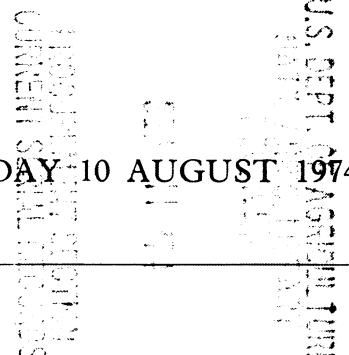


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BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

SATURDAY 10 AUGUST 1974



LEADING ARTICLES

Drop-outs' Diarrhoea page 373	Coroners and the Public Interest page 374	History of
the M.R.C. page 374	Enuresis Again page 375	Demand and
the N.H.S. page 376	Migraine Clinics page 376	

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Experience with Simplified Scheme of Treatment of Hyperlipidaemia SOAD TABAQCHALI, ALAN CHAIT, ROSAMUND HARRISON, BARRY LEWIS.....	377
Malabsorption in Overland Travellers to India A. M. TOMKINS, W. P. T. JAMES, J. H. WALTERS, A. C. E. COLE.....	380
Blood Glucose Measurement with Dextrostix and New Reflectance Meter BENGT SCHERSTEN, CLAUS KUHL, ANDERS HOLLENDER, TOLF EKMAN.....	384
Self-induced Glomerulonephritis J. M. BOULTON-JONES, J. G. P. SISSONS, P. F. NAISH, D. J. EVANS, D. K. PETERS.....	387
Relation between Pulmonary Gas Exchange and Closing Volume before and after Substantial Weight Loss in Obese Subjects M. J. B. FAREBROTHER, G. J. R. MCHARDY, J. F. MUNRO.....	391

MEDICAL PRACTICE

What is Diagnostic Radiology's Place in Medicine? J. W. D. BULL.....	394
Complications of Carbenoxolone Therapy G. J. DAVIES, J. RHODES, B. J. CALCRAFT.....	400
Aspects of Plastic Surgery: Hand Injuries H. BROWN.....	403
Any Questions?	406
Personal View TERRY HAMBLIN.....	407

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents..... 408

OBITUARY NOTICES 416

NEWS AND NOTES

Medicolegal—Death during Dentistry.....	419
Parliament—N.H.S. and Private Practice.....	420
Medical News—Doctors' and Dentists' Pay; Trial of Tobacco Substitute; Drinking and Driving.....	421

BOOK REVIEWS..... 418

SUPPLEMENT

General Medical Services Committee.....	423
Underfinancing of the N.H.S.....	424
Increased Mileage Allowance.....	424
Annual Postgraduate Meeting, Isle of Man.....	424
G.M.C. Disciplinary Committee.....	425
C.C.H.M.S./H.C.S.A. Meeting	426

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondents are asked to be brief

Psychiatry in the Soviet Union	
J. K. Wing, M.D.	408
Autonomic Neuropathy and Autovagotomy	
J. H. Baron, D.M.	408
Death after E.C.T.	
J. L. Barton, M.R.C.PSYCH.; Paula J. H. Gosling, M.B.	409
Tests of Hearing in School	
L. Fisch, M.D.	409
Contaminated β-Lactamase and Blood Cultures	
J. M. T. Hamilton-Miller, PH.D., and W. Brumfitt, F.R.C.P.	410
Sun, Wind, and the Skin	
E. J. Moynahan, F.R.C.P.	410
Who is the Dental Anaesthetist of the Future?	
T. E. McEwan, F.F.A.R.C.S.	410
Reporting Deaths to the Coroner	
R. N. Palmer, M.B.	410
Effect of Methohexitone on Infants Delivered by Caesarean Section	
J. W. Downing, F.F.A.R.C.S.	411
N.H.S. Contraceptive Services	
T. D. Richards, M.R.C.G.P.; W. G. A. Riddle, M.B.	411
Treatment of Giardiasis	
Elizabeth A. Green, M.B., D.P.M., and others	411
Malaria in the United Kingdom	
L. J. Bruce-Chwatt, F.R.C.P., and others	412
Aspirin and What Else?	
R. M. Barnes, M.R.C.P.ED., and others; J. C. Delaney, M.B.	412
Metaclopramide and Prolactin	
J. S. Bunting, F.R.R.; R. G. Wilson, F.R.C.S.ED.	412
The Unproductive Minority	
H. E. Pritchard-Jones, M.R.C.S.	413
Gastric Balloon Displacement in a Sengstaken Tube	
J. B. Bourke, F.R.C.S.	413
Stresses of Management Selection Courses	
P. Hall, F.R.C.PSYCH.	413
Withdrawal of Rifamide	
D. S. Reeves, M.R.C.PATH., and R. Wise, M.B.	413
Inversion of the Appendix	
J. A. Shepherd, F.R.C.S.	414
Anoxic-ischaemic Brain Injury	
S. H. Cookson, F.R.C.P.	414
Sterilization of Fibrescopes	
J. C. Kelsey, F.R.C.PATH.	414
Call to Arms	
J. M. Aitken, M.B.	414
Rescuing the N.H.S.	
R. K. Griffiths, M.B.; F. C. Harris, F.R.C.PATH.; P. Richards, M.R.C.P.	415
Fair Play	
N. A. Chisholm, L.R.C.P.ED.	415
Hospital Medical Staffing	
F. S. A. Doran, F.R.C.S.	415
Career Earnings	
J. G. B. Russell, F.R.R.	415
Fees for Form Filling	
N. N. Davies, M.R.C.G.P.	415

Psychiatry in the Soviet Union

SIR.—Professor Georgi Morozov (6 July, p. 40) points to the fact that there is a good deal of difference in the way psychiatric diagnoses are made in different parts of the world and he is, of course, right. I suggested in my article (9 March, p. 433) that this explained in part why many British psychiatrists could not accept Soviet practice in respect of political dissenters who are regarded as insane. There were, however, other reasons. For example, few of the dissenters would be regarded in Britain as having committed any serious crime, so that the question of "responsibility" would not arise. Moreover, except in the case of gross abnormalities immediately obvious to a layman, when the accused person may be ruled "unfit to plead," in a British court it is only the *defence* that enters a plea of insanity. I mentioned a number of other apparent disadvantages of Soviet legal procedures in these cases.

However, Professor Morozov's main point was that I had not indicated the favourable outcome of the meeting between western and Soviet psychiatrists at the Serbsky Institute on 15 October 1973. In fact, of the 13 westerners who attended, 12 had first signed a statement containing two main principles: firstly, that the visit could not in itself be held to imply acceptance or rejection of any of the allegations and, secondly, that such difficult and complex problems could not be adequately evaluated in one day. We wished to begin what it was hoped would be continuing discussions. General statements are therefore out of order. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that many of my colleagues were not satisfied, as I myself was not, that all five political dissenters whose cases we heard were so seriously mentally ill during the time of their legal examination as to be unfit to

plead, to conduct their own defence, or to instruct defence lawyers.

In addition to these five cases we asked to discuss the case of Dr. Zhores A. Medvedev (who has given me permission to mention his name). We were told that his compulsory admission to hospital was an error. This frank statement was, for me, one of the most encouraging features of our visit to the Serbsky Institute, since it indicated a willingness to admit mistakes which, if it were matched by an equivalent attitude on the part of western psychiatrists, could lead to constructive discussions. I may have missed a public announcement about an inquiry into this matter. If such an inquiry has been held it seems important that its conclusions should be published together with an account of the action that has been taken to ensure that such an error will not be repeated.

Finally, I should like to endorse Professor Morozov's plea for impartial discussion of these issues. As I suggested in my paper at Yerevan, accusations have been levelled at psychiatrists in many countries and we ought to consider them attentively in order to decide whether, after the stridency and exaggeration have been removed, there does not remain a kernel of truth. The Royal College of Psychiatrists, the American Psychiatric Association, and many other professional psychiatric bodies throughout the world have agreed to set up a committee to examine such issues. A main aim is to discover how best to arrive at a just and humane legal procedure which will spare people suffering from severe mental disorders from being held responsible for actions undertaken under the compulsion of forces they cannot withstand, while at the same time ensuring that those who deliberately and rationally choose to break

what they regard as morally indefensible conventions or laws should not be treated as insane. It is much to be hoped that the All-Union Society will join this endeavour.—I am, etc.,

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Autonomic Neuropathy and Autovagotomy

SIR.—Your leading article on diabetic autonomic neuropathy (6 July, p. 2) ignored gastric secretion. Achlorhydria^{1,2} and associated gastritis^{3,4} after an augmented histamine test are abnormally frequent in diabetics, especially those with a high fasting blood sugar with severe complications.

Vagal function has been studied in diabetics by comparing the peak acid output (P.A.O.) after a chemical stimulus of histamine, Histalog (Hg) (ametazole hydrochloride) or pentagastrin (Pg), and a vagal stimulus, intravenous insulin (I). P.A.O._{Pg} was normal in a group of 10 diabetics (seven with neuropathy) but the mean P.A.O._I of these diabetics (19.8 mEq/hr) was significantly lower than in control subjects (33.5 mEq/hr).⁵ The ratio of acid output in response to insulin and to a maximum stimulus estimates the proportion of parietal cells which are vagally excitable.⁶ This ratio was significantly lower in these diabetics (49%) than in controls (87%). One of the 10 diabetics secreted no acid after insulin,⁵ just as if the patient had had a "complete" surgical vagotomy. In another group of 11 diabetics (eight with neuropathy) two failed to secrete acid after insulin.⁷ Evidence of autonomic neuropathy was not sought specifically in these Swedish patients.^{5,6}

In three diabetic patients with autonomic neuropathy (neurogenic bladder, negative Valsalva tests, and absent sweating) the