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Politically charged medicine

Treatment for subfertility, antenatal screening, postmarketing surveillance of drugs, and audit are subjects that have become politically charged in a way that has never happened to, say, treatment of colonic tumours, and all are covered in this week's issue. A group in Bristol has set out its results from four years of treating subfertility with assisted conception and found that results are better than is generally thought (p 1465): a subfertile couple where the woman is under 40 and the man has normal sperm have a similar chance of taking a baby home after assisted conception as a couple conceiving in the usual way. Pressure is on to offer routine ultrasound scanning to the whole pregnant population, and Carole Luck presents the results of screening an unselected population in a district general hospital at 19 weeks' gestation (p 1474): 85% of abnormalities were detected.

The discovery that a newly marketed drug has important side effects always evokes public outcry, and in 1988 voluntary guidelines were produced for conducting postmarketing surveillance. A group from

the Medicines Control Agency has now reviewed 31 studies conducted under the guidelines and concluded that they have made little contribution to assessing drug safety (p 1470).

Audit is growing in importance, and today we publish the results of the first comprehensive study of the effectiveness of audit in general practice (pp 1480 and 1484); it has taken 10 years to complete. In an accompanying editorial Richard Baker says that the study produces evidence of the effectiveness of audit and shows that setting standards and claiming them as your own are perhaps the most vital parts of the process (p 1455).

Finally, Jim Drife (p 1514) describes the rough time the media gave him after he produced in his regular column the "philosophical proposition" that prophylactic mastectomy could prevent cancer. On the way to the theatre his family read on a hoarding "Yorks doc sparks cancer storm," while one tabloid made him "Wally of the Week." Such may be the tribulations of exercising the fundamental right of free speech.

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Editor's Choice