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INTERNATIONAL

Editorials

263	Poor Britain Tony Delamothe
264	Foodborne botulism D N Hutchinson
265	Cytokines and cancer Saleem Malik, Jonathan Waxman
267	Screening, ethics, and the law P J Edwards, D M B Hall
268	Americans retreat on SI units Magne Nylenna, Richard Smith

HBI

JG

News

269-272	Reform of drug laws · Unemployment in Sweden · Loophole in tobacco code · Public spending in Britain · NHS priorities in 1993 · Mystery AIDS virus · Doctors right to treat Jehovah's Witness · The Week
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Papers

273	Bone density, parathyroid hormone, and 25-hydroxyvitamin D concentrations in middle aged women Kay-Tee Khaw, Mary-Jane Sneyd, Juliet Compston
277	Low serum cholesterol concentration and short term mortality from injuries in men and women Gunnar Lindberg, Lennart Råstam, Bo Gullberg, Gunnar A Eklund
280	Central serotonin receptors and delayed gastric emptying in non-ulcer dyspepsia A Chua, J Keating, D Hamilton, P W N Keeling, T G Dinan
283	Child pedestrian mortality and traffic volume in New Zealand Ian Roberts, Roger Marshall, Robyn Norton
283	Cardiac rehabilitation programmes: are women less likely to attend? Hannah M McGee, John H Horgan

General Practice

285	Health service support of breast feeding—are we practising what we preach? Sally Beeken, Tony Waterston
288	Partners in Practice: The clinical task Janet Sheppard

Education & Debate

291	Regular Review: Congenital toxoplasmosis Susan M Hall
298	Russian report: perspectives on strikes by health care staff Michael Ryan
300	Hammersmith Staff Rounds: An infected prosthetic hip J C Mason
303	ABC of Colorectal Diseases: Colorectal trauma M Stokes, D J Jones

307-322	Obituary · Letters · Medicopolitical Digest · Soundings · Personal View · Medicine and the Media · Medicine and Books · Minerva · (in detail overleaf)
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CONTENTS *pages 307-322*

307 **Obituary** C D Williams, G M Barr, A C C Hughes, F J Robertson, S G Griffin, D A Craib, A D Whitelaw, E W B Varley, A C Martin

309 Letters

309 Misuse of ecstasy	313 Assessing observer variability
J D Shearman and others; D A Gorard and others; D Rittoo and others; J Sawyer and W P Stephens; R N De Silva and D P Harries	J Jamart; P Brennan and A Silman
310 Service increment for teaching and research	314 Toxic dilatation and infective diarrhoea
T A Sheldon; C Normand and M McKee	J A Snowden and M W McKendrick
310 Coronary vasospasm and sumatriptan	314 Medical audit in general practice
D K Lloyd and others	M Lawrence
311 Treatment of natal cleft sinus	314 Agenda for health in Europe
J Hollingworth and others; D P Berry and K G Harding; H T Khawaja and others	I Holtby and S Ramaiah
312 Home accidents in elderly people	314 Black dog of depression
K Shotliff and others; N J Vetter and P A Lewis	R Howard
312 Use of Lucozade and glucagon by ambulance staff in hypoglycaemia	314 Poland: collaboration or advice?
K Jones and others	M H Dominicak and others
312 Monitoring Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease	315 Withdrawal of a monopoly treatment
D Lyons and C Johnstone	L W Fleming and others; I Rubin
313 Gall stones induced by octreotide	315 Gene therapy
S M Catnach and others	P Spallone
313 Renal transplantation in tuberous sclerosis	315 Torpid MPs
Y Pirson	B H Burne
	315 Balloon inflation and chronic bronchitis
	K Cooney

316 Medicopolitical Digest

JCC meets PM and health ministers · New GMSC negotiator · Assessing GP trainees · Complaints to ombudsman · Health select committee · Extending GP purchasing

318 Soundings

Reforming health care: calling for Mr Yeltsin George Dunea
Lyme and the layperson Bernard Dixon

319 Personal View

Lottery of appointing junior staff John R Bennett
Touch me not, or just a little Alun J B Edwards

320 Medicine and the Media Facing up to death in childhood: how should we treat children? Roger Higgs

321 Medicine and Books

Jon G Ayres: *Adult Respiratory Distress Syndrome* (Ed A Artigas, F Lemaire, P M Suter, W M Zapol)
Ludmilla Jordanova: *The Fabric of the Body: European Traditions of Anatomical Illustration* (K B Roberts, J D W Tomlinson)

322 Minerva

Instructions to authors appeared in the issue of 4 January 1992

Risks and benefits of raising vitamin D and lowering cholesterol

Doctors who work primarily with individual people may forget that small changes in populations can have large consequences, as two papers in this week's journal illustrate. A group from Cambridge has been testing the hypothesis that serum vitamin D concentrations in middle aged women may be important in determining bone density (p 273). The researchers have found a positive relation right across the range of vitamin D concentrations and speculate that a small increase in exposure to sunlight or in dietary intake might lead to a 5% increase in mean bone density—and hence a 20% fall in fractures. But there is, of course, the possibility that increases in exposure to sunlight or dietary intake of vitamin D might have adverse consequences, and this anxiety has arisen in the context of lowering serum cholesterol concentration in populations.

Various studies have shown excess mortality from injuries and "causes not related to illness" in those who have participated in trials in which their serum cholesterol concentration is lowered by either diet or drugs. A Swedish group has now investigated the possibility that low cholesterol concentration may be

linked to death from injuries or suicide by studying a cohort of over 50 000 men and women followed up for 20 years since testing in 1964-5 (p 277). Deaths from injuries, particularly suicide, were indeed commoner in men with low serum cholesterol in the first seven years after testing. Whether there is a direct causative link is not known, but this evidence supports calls for a moratorium on the use of cholesterol lowering drugs in those with mild increases in serum cholesterol until more evidence is available. Those who propose changes in whole populations must be even more sure of their ground than those who seek changes in individual people, as an editorial on the ethics of screening discusses (p 267).

Finally, nobody will be surprised to read in this week's journal that "The financial position of the London general hospitals has long been a cause of anxiety to those entrusted with the care of those institutions" (p 284). Nor, sadly, will many people be greatly surprised to learn that the sentence first appeared in the journal exactly a century ago.

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Editor's
Choice