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Instructions to authors appeared in the issue of 4 January 1992

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Editor's Choice

The problems of success: the elderly in Japan and a blind politician

Success often brings problems, as Yuzo Okamoto's paper on the elderly in Japan illustrates (p 403). Japan now has the highest life expectancy in the world, and the proportion of the population aged over 65 has doubled in the past 20 years and will double again in the next 30. During this time cultural changes have meant that fewer elderly people live with their children, although it's still 60% in Japan compared with less than 10% in Britain, Sweden, and the United States. The consequence is that more Japanese elderly people have needed long term care outside the home. The health and social services have not been able to cope, and, says Dr Okamoto, "many have ended up in decrepit, understaffed hospitals where treatment may be grossly inadequate. For example, patients with dementia may be tied to their beds and overmedicated."

Success has also brought new problems for David Blunkett, the Labour party's shadow secretary of state for health. He is blind and yet has to absorb huge

amounts of written material every day. In his personal view he describes how his staff read correspondence and newspapers on to cassettes and how he has braille transcription equipment linked to a computer and a scanner (p 429). Mr Blunkett's philosophy is that no one should ever be able to say of him that "He would have done it better if he had been able to see," although he says that he will stop short of becoming an airline pilot until there is further technological development. (Ironically, he could perhaps become one now: the *Economist* recently pointed out that pilots were there only to reassure the passengers as computers are better at flying the plane.)

Finally, if you are in the throes of installing a clinical information system, "Think of your secretary," says A P Smith (p 415). "You will get no extra staff to run your computer," he warns. "No system should increase secretaries' workload, instead it should make them more efficient and happy." If it doesn't your system may fail—as have so many before it.