

BMJ

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL NO 6857 VOLUME 305

INTERNATIONAL

Editorials	785	Guidance on guidelines Andrew Haines, Gene Feder	CURRENT SERIALS BRANCH CURRENT SERIALS RECORDS & CDS SERIALS BRANCH
	786	Getting to grips with Archie Cochrane's agenda Iain Chalmers, Kay Dickersin, Thomas C Chalmers	
	788	Breast feeding and HIV infection William A M Cutting	
	789	Towards a separate adolescent medicine Michael Malus	
	790	Delayed puberty R Stanhope, A Albanese, S Shalet	
News	791-796	Trauma in the US · EC and election of WHO director general · Gene therapy for lung cancer · Patients first · Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy · Child abuse · Primary and community care in London · Consultants accused of overcharging · Over the counter medicines · Needs of black and ethnic minorities · BMA Malta meeting · Britain's poor housing · The Week	
Papers	797	Can secular trends in child growth be estimated from a single cross sectional survey? Carlos A Monteiro, Alberto M Torres	
	799	Effect of maintenance chemotherapy in childhood on numbers of melanocytic naevi Elizabeth A Baird, Pamela M McHenry, Rona M MacKie	
	801	Female streetworking prostitution and HIV infection in Glasgow Neil McKeganey, Marina Barnard, Alastair Leyland, Isobel Coote, Edward Follett	
	804	Computer system for assisting with clinical interpretation of tumour marker data M S Leaning, S Gallivan, E S Newlands, J Dent, M Brampton, D B Smith, K D Bagshawe	
	808	Referral patterns and diagnoses in women attending a urodynamic unit Declan P Keane, Seumas D Eckford, Angela M Shepherd, Paul Abrams	
	808	Drugs and the exercise test K W Muir, J C Rodger, J S DeBono, H McDonald, J B Irving	
	810	Drug points: Flecainide induced peripheral neuropathy Jackie Palace, Rashmi Shah, Chris Clough · Diarrhoea during treatment with clozapine: association with lymphocyte count R J Harvey, T Bullock, S A Montgomery	
General Practice	811	Oestrogen replacement therapy after hysterectomy Tony Seeley	
Education & Debate	813	Regular Review: Surgical correction of nearsightedness Samir J Bechara, Keith P Thompson, George O Waring III	
	817	US health care. I: The access problem Jennifer Dixon	
	820	ABC of Colorectal Diseases: Sexually transmitted diseases and anal papillomas D J Jones, B P Goorney	
	823	How to implement a no smoking policy Pamela Taylor	
	826-842	Obituary · Letters · Medicopolitical Digest · Soundings · Personal View · Medicine and the Media · Medicine and Books · Minerva · (in detail overleaf)	

CONTENTS *pages 826-842*

826 **Obituary**

T D V Swinscow, J A Learner, W E R Branch, S F Thomas, R P Picton Davies, R H Heyland, D M Jones, A H Morris

828 **Letters**

- | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|--|
| 828 | Unexplained death in fit young people
P Vanezis; J L Emery; A Busuttil; J J Pandit | 833 | Predicting mortality from cervical cancer
C M Anderson; E J Buxton and others;
G J van Oortmarsen and others |
| 829 | Emergency feeding programmes
J Seaman; M Lavender and C Vickery | 833 | Quality of life of cancer patients D W Davies |
| 829 | Smoking accepted on death certificates
R Peto and R Doll; P Whidden; D S James and others | 833 | Oesophageal achalasia mistaken for anorexia nervosa A J Prior |
| 830 | Long term problems after obstetric epidural anaesthesia C MacArthur and others | 834 | Partners in practice C M Bond |
| 830 | Predicting preterm delivery
J G Thornton and R J Lilford | 834 | Delays in thrombolysis P Watson |
| 831 | Bovine insulin R Tattersall | 834 | False positive salivary HIV test D F Morris |
| 831 | Practising intubation on cadavers
G Hinchley; J Tyrrell and others | 834 | Preparing for a foreign fellow P L Towers |
| 831 | Drug resistant tuberculosis B Watt | 834 | Psychiatrists in the new NHS R Thomas |
| 832 | Drug management of ulcerative colitis
S Barrow and S H Rees; M A Kamm | 835 | Reaccrediting general practice
J Russell; C Nancollas |
| 832 | Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors
K Matthews and J M Eagles | 835 | <i>The Health of the Nation</i> S Ibbotson and P Watson |
| 832 | Misuse of temazepam C F Innes and others | 835 | AIDS: guidelines for barbers G Bignardi |
| | | 835 | Corrections Oesophageal atresia mistaken for anorexia nervosa (McSherry and Pagliero) |
| | | 835 | Cardiac rehabilitation programmes (Scanlon and Godfrey) |

836 **Medicopolitical Digest** Junior doctors and specialist medicine · Juniors' chairman calls for unity

837 **Soundings** Cracking up? David Widgery Against lawyers Tony Smith

838 **Personal View** Stop, look, listen Anonymous

839 **Medicine and the Media** Cash or care Graham P Mulley

840 **Medicine and Books**

- 840 Colin D Payton: *Protecting the Community: A Worker's Guide to Health and Safety in Europe* (M Allen, C Mather)
840 P E Belchetz: *Thyroid Disease in Clinical Practice* (I R McDougall)
841 Roger J Robinson: *The Orkney Child Abuse Scandal: Suffer the Little Children* (D H S Reid)

842 **Minerva**

What we know and what we don't know

It seems extraordinary that in medicine we don't know clearly what we know and what we don't know. Archie Cochrane—the epidemiologist of almost blessed memory—suggested 20 years ago that medicine should compile a critical register of what is known, and now several groups are taking up his challenge. Iain Chalmers and others discuss (p 786) why Cochrane's agenda is so important and describe how the Cochrane centre in Oxford will "collaborate with others to assemble and disseminate a register of controlled trials."

Once you know what you know there is also the problem of how to change practice, and Chalmers and others note that unsystematically conducted reviews in journals and textbooks have sometimes taken years to recommend treatments that a systematic review would have shown to prevent premature death and other treatments have been endorsed long after trials had suggested that they were useless or harmful. One way to disseminate good practice is through guidelines, and Andy Haines and Gene Feder review how effective guidelines have been (p 785). Two important messages are that writing them is easy but getting them to change practice is hard, while guidelines produced locally by the people who will use them tend to be much more effective than those produced nationally or internationally.

Sexual abuse of children emerges as a theme in this

issue. Figures published last week by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children show that the number of British children on registers of those at risk of all kinds of abuse has trebled since 1973 (p 793). The report shows that abuse tends to be associated with bigger, more mobile, and poorer families, but an anonymous doctor describes in a personal view how he discovered that his daughter was being sexually abused (p 838). His message is that it can happen to anybody. Roger Robinson, meanwhile, reviews a powerful if overstated book on the Orkney child abuse scare. The book's author, a consultant paediatrician, argues that the British and American ways of handling sexual abuse are inferior to the Dutch method, where the emphasis is on healing within the family.

Finally, this issue carries the obituary of Dougal Swinscow, the long time deputy editor of the *BMJ*, who died last week. Many readers will know Dougal best as the author of *Statistics at Square One*, which has sold 80 000 copies. But he was also a world famous lichenologist and an expert on gardens. My most moving moment with Dougal was when he described listening to a radio account—on a mountainside in Norway—of the dropping of the atomic bomb. "I knew then," he said, "that the world would never be the same."

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**Editor's
Choice**