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1304 Minerva

Instructions to authors appeared in the issue of 4 January 1992

Screening no panacea

Repeatedly faced with conditions that are hard to treat and often fatal, a doctor may turn to screening. But screening is no panacea. On p 1260 a group from Newcastle describes its experience of trying to screen for neuroblastoma, a condition affecting one child in 10 000. The Japanese began screening in the early '70s and have had encouraging results. The Newcastle group screened 20 000 babies at 6 months with a biochemical test: 10 had positive results, but eight of these were false positives; in contrast, three of those who had negative results proved later to have neuroblastoma. The authors conclude that screening is possible but that a controlled trial is needed. Meanwhile, the debate continues on the letter pages over whether screening for abdominal aneurysms would reduce mortality (p 1291).

A cluster of papers this week looks at written material produced for patients and finds dismal results. When assessed with a score—for which the lower the number the more readable the piece—Wordsworth's *Upon Westminster Bridge* scores six, a news story in the *Sunday People* 10, practice leaflets 12 (p 1266), consent forms 14 (p 1263), and a *BMJ* article on audit 16. (This piece, my computer tells me, scores 12.) Two doctors

from Brighton find some dreadful examples of misspelt material produced for patients and give some simple rules on preparing better information (p 1294). Tony Smith explains in an editorial why what seems so easy is so hard (p 1242).

This week we start a series of articles on the state of medical education (p 1277). Stella Lowry has toured medical schools in Britain and elsewhere and found a wide array of deep problems together with some solutions. She concludes that change is now inevitable, a conclusion supported by a report last week to the General Medical Council that 10% of medical students in Britain are dropping out (p 1298).

Finally, some of the grandest figures in British medicine are stalking our pages this week. Sir Denis Burkitt (p 1300) asks whether intelligence is necessary to succeed in research; Stephen Lock (p 1303) picks his best books on medical writing; and Sir George Godber (p 1289) slams the government's refusal to ban tobacco advertising. "It has been," observes Sir George, "illegal to advertise a cure for cancer for 70 years. Why should we hesitate to ban the single largest cause of cancer from promotion that has been shown to reach all ages?"

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Editor's Choice