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The dog that didn't bark

The tendency of authors not to write up studies that yield negative results and of editors not to publish them creates difficulties. Those people mining the medical literature to write systematic reviews know from the beginning that they are likely to be misled. Editors should publish negative studies, especially those that look at major changes in how services are provided—because they are so rare.

Today we publish two studies that we can call negative, although each offers a wealth of insight. Addington-Hall and others have conducted a randomised controlled trial of employing nurses whose job was to coordinate terminal care services from the NHS, local authorities, and the voluntary sector (p 1317). The nurses made little difference to the outcome for patients or their families. Meanwhile, a study from Western Australia that used both subjective and objective measures shows no increase in "current asthma" in 1990 compared with 1981 (p 1326). Symptoms did, however, increase, suggesting a rise in awareness of asthma, changed treatment patterns, or increased exposure to allergens. Somebody somewhere is almost certainly conducting a

systematic review of whether the prevalence of asthma is increasing, and because this study includes objective measures he or she will probably give more weight to it than to others that have suggested an increase in asthma.

John Fox's obituary of Abe Adelstein (p 1358), the eighth chief medical statistician of England and Wales, is peculiarly effective because he places Professor Adelstein's work in a tradition stretching back to William Farr, the leading medical statistician of the nineteenth century, who published his classic letters on the causes of death in England between 1839 and 1870. "Both," writes Professor Fox, "believed that, by promoting understanding of the variations in health and sickness, society could develop strategies for overcoming many of the causes of human misery." Sadly, on p 1331 a group from Glasgow tells a statistical story of increasing human misery. Forty years after Doll and Bradford Hill published in the *BMJ* their study linking cigarette smoking and lung cancer the Glasgow group shows that lung cancer has overtaken breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer among women in Glasgow.

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**Editor's
Choice**