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INTERNATIONAL

Editorials	597	Paracelsus, and 500 years of encouraging scientific inquiry Charles Webster
	598	Hypertension and cancer Matthew F Muldoon, Lewis H Kuller
	599	Diabetic care in general practice Ann-Louise Kinmonth
	600	Treating hypoglycaemia in general practice R L Gibbins
	601	Non-medical use of ketamine K L R Jansen
	602	Meeting local needs Martin McKee, Aileen Clarke, Barry Tennison
News	603-608	London ambulance chaos · Hospital league tables · India stops selling medical education · Italy's mentally ill · Future of regions · Help for mentally incapable · Urgent cases · Growth hormone victims · France's tobacco battle · Model for GMC? · Restoring professionalism to general practice
Papers	609	Incidence of and mortality from cancer in hypertensive patients D J Hole, V M Hawthorne, C G Isles, Sarah M McGhee, J W K Robertson, C R Gillis, Jean A Wapshaw, A F Lever
	612	Hypoxaemia in young Kenyan children with acute lower respiratory infection F E Onyango, M C Steinhoff, E M Wafula, S Wariua, J Musia, J Kitonyi
	615	Case-control study of leukaemia and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma among children aged 0-4 years living in West Berkshire and North Hampshire health districts Eve Roman, Ann Watson, Valerie Beral, Sandra Buckle, Diana Bull, Krys Baker, Hilary Ryder, Carol Barton
	621	Comparison of nifedipine and propranolol as second line agent for hypertension in black Kenyans N R Poulter, J E Sanderson, A V Thompson, P S Sever, C L Chang
	622	Cancer mortality and atenolol treatment A E Fletcher, D G Beevers, C J Bulpitt, E C Coles, C T Dollery, J G Ledingham, A J Palmer, J C Petrie, J Webster
	623	Does awareness of rates of obstetric interventions change practice? P Buekens, M Boutsen, F Kittel, P Vandebussche, M Dramaix
General Practice	624	Prompting the clinical care of non-insulin dependent (type II) diabetic patients in an inner city area: one model of community care Brian Hurwitz, Caroline Goodman, John Yudkin
	630	Influences on control in diabetes mellitus: patient, doctor, practice, or delivery of care? Mike Pringle, Carol Stewart-Evans, Carol Coupland, Idris Williams, Simon Allison, Jennifer Sterland
Education & Debate	635	Countdown to Community Care: Community care and the fundholder Rhidian Morris
	637	The fortysomething barrier: medicine and age discrimination Peter Forster
	640	ABC of Sleep Disorders: Sleep disorders in children Tony Jaffa, Stephen Scott, Jean Harris Hendriks, Colin M Shapiro
	643	Lesson of the Week: Late presentation of traumatic rupture of the diaphragm in a child George Ninan, Prem Puri
	639	Correction: Trends in health care and their effects on medical education Lowry
	645-664	Obituary · Letters · Medicopolitical Digest · Soundings · Medicine and the Media · Personal View · Medicine and Books · Minerva · (in detail overleaf)

CONTENTS *pages 645-664*

645 Obituary F J P O'Gorman, E Fletcher, C M Norman, D Vaughan, W Serle, P E Clayton, P M Campion, J W Emerson, B Fistein, B Hatherley

647 Letters

647 Unlicensed nicotine skin patches
M J Jarvis and others

647 How many doctors does Britain need?
L M Eccles and S J Townsend; J Fry; C D Collins; S D Hutton-Taylor

648 Medical education E Murray and others

648 Undergraduate medical education A J Zuckerman

648 Death from cancer at home
K A Milligan; M J Minton and others

649 Respite care M Powell

649 Long term care of elderly people in the NHS
J Andrews

649 Children of parents infected with HIV in Lothian
P J M Ronald and others

650 Trends in prenatal diagnosis of Down's syndrome
K Spencer

650 Retinoblastoma in children of former residents of Seascale J A Morris and others

650 Persistent glue ear in children
T Sheldon and N Freemantle

651 Tumour markers and primary site of cancer
A Pinhorn

651 Pre-emptive analgesia R Mungiani and S Hunt

651 Inheritance of chronic inflammatory bowel disease
M Farrall

651 BCG vaccination and health care workers
J Germanaud

652 Toxic shock syndrome after minor surgery
M J D Griffiths and D G Sinclair; R M R McAllister

652 Selective decontamination of the gut
P McClelland and others

652 Risks to surgeons and patients from HIV and hepatitis E H Boxall

653 Gloves for venepuncture
J W Jones and J V S Pether

653 Managing urinary tract infections
G Phillips and others

653 Microalbuminuria, height, and sex
P McKeigue and D Leon; M M Gould and others

654 Postmenopausal hormone replacement therapy
A E Raffle

654 Police surgeons G Moon and others

655 The cervical spine in rheumatoid arthritis
J A Mathews

655 Low blood pressure and wellbeing
J A Pilgrim and M Crawford

655 Gangliosides in neurological diseases
C J Gibbs and others; A G García and others

656 Natural remedies G Dodds; A H Lockie

656 Patients' interests or resource allocation?
R M Rudd; D J W Hunter and M McKee

657 NHS reforms I Watt and N Freemantle

657 Tipping the balance L McTaggart

657 Waiting times for outpatient appointments
T Swage and D Mudd; C C Long

658 Medicopolitical Digest

Gene therapy · Labour party and patient's charter · Extracontractual referrals · WHO meets European doctors

659 Soundings Judgment night Colin Douglas; Breathe in Trisha Greenhalgh

660 Medicine and the Media

Mind blowing or just another swipe? Adrian Furnham; Human frames Ludmilla Jordanova

661 Personal View Problems on the other side of the fence Andrew Wiener

662 Medicine and Books

662 F Al-Hilli: *Primary Health Care in the Arab World* (W J Stephen)

662 J W Scadding: *Drug Therapy in Neurology* (Ed M J Eadie)

663 I D A Johnston: *Obstructive Lung Disease* (Contemporary Management in Internal Medicine series)
(Ed S G Jenkinson)

663 Mick Braddick: *Earth in the Balance* (A Gore)

664 Minerva

Cancer, chance, and the diversity of doctors

A surprising finding from the Medical Research Council's trial of treating hypertension in elderly patients published in the *BMJ* last year was an association between atenolol and death from cancer. That atenolol might cause cancer was a worrying finding, and two groups set to work to investigate the possibility. Neither group has confirmed the association (pp 609 and 622).

Another paper published today allows a test of the Gardner hypothesis that excess cases of childhood leukaemia around nuclear installations may be caused in part by paternal exposure to radiation before the child is conceived. In a case-control study of leukaemia in children living around the atomic weapons establishments at Aldermaston and Burghfield, Eve Roman and others have found an association between fathers being monitored for exposure to penetrating ionising radiation and leukaemia (p 615). But because of the small numbers the finding could be due to chance, and the study neither strongly supports nor disproves the Gardner hypothesis.

The advent of the changes in community care are now just a few weeks away, and many doctors are still hazy about what the changes will mean. In a further attempt to help doctors and others understand what is happening we begin today a series in which various participants describe what the changes will mean for them (p 635).

Finally, our obituary columns bear witness this week to the remarkable range of people who make up the medical profession. William Serle was not only a physician but also a minister in the Church of Scotland and a world famous ornithologist (p 646); Donald Vaughan, despite being under age, joined the Royal Flying Corps in the first world war and then spent years as a lifeboat doctor in Norfolk (p 645); and Frank O'Gorman (known to all as FOG), a surgeon, played football for Glasgow Celtic reserves and lived throughout his career in the grounds of the then City General Hospital in Sheffield with a succession of Staffordshire bull terriers.

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Editor's
Choice