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Asthma guidelines, effectiveness, and corrections

This week's journal contains some strange looking pages. These six pages carry charts from the British Thoracic Society and others on how to manage asthma (p 776). The charts may look forbidding at first glance, but much thought has gone into both their content and their design in an attempt to present busy doctors with the essential information they need to manage asthma well, for, as the authors of the guidelines say, "mortality and morbidity from asthma remain unacceptably high." We hope that these guidelines, which are revisions of those first published in 1990, will help reduce both.

Virginia Bottomley, the British secretary of state for health, told a conference last week that formulating clinical guidelines and protocols is one way to respond to the increasing pressure within health services to set priorities (p 737). Another point she emphasised was the need to study the effectiveness of various clinical interventions, and this week's journal contains several examples. Treatment of glue ear has been at the centre of the debate on effectiveness, and on p 756 Richard Maw and Rachel Bawden present the results of a 12 year follow up of a randomised controlled trial of treating glue ear. They find that treatment led to

quicker resolution. Meanwhile, a group from Austria shows in another randomised trial that chemotherapy in patients with metastatic colorectal cancer increases the quantity of life and does not reduce its quality (p 752). Palliative chemotherapy for cancer, which is often expensive, is a favourite target of those looking to reduce drug budgets. Will this paper change their minds?

Finally, this is a bumper week for corrections and apologies. On p 741 we correct an editorial error in a figure; on p 771 we correct several errors by an author; and on p 767 we apologise for having chosen an unsuitable picture to accompany an article. Some readers may note that we carry many more corrections than the average tabloid newspaper and therefore conclude that we have lower and sloppier standards. In fact, as most editors agree, the quality of a publication is directly related to the number of corrections it publishes. All publications make mistakes, but only some admit to them. Once you discover corrections they can be a joy. My favourite comes (I think) from H L Mencken. He wrote: "In my article on milk production published last week please read cow for horse throughout."