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## 1012 **Minerva**

### The importance in medicine of not doing things

Good surgeons know how to operate, better surgeons know when to operate, and the best surgeons know when not to operate. This saying reflects the importance in medicine of resisting the human and therapeutic imperative always to do something. Not acting is often the right thing to do, and this week's journal contains several examples.

A group from Australia has looked back on 445 children with bacterial meningitis and discovered that 19 of them suffered cerebral herniation (p 953). Thirty one children died, and herniation had occurred in 14 of them. Herniation was something like 30 times more common in the 12 hours after lumbar puncture. Sometimes it will be right not to do a lumbar puncture. Other papers and articles show that it will often be right not to offer cervical screening to women over 50 (p 967), not to treat patients with hypertension with stress management (p 963), not to immunise elderly people against influenza (p 974), and not to give zidovudine to asymptomatic patients with HIV infection (p 949). There is so much not to do.

General practice in Britain seems to be at a crossroads, and both of its major institutions—the General Medical Services Committee (GMSC) and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP)—are looking to the future. Ian Bogle, chairman of the GMSC, has produced a bold paper on the future of general practice, which Steve Iliffe applauds (p 946). The

college, meanwhile, is suffering from a financial crisis and falling membership and has just lost its chairman of council. Brian Keighley argues passionately on p 977 that the time has come for all general practitioners actively to support the college.

Duncan Curr begins a new Soundings column this week (p 1007). He is currently practising in Ingwavuma, South Africa, and he describes his experience of having to certify the age of what Circular No 38 calls a "Black Illiterate Old Person." Duncan replaces David Widgery, who died last year, and on p 1008 Trisha Greenhalgh reviews a television programme of David's work in the east end of London.

Finally, medicine has lost one of its most famous names with the death of Denis Burkitt. In the obituary on p 996 Andrew Fergusson draws on the piece that Burkitt published in the *BMJ* at the end of last year (21 November, p 1300). Burkitt argued that the most important ingredients for successful research may not be high intelligence, ample funding, and a sophisticated technical back up. There are other factors that are important, and Burkitt captured them in an epigram that he liked to write when signing copies of his books. "Attitudes are more important than abilities. Motives are more important than methods. Character is more important than cleverness. Perseverance is more important than power. And the heart takes precedence over the head."

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