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INTERNATIONAL

Editorials

- 1281 **Specialist medical training and the Calman report**
Stephen Hunter, Paul McLaren
- 1282 **Annual reports of directors of public health**
Ian S Watt, Sue L Ibbotson, Carol Nicholson
- 1283 **How should new treatments for benign prostatic hyperplasia be assessed?**
David Kirk
- 1284 **Nicotine patches in general practice**
I A Campbell
- 1285 **Overpopulation and overconsumption**
Richard Smith
- 1286 **Pre-employment chest radiography and NHS staff**
Anne Cockcroft
- 1286 **Correction: Screening for ovarian cancer**
Webb

CENTRAL RECORDS
ACCIDENTALS BRANCH

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News

- 1287-1292 **Britain's specialist training · Nakajima re-elected · Italy's drug problem · Australia's health · Infertility on the NHS · India's birth control · Bowel cancer gene · Father sues over operation · Wessex fiasco · Defects and treasures**

Papers

- 1293 **Transurethral microwave treatment for benign prostatic hypertrophy: a randomised controlled clinical trial**
A S Bdesha, C J Bunce, J P Kelleher, M E Snell, J Vukusic, R O'N Witherow
- 1296 **Vertically transmitted HIV infection in the British Isles**
A E Ades, Clare F Davison, Fiona J Holland, Diana M Gibb, Christopher N Hudson, Angus Nicholl, David Goldberg, C S Peckham
- 1299 **Assessing long term backache after childbirth**
Robin Russell, Philippa Groves, Nicholas Taub, John O'Dowd, Felicity Reynolds
- 1303 **Prevalence of primary lactase deficiency in adult residents of west Birmingham**
T H Iqbal, G M Wood, K O Lewis, J P Leek, B T Cooper
- 1303 **Correction: Medical management of miscarriage: non-surgical uterine evacuation of incomplete and inevitable spontaneous abortion**
Henshaw *et al*

General Practice

- 1304 **Effectiveness of a nicotine patch in helping people stop smoking: results of a randomised trial in general practice**
Imperial Cancer Research Fund General Practice Research Group
- 1308 **Targeting heavy smokers in general practice: randomised controlled trial of transdermal nicotine patches**
M A H Russell, J A Stapleton, C Feyerabend, S M Wiseman, G Gustavsson, U Sawe, P Connor

Education & Debate

- 1313 **How can we best prolong life? Benefits of coronary risk factor reduction in non-diabetic and diabetic subjects**
John S Yudkin
- 1319 **Measurement error in the Hawksley random zero sphygmomanometer: what damage has been done and what can we learn?**
Rónán M Conroy, Eoin O'Brien, Kevin O'Malley, Neil Atkins
- 1322 **How to teach communication skills to clinical students**
I C McManus, C A Vincent, S Thom, J Kidd
- 1328 **A BMA secretary for quality**
Richard Smith
- 1331 **ABC of Sleep Disorders: Psychotropic drugs and sleep**
Joel Eisen, James MacFarlane, Colin M Shapiro
- 1318 **Corrections:**
Intraocular foreign body missed by radiography
McElvanney and Fielder
Diagnosis and treatment of malaria in Britain
Molyneux and Fox

Received By: *HBT*
Indexing Branch

7

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1335-1354 **Obituary · Letters · Medicopolitical digest · Soundings · Personal View · Medicine and the Media · Medicine and Books · Minerva · (in detail overleaf)**

CONTENTS *pages 1335-1354*

1335 **Obituary**

H I Winner, R S E Cutcliffe, A M C Macpherson, J W Latham, B C Nicholson, C E Tait, N W H Baker, X S Captain, M A L Herbertson, H A Sutherland

1337 **Letters**

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1337 Hypertension guidelines
R D Bailey; M Polkey; J Tudor Hart | 1341 One fee for night visits is required I McKee |
| 1337 AIDS epidemic in Africa F O'Brien; M M Attah | 1341 Health care in India P Johari and others |
| 1338 Long term care of elderly people
P Divall; W R Primrose; D B Goss; C A West;
R C Baldwin | 1342 Chest infections in African children
T J D O'Dempsey and J E Todd; T Dyke and
M Manary |
| 1339 Foreign body aspiration
M Anderson and S Dowse | 1342 Treating drug addicts in police custody N Davis |
| 1339 Dural puncture
M J Jordan; M Robson and others; G M Cooper
and P C Stride | 1343 Presenile dementia
T Helme; A Pinhorn; A J Newens and others;
L Whalley and others |
| 1339 Subdural haematoma after spinal anaesthesia
J S Norris | 1344 Urinary incontinence
P Ekelund and others; J V Jolleys and J V Wilson |
| 1339 Advanced life support course
A H Swain and A J Handley | 1344 Hypercalcaemia with topical calcipotriol
J F Bourke and others |
| 1340 Alcohol not a predictor of peripheral oedema in
chronic bronchitis
P McKee; W MacNee and N J Douglas | 1345 Multiple author trend worst in medicine
J L Onwude and others |
| 1340 Non-medical use of ketamine
P A Gill; K L R Jansen | 1345 What social workers need C Brewer |
| 1340 Hammering psychiatric practice
A J D Macdonald; B Pitt; J M Godfrey; A White | 1345 BUPA and consultants over 70 J Luder |
| 1341 Asthma guidelines
J E Peake and A F Mellon; B Lask | 1346 Future of the RCGP
G Kelly; M A Varnam; M McBride |
| | 1346 Editorial practice
M Fisher and D Sandler; Editor, <i>BMJ</i> |

1347 **Medicopolitical Digest**

Call for advice on child health services to be withdrawn · NHS will be purchaser driven · London Implementation Group · Lords ethics committee · Named nurse initiative · BMA will sponsor GMC candidates

1349 **Soundings** Recessional Colin Douglas; Girls and boys need time to play Trisha Greenhalgh

1350 **Personal View** Closer to home Dawn Lain

1350 **Medicine and the Media**

- 1350 Death on the market Neil Vickers
1351 Asthma whodunnit John Rees; Trouble with patients Richard Hobbs

1352 **Medicine and Books**

- 1352 Paul Booton: *The Making of a Doctor: Medical Education in Theory and Practice* (R S Downie, B Charlton)
1352 Allen Hutchinson: *Hospital Referrals* (Ed M Roland, A Coulter)
1353 R J Maughan: *Physical Activity and Health* (Ed N G Norgan)
1353 Gordon D O Lowe: *Vascular Medicine: A Textbook of Vascular Biology and Diseases* (Ed J Loscalzo, M A Creager, V J Dzau)

1354 **Minerva**

Whatever else you do, stop patients smoking

We still need to be reminded constantly of the central importance of smoking in causing carnage to health, and three papers this week relate to smoking.

John Yudkin has combined results from several meta-analyses and data on almost 350 000 non-diabetic and over 5000 diabetic men to quantify the effectiveness of various interventions to reduce deaths from coronary artery disease (p 1313). Lowering serum cholesterol concentration will reduce 10 year mortality from 14.4 per 1000 non-diabetic men to 13.6. Antihypertensive treatment will have an even smaller effect, but stopping men smoking will reduce mortality to 11.6 per 1000.

But as every doctor and smoker knows, stopping smoking is hard. Two trials from general practice show, however, that nicotine patches can significantly increase smokers' chances of being able to stop (pp 1304 and 1308), but it is still only one smoker in 10 who manages to give up smoking for a year.

Stopping smoking may be more effective than antihypertensive treatment in reducing deaths from coronary artery disease, but there are still millions of people who are taking drugs to reduce their blood

pressure. But some of those people may be being treated unnecessarily. This is because the Hawksley random zero sphygmomanometer, which has been used in most clinical trials in the past 30 years, systematically gives a low reading (p 1319). This means that advice from some trials that patients should be treated if they have diastolic pressures over, say 90 mm Hg is actually based on results from patients whose true pressures were over 97.5 mm Hg. Patients whose blood pressures are recorded at 90 mm Hg with standard blood pressure machines in clinical practice may thus be treated unnecessarily. It has been known for 20 years that the Hawksley sphygmomanometer gives a low reading, and yet nobody has acted on this information. Why not?

Finally, Trisha Greenhalgh considers a new syndrome—adolescent intellectual burnout (p 1349). It may arise in those 5 year olds who are "whisked from school to French lessons, swimming, ballet, creative mathematics, or theatre workshop." Dr Greenhalgh's prescription is to read the newspaper and leave your children to play on the bare floor.

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Editor's Choice