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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**