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1488 Minerva

Instructions to authors appeared in the issue of 2 January 1993, p 55

A Dow-Jones for health?

Imagine if the news every night included not just an index of how well the local stock exchange was doing but also an index of the nation's health. The index would be a single number and would be the ultimate measure of how well the government was doing with its health policy. The British could tell if the NHS reforms were working; Hillary Clinton could point to a declining index in the United States as justification for radical change; and the world could see exactly how the health of the people of Bosnia, Somalia, Peru, or wherever was being destroyed.

Such an index might conceivably result from an easy to administer questionnaire for patients to answer about their own health, and two papers (pp 1437 and 1440) and an editorial (p 1429) in this week's journal discuss such a measure—the unattractively named SF 36. The questionnaire, developed in the United States, can be quickly completed and seems to give a highly reliable and sensitive measure of the patient's health. It is likely to become familiar in health settings everywhere, and the national index of health might be produced by having a continuing sample of the population who completed the form every day or by taking a different, random sample each day. This may sound like science fiction now, but it could happen and could be useful.

The British are a nation who are fonder of looking backwards than forwards as our past seems more magnificent than our future. One of the great moments

in recent British history was the announcement on the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation that a British party had been the first to climb Everest. Forty years on to the week, Michael Ward, who was the doctor on that successful expedition, describes the vital part played by Griffith Pugh of the Medical Research Council in the success (p 1455). Pugh, an Olympic skier and experienced mountaineer as well as a physiologist, advised on the use of oxygen at high altitudes. The key effect of the oxygen is to allow climbers to keep going without having to rest and so to progress much more rapidly than without oxygen. Another piece of history is recorded in the obituary of Tom Gibson (p 1472), the plastic surgeon who made some of the crucial initial discoveries on immune rejection that laid the scientific base for transplantation.

Finally, this week's personal views are two of the best (p 1484). John Launer describes people of different religions coming together at an inspirational German conference and (among other things) playing "Cinderella in a scratch pantomime which included a nun on all fours as a dog and a French rabbi as a goldfish." Tom O'Dowd, meanwhile, tells why he chose to carry the coffin of his 1 year old son to his grave. He then wonders why there is no brotherhood to match the sisterhood that supported his wife in her grief: "Men do not usually have the words to express their grief and the world of work leaves little room for such expressions."

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