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BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL NO 6901 VOLUME 307

INTERNATIONAL

- Editorials**
- 395 **Avoiding the misuse of fresh frozen plasma**
Hannah Cohen
 - 396 **The gene for Huntington's disease**
A E Harding
 - 397 **Clinical consequences of isolating the gene for Huntington's disease**
Peter S Harper
 - 398 **How should another Camelford be managed?**
R T Mayon-White
 - 399 **Seclusion in prison strip cells**
Alison Liebling, Peter Hall

- News**
- 401-404 **US hospitals spend on administration • Britain's waiting lists • Denmark registers prescriptions • Damage from Agent Orange • GMC and fraud cases • McBride struck off • Rabbis talk medical ethics**

- Papers**
- 405 **Relation of fingerprints and shape of palm to fetal growth and adult blood pressure**
K M Godfrey, D J P Barker, J Peace, J Cloke, C Osmond
 - 409 **Earliest electrocardiographic evidence of myocardial infarction: implications for thrombolytic treatment**
Jacqueline Adams, Roger Trent, John Rawles on behalf of the GREAT Group
 - 413 **Minor surgery by general practitioners under the 1990 contract: effects on hospital workload**
Adam Lowy, John Brazier, Margaret Fall, Kate Thomas, Nicola Jones, Brian T Williams
 - 417 **Cryptosporidiosis in infancy and childhood mortality in Guinea Bissau, West Africa**
Kåre Mølbak, Niels Højlyng, Adam Gottschau, José Carlos Correia Sá, Liselotte Ingholt, Augusto Paulo José da Silva, Peter Aaby
 - 420 **Urinary microalbumin excretion in early pregnancy and gestational age at delivery**
Ivan J Perry, Peter Gosling, K Sanghera, David Churchill, D M Luesley, D G Beevers

- General Practice**
- 422 **Accuracy of perception of severity of asthma: patients treated in general practice**
A H Kendrick, C M B Higgs, M J Whitfield, G Laszlo

- Education & Debate**
- 425 **Fortnightly Review: Medical management of rheumatoid arthritis**
D R Porter, R D Sturrock
 - 429 **Unravelling gossamer with boxing gloves: problems in explaining the decline in smoking**
Simon Chapman
 - 433 **Malaria and gold fever**
Hans Veeken
 - 435 **Rationing in Action: Priority setting in the NHS: reports from six districts**
Chris Ham
 - 439 **Lesson of the Week: Acute soft tissue injuries of the cervical spine**
J N Brown, A C Crosby

- 441-456 **Obituary • Letters • Soundings • Personal View • Medicine and the Media • Medicine and Books • Minerva • (in detail overleaf)**

CONTENTS pages 441-456

441 Obituary

Sir Theo Crawford, B A Roper, T M Kraszewski, M I Foreman, A Phillips, A M Cunningham, W T Gordon

443 Letters

- | | |
|---|--|
| 443 Management of pneumothorax
J A Haggie; S Hewitt; A Colman and B Richards;
P S Wong; A J Ireland and A J Dorward | 446 Cimetidine and weight loss
M H Rasmussen and others |
| 444 Teenagers, sex, and risk taking
C Fleming and M Jones | 447 Suicide in doctors V Seagroatt and C Rooney |
| 444 Giving early solids to infants
J S Charlton; H C Williams | 447 Appendicectomy in children R J Brereton |
| 444 Ionising radiation and childhood cancer in Seascale
P Doyle and E Roman; C A Veys; L J Kinlen | 447 Don't be complacent about cot death
D P Davies and others |
| 445 Epidemiology of childhood leukaemia
I H Langford and G Bentham | 447 Mild head injury
S Wallace and R Gullan; A C Lewis and T T Lewis |
| 446 Bronchodilator treatment in asthma
M R Sears and D R Taylor | 448 Ocular melanomas in pregnancy K Aziz |
| 446 High dose inotropic support in septic shock
C J Hinds and others | 448 The SF 36 health survey questionnaire
D Ruta and others; C Jenkinson and others; S Hill
and others; R A Lyons and others |
| 446 Contraceptives and the selected drugs list
C Porter and A Glasier | 449 Regulation of locum staff D J Dye |
| | 450 The new NHS
N W Goodman; J Coakley; R J Rabett; J Miller;
N G M Beattie |

451 **Soundings** Not for debate James Owen Drife; Choosing sex Tony Smith

452 Personal view

General practice is dead. Long live general practice G M MacKenzie; Hanging on for dear life Margaret Hunt

453 **Medicine and the Media** "He did not mean to kill himself" Thomas McClintock

454 Medicine and Books

- 454 David Kirk: *Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia* (Roger Kirby, Timothy Christmas)
454 Roger S Kirby: *Impotence: An Integrated Approach to Clinical Practice* (Ed A Gregoire, J P Pryor)
455 John Giles: *Gynaecology* (Ed R Shaw, P Soutter, S Stanton)
455 Alex Paton: *Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children: 125 Years of Achievement* (Ed J Kosky)

456 Minerva

The gene for Huntington's disease, and the NHS foot soldiers

The gene mutation for Huntington's disease has now been identified, opening up profound consequences that are discussed in two editorials. Anita Harding describes how work has already begun on using the new information to unravel the pathogenesis of the disease (p 396). A gene product—called huntingtin—has been predicted, and one of the patterns of nucleotides seen in the gene for Huntington's disease is seen also in myotonic dystrophy and other neurological disorders. The main clinical implication—described by Peter Harper (p 397)—is that it is likely that a single test on a single sample will allow prediction of Huntington's disease; until now doctors have had to test many family members as well.

For many people a shadow will be lifted when they find that they don't have the gene, but great ethical and social difficulties may arise from the test. Imagine, for example, if the grandchild of an affected patient asks for a test whereas the child of the patient doesn't want one: a positive result for the grandchild inevitably means that his or her parent also carries the gene. The most serious possibility, warns Professor Harper, is that people will be tested without adequate information, counselling, and support. He worries about this, particularly as there is such pressure to reduce the costs of health care.

That problem of how to get more for the health care pound or dollar crops up again in the journal—as it does most weeks. Chris Ham discusses how six health

authorities are tackling—or failing to tackle—the question of rationing health care (p 435), while a group from Sheffield shows that one wheeze for getting better value for money—general practitioners doing more surgery—is not working (p 413): the general practitioners are doing more surgery but mostly on people who probably wouldn't have been referred to hospital surgeons.

Waiting lists thus continue to grow (p 401), and so—in the United States at least—does the number of administrators in hospitals. John Roberts reports on a study from the *New England Journal of Medicine* showing that in 1960 there was one administrator for every 3.17 patients but now there is one patient for every 1.43 administrators (p 401). An accompanying editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* argues that the increase in administrators is, however, the result and not the cause of the crisis.

The health care crisis is producing great angst in many countries, and a letter on p 450 contains a scream of real pain from general practitioner Neil Beattie: "We foot soldiers in the wilds of general practice have long since known that the NHS was crumbling away while our leaders wine and dine in the nation's capital, apparently oblivious to reality. . . . I would rather return to trying to be a good doctor than be an accountant/entrepreneur/businessman/negotiator/statistician with a bit of medicine thrown in."

BMJ Editor's Choice

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