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Editor's Choice

Boring, obscene, defamatory, or just too abstruse

Private Eye, the British satirical magazine, has only three reasons for rejecting an article—that it is boring, obscene, or defamatory. We have a wider range of reasons, but a rejection letter that we are often tempted to send reads: "Your paper was good and original, but sadly the good bits were not original and the original bits were not good." Editors of general medical journals are constantly searching for scientifically sound papers that deal with common clinical problems, but often the scientifically best papers are depressingly abstruse and common problems are not dealt with very scientifically. This week, however, we have two sound papers that deal with common clinical problems.

Urinary tract infections in children and constipation in elderly patients are the stuff of everyday medicine. A large study from Gloucester suggests that many children are not having their urinary tract infection diagnosed microbiologically and that many of those with infections are not undergoing the imaging that is recommended (p 761). A double blind, randomised, placebo controlled, crossover trial comparing a senna-fibre combination with lactulose in elderly patients with constipation showed that both treatments were effective but that the senna-fibre combination was significantly more effective at lower cost (p 769).

A study from Harvard and Greece will be of much less direct use to the ordinary doctor but is scientifically fascinating. The researchers wanted to test the hypothesis that leukaemia may be more common in

children who are not exposed to a possible infectious agent when very young but encounter it when they are older—when the agent may give rise to leukaemia rather than a subclinical infection. This hypothesis has been proposed to explain why leukaemia may be more common in new towns (some also, coincidentally, near nuclear installations). The researchers hypothesised that if the theory was true then children with leukaemia would be less likely to have attended crèches. The case-control study found that this was so (p 774). The theory is far from proved but remains intriguing.

Our recent research among readers has shown that you want more educational and ethical articles, and we are trying hard to oblige. As well as our review of Alzheimer's disease (p 779), our educational material this week includes a new ABC—on emergency radiology (p 785). And we are publishing this week four views on whether doctors should agree to the request for permanent castration from a man who persistently sexually abuses children (p 790). The debate will, we hope, continue in our correspondence columns.

Finally, would you like to achieve everything that Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon, and Edison achieved? One step down this road, described by Minerva (p 812), would be to stop sleeping all night and sleep—as they did—for 15 minutes every four hours. This is poetically called "polyphasic ultrashort sleep."

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