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LEADING ARTICLES

- | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Diabetic Emergency page 63 | Jet Vaccination page 64 | Drugs and Enzymes page 65 |
| Intermittent Chemotherapy for Tuberculosis page 65 | | Recurrent Abdominal Pain in |
| Children page 66 | Syphilitic Lymphadenitis page 67 | Infected Feeding-stuffs page 67 |
| Accident and Emergency Services page 68 | | |

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

- Osteomalacia with Long-term Anticonvulsant Therapy in Epilepsy**
C. E. DENT, A. RICHENS, D. J. F. ROWE, AND T. C. B. STAMP 69
- Disturbance of Calcium Metabolism by Anticonvulsant Drugs** A. RICHENS AND D. J. F. ROWE 73
- Computer-held Clinical Record System—I, Description of System** L. J. OPIT AND F. J. WOODROFFE 76
- Computer-held Clinical Record System—II, Assessment** L. J. OPIT AND F. J. WOODROFFE 80
- Survival Rates of Patients Treated by Home and Hospital Dialysis and Cadaveric Renal Transplantation**
JOHN F. MOORHEAD, R. A. BAILLOD, J. P. HOPEWELL, A. H. KNIGHT, R. E. CROCKETT, O. N. FERNANDO, AND Z. VARGHESE 83
- Malabsorption of Dietary Folate (Pteroylpolyglutamates) in Adult Coeliac Disease and Dermatitis Herpetiformis**
A. V. HOFFBRAND, A. P. DOUGLAS, L. FRY, AND J. S. STEWART 85
- Diabetic Ketoacidosis During the Influenza Epidemic** P. J. WATKINS, N. G. SOLER, M. G. FITZGERALD, AND J. M. MALINS 89

PRELIMINARY COMMUNICATIONS

- Chromosome Aberrations Induced by an Ultrasonic Fetal Pulse Detector**
I. J. C. MACINTOSH AND D. A. DAVEY 92

MEDICAL MEMORANDA

- L-Dopa Treatment Failure: Explanation and Correction**
L. RIVERA-CALIMLIM, C. A. DUJOYNE, J. P. MORGAN, L. LASAGNA, AND J. R. BIANCHINE 93
- Placental Transfer of an IgG Paraprotein Associated with Prolonged Immunosuppression**
J. M. LITTLEWOOD, I. HUNTER, R. B. PAYNE, AND D. W. MILES 94
- Isotopic and Radiological Investigation of Renal Function for Hypertension**
J. H. ANGEL, M. J. GOGGIN, A. R. CONSTABLE, A. M. JOEKES, AND T. SHERWOOD 95

MIDDLE ARTICLES

- Attachment of Community Nurses to General Practices. A Follow-up Study**
J. A. D. ANDERSON, P. A. DRAPER, I. T. KINCAID, AND M. C. AMBLER 103
- Attitudes to Psychiatry in the General Hospital**
JOHN M. KELLETT AND ALEX G. MEZEY 106
- Assessment of Birmingham Medical Students**
W. H. TRETHOWAN 109
- One Hundred Years Ago** 111
- Personal View** CLIFFORD ALLEN 112

NEWS AND NOTES

- Epidemiology—Staphylococcal Food-poisoning** 122
- Medicolegal—Disputed Consultant Appointment** 123
- Medical News** 123

CURRENT PRACTICE

- Acute Urinary Tract Infection in Children**
JEAN M. SMELLIE 97
- Any Questions?** 100

BOOK REVIEWS

CORRESPONDENCE

OBITUARY NOTICES

SUPPLEMENT

- Hospital Junior Staffs Group Council** 7
- General Medical Services Committee (Scotland)** ... 8
- Hospital Junior Staffs Group Council (Scotland)** 9
- Association Notices** 10

Correspondence

Correspondents are asked to be brief.

Importance of Casualty Departments A. E. Bremner, F.R.C.S.ED.113	Double-blind or Not? C. M. Heath, M.D.115	Urinary Tract Infection J. D. E. Knox, F.R.C.P. ED.118
Shortage of Casualty Officers Surgeon Lieutenant Commander J. J. Nicholas, M.B.113	Gut Flora after Cephalixin C. N. Brown, M.R.C.S., and G. E. Mallett, PH.D.116	Misuse of Medical Profession A. S. Gardiner, F.F.A.R.C.S.119
G.P.s and Casualty Departments J. W. Mitchell, M.B.113	Bib into Apron P. C. C. Pitt, F.R.C.S.116	Ban on Amphetamines A. G. White, M.R.C.P.119
Undiagnosed Abdominal Pain Eva A. Frommer, D.P.M., and D. G. Cottom, F.R.C.P.113	Diabetic Acidosis M. J. Sulway, M.R.A.C.P.116	Serological Diagnosis of Rubella Jan Desmyter, M.D.119
Paraquat Toxicity S. S. Brown, PH.D., and P. F. Gibson, B.Sc.114	House-dust and Asthma R. S. B. Pearson, F.R.C.P., and A. Margaret Hughes, PH.D.116	Folate and Vitamin B₁₂ in Epilepsy J. W. Norris, M.D.119
Clofibrate, Fibrinolysis, and Platelet Stickiness G. R. Fearnley, F.R.C.P.114	Dentistry, Herpes Zoster, and Varicella H. G. Easton, M.D.117	Life in Flats D. A. W. Johnson, D.P.M.120
Cholera in Britain B. G. Maegraith, F.R.C.P.114	Bromhexine in Chronic Bronchitis F. Christensen, M.D., and others117	Medical Students and Smoking J. P. Anderson, F.R.C.P.ED.120
Embryonal Tumours in Childhood R. S. Illingworth, F.R.C.P.115	Suggestion for Tetanus Prophylaxis R. K. M. Sanders, M.D.117	New Review Body R. A. Keable-Elliott, M.B.120
Emphysema in Coal Workers M. C. S. Kennedy, M.R.C.S.115	Y Chromosomes and Quinacrine Fluorescence Technique N. B. Atkin, D.M.R.T.118	Claims for Expenses N. Cridland, D.M.120
	Priapism and Phenothiazines K. Dawson-Butterworth, D.P.M.118	Decade of Doctors' Pay K. S. Stewart, F.R.C.S.ED.120

Importance of Casualty Departments

SIR,—The present dearth of doctors in our casualty and accident departments is a cause of considerable worry to those of us who are responsible for running them.

These departments are unpopular among young medical men. The work there can be arduous and does not provide a definite step forward in the training for any existing specialty in our Health Scheme. This is a pity, for much interesting clinical material passes through the casualty and accident sections each day, and the very diversity of the work is stimulating—the injured eye, the poisoned child, the fractured tibia, together, unfortunately, with all the trivia which should really not be there because they do not require any of the sophisticated facilities that the modern casualty and accident department can provide.

The orthopaedic surgeon is often asked to take charge of these departments, because it is argued that a large proportion of the cases consist of injuries to the locomotor system. This is in many ways unsatisfactory, for such a busy man can rarely spare the time to be on the spot long enough and often enough to be of use when he is most required, and his expert and somewhat nar-

row training are inappropriate to many of the problems that present themselves.

The type of doctor required to preside in our casualty and accident departments should, of course, be an expert resuscitator. He should be able to diagnose many conditions with some accuracy and to know which of these to treat himself and where to transfer the other ones as quickly as possible. He should, in some degree, be a "Jack of all trades and Master of none," but a special interest in hand surgery or the care of head injuries might well broaden his medical horizons as well as being of considerable practical use.

The development of such skills as I have suggested is not easy and a career structure to develop them is necessary, together with the prospect of posts carrying a suitable status and financial reward when the training is completed. The situation has deteriorated rapidly in the past few months and may get worse. I write, not to dramatize the subject, but to draw attention to the increasing urgency of the problem.—I am, etc.,

ALAN E. BREMNER.

Newcastle upon Tyne.

Shortage of Casualty Officers

SIR,—I am not of the persuasion who ever seeks to impose longer periods of hospital training on new doctors, particularly as I suspect it is often a way of providing cheap medical labour to subsidize the under-financed hospital service, but I heartily agree with Dr. D. K. Guha-Ray (26 September, p. 774) on the value of experience as a casualty officer.

The casualty department confronts a doctor with the worst that disaster, disease, and human nature can provide, but with facilities and help at hand. When he has learned to deal with it in casualty he is not likely to be disconcerted by it later on in broader fields of medicine.

Before entering general practice I served in the Royal Navy and Merchant Marine. I cannot imagine how I would have coped without the tricks of the trade I learned in only six months as a casualty officer. Nearly always, no matter how bizarre the surroundings or meagre the facilities, one had "seen it all before" in casualty and one got on and did the best one could with what one had.

It is the most valuable halfway-house between the ward and the world, no matter what a doctor intends for his future practice.—I am, etc.,

J. J. NICHOLAS.

Southampton.

G.P.s and Casualty Departments

SIR,—In view of progressive closure of casualty departments in various parts of the country owing to staff shortage, would not this be a suitable opportunity for general practitioners to man these posts when required, and thus maintain their hospital connexion?

This should appeal to younger general practitioners, and might only mean one evening per week. I am sure it could be a workable scheme, and I put it forward for what it is worth.—I am, etc.,

J. W. MITCHELL.

Luton, Beds.

Undiagnosed Abdominal Pain

SIR,—Your leading article on recurrent abdominal pain (22 August, p. 415) is a suitable reminder that in children an organic cause is found in less than 10% of cases. Despite energetic and increasingly accurate diagnostic techniques improvement is slow. In 1951 Conway¹ found serious illness in 5.8% of 250 children attending outpatients at Great Ormond Street with abdominal pain; in Apley's study² it was 7%, and a recent survey is in the region of 10%. A proportion of the remaining 90% have an emotional disorder, often depression, which is rapidly benefited by treatment with antidepressant drugs.³

The child over five years of age commonly complains of pain in the lower abdomen which may occur many times a week, and may be sufficient to cause it to cry. The pain is associated with nausea but rarely vomiting, there is a feeling of fullness though the appetite may remain normal, and weight loss is unusual. Constipation is often present and on occasions is thought to be responsible for the pain. In addition misery, labile mood swings, and changes in sleep pattern may suggest a depressive illness, though often these symptoms are only elicited by direct