



FIONA BLAIR

CLINICAL REVIEW, p 28

## NEWS

- 1 **MPs say all publicly funded trials must be registered**  
UK clinical trials must be registered to win approval from ethics committees
- 2 **Doctors condemn plan to link A&E payments to staff flu jab uptake**  
CCGs must demand openness about mistakes
- 3 **NHS competition rules are "not fit for purpose," think tank chief says**  
Ten providers bid to run £800m contract for Cambridgeshire services
- 4 **Mice prefer Verdi and Mozart to Enya as an aid to recovery after heart transplant surgery, study shows**  
Evidence that exercise helps depression is weak to non-existent
- 5 **Guide warns patients to be sceptical of internet "miracle cures"**  
Review rates of head and neck cancer pathology vary widely
- 6 **Educating practice staff about chlamydia boosts detection rate**  
UK will reconsider claims linking narcolepsy to vaccination  
Lilly challenges Canada's decision to strike down two drug patents



Return of snake oil salesmen, p 5

## RESEARCH

### RESEARCH PAPERS

- 11 **Different combined oral contraceptives and the risk of venous thrombosis: systematic review and network meta-analysis**  
Bernardine H Stegeman et al
- 12 **Provision of rapid HIV tests within a health service and frequency of HIV testing among men who have sex with men: randomised controlled trial**  
Tim R H Read et al  
EDITORIAL, p 10
- 13 **Impact of 2008 global economic crisis on suicide: time trend study in 54 countries**  
Shu-Sen Chang et al  
EDITORIAL, p 9
- 14 **The effects of excluding treatments from network meta-analyses: survey**  
Edward J Mills et al

## COMMENT

### EDITORIALS

- 7 **The word "cancer": how language can corrupt thought**  
Barbara K Dunn et al
- 8 **Adolescents and young adults not in employment, education, or training**  
Jan Scott et al



The mental health consequences of financial recession, p 9

- 9 **Economic recession and suicide**  
Keith Hawton and Camilla Haw  
RESEARCH, p 13
- 10 **Testing times for HIV**  
Jonathan Weber and Roger Tatoud  
RESEARCH, p 12

### ANALYSIS

- 15 **How the political drive to screen for pre-dementia ignores the evidence**  
The strong political lead in the US and UK to screen for pre-dementia lacks sound evidence and ignores the harms of diagnosis, finds David G Le Couteur and colleagues

### FEATURES

- 18 **New chief: Hospital inspection will work this time**  
Mike Richards, England's first chief inspector of hospitals, tells Nigel Hawkes why the new inspection regime introduced after the Mid Staffordshire scandal is bigger and better



The inspector calls time on poor hospital care, p 18

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Doughty, gag inventor, p 26

## COMMENT

## LETTERS

- 20 Angiotensin receptor blockers; Chronic kidney disease
- 22 Opioids in the UK; Detention of psychiatric patients
- 23 Turning doctors into coders; Atos Healthcare replies to Greg Wood

## PERSONAL VIEW

- 24 Humanitarian power must regain its neutral reputation  
Gabriele Rossi
- 25 Homeopathy is not humanitarianism  
David M Shaw

## OBITUARIES

- 26 Andrew Doughty  
Inventor of the Doughty gag and early champion of epidurals in labour
- 27 George Edward  
Adan; James Robertson Hood; Robert Donald McLean; Peter Nathaniel Mond; Jeremy Alan Sherman; Peter Stuart Smith



Treatment questions, p 25

## LAST WORDS

- 39 Make children move Des Spence  
Parking the issue Kinesh Patel

## EDUCATION

## CLINICAL REVIEW

- 28 Managing cows' milk allergy in children  
Sian Ludman et al

## PRACTICE

## GUIDELINES

- 33 Management of urinary incontinence in women: summary of updated NICE guidance  
Antony Smith et al

## A PATIENT'S JOURNEY

- 36 Left atrial myxoma Susie Layton et al

## ENDGAMES

- 38 Quiz page for doctors in training

## MINERVA

- 40 Emergency care for older patients, and other stories



Palmar rash alert, p 40

# Too much information and not enough time?

## BMJ Masterclasses

[masterclasses.bmj.com](http://masterclasses.bmj.com)





21 September 2013 Vol 347

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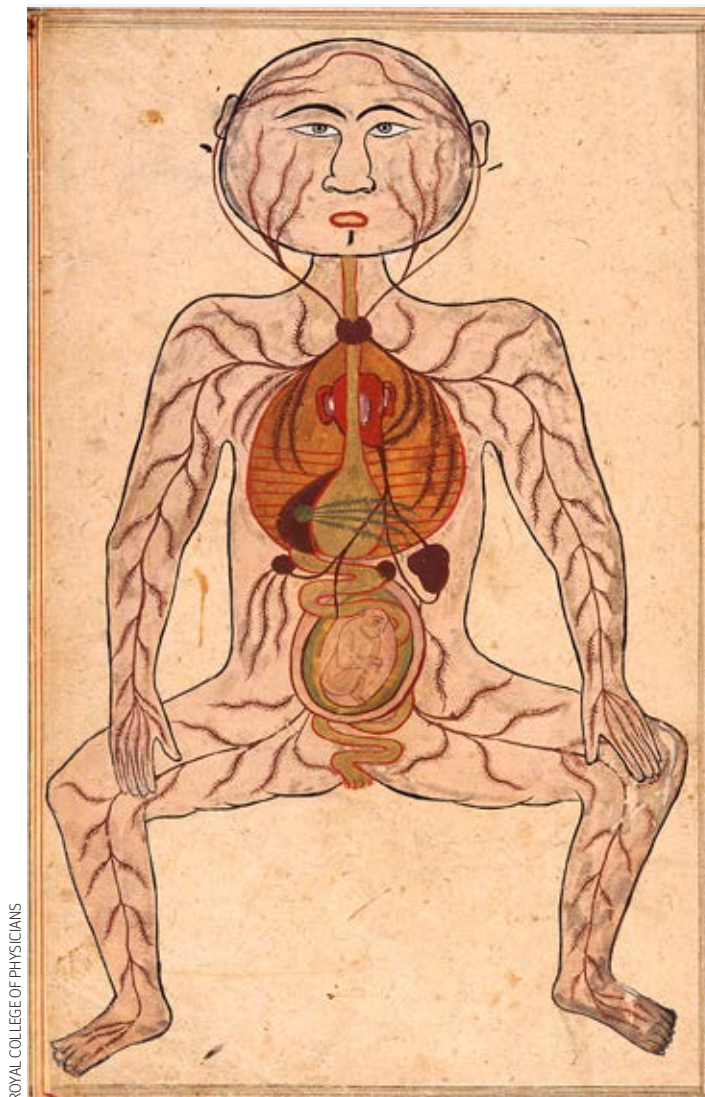
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ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

The Royal College of Physicians' exhibition, *The mirror of health: discovering medicine in the Golden Age of Islam*, presents newly researched material from the college's collection of Islamic medical manuscripts and objects. The exhibition, which draws on advances from the 9th to the 17th century, runs until 25 October. Pictured, above, is an illustration of female reproduction, from *Mansur's Anatomy*, 1656.

## BMJ.COM POLL

Last week's poll asked: "Would older people benefit from having a named general practitioner?"

**87%** voted yes (total 721 votes cast)

► *BMJ* 2013;347:f5545

This week's poll asks:

"Should it be compulsory for healthcare workers to be vaccinated against flu?"

► *BMJ* 2013;347:f5639

► [Vote now on bmj.com](http://bmj.com)

## RESPONSE OF THE WEEK

As I have advancing metastatic disease, there have been no opportunities for good news—just different shades of bad news. What I have noticed is that communication skills bear no relationship to seniority or experience—indeed some of the younger doctors have been absolute naturals, whereas those who should know better can fall well short. In my experience this has usually been evident before a word has been said, so that the discomfort is clearly visible and therefore palpably present in advance of the consultation. We should not forget the importance of the greeting and the strategic significance of a walk down the corridor when dealing with our patients.

But most of all, we need to consider how we would wish to be addressed in similar circumstances."

Jim N Hardy, retired GP, London, UK, in response to "Communication in difficult situations: what would a friend say?" (*BMJ* 2013;347:f5037)

## MOST READ

Fruit consumption and risk of type 2 diabetes: results from three prospective longitudinal cohort studies

Why we can't trust clinical guidelines

Performance of English stop smoking services in first 10 years: analysis of service monitoring data

Dyspepsia

Personality disorder



## EDITOR'S CHOICE

## Austerity, suicide, and screening

**Governments can, if they choose, ameliorate the serious damage to mental health from unemployment**

The *BMJ* tries not to get into party politics. But parties have policies, and when those policies become government policies, and where there is evidence that a policy is harming health, we must speak as we find.

The policy in this case is austerity, and new evidence of its associated harm is published in the *BMJ* this week. Building on previous smaller studies, Chang and colleagues have examined data from 54 countries for any link between the 2008 global economic crisis and increased rates of suicide (p 13). By comparing the number of suicides reported in 2009 with the number expected based on trends before the crisis (2000-07), they identified over 4000 “excess suicides.” Increased suicides were most apparent in Europe and the United States and in men rather than women. The authors looked for and found a specific “dose-response” relation between suicide and unemployment, especially in countries where unemployment levels before the crisis were low.

In a linked editorial, Keith Hawton and Camilla Haw take this further (p 9). Other evidence, most notably a study published four years ago in the *Lancet* (2009;374:315-23), shows that countries that have adopted austerity measures have seen the biggest rises in suicide and other health problems and that active programmes to keep people in work or meaningful activity can reduce or counter these harms.

So governments can, if they choose, ameliorate the serious damage to mental health from unemployment, the brunt of which in almost all countries examined by Chang and colleagues was borne by young men. In a second editorial, Jan Scott and colleagues highlight the hidden burden of mental illness in young men who are not employed or in education or training (p 8). Too

often healthcare systems fail to identify those at risk before they are hit by the “double whammy” of economic inactivity and severe mental disorder.

If this is an important example of underdiagnosis, there is no shortage of examples of overdiagnosis. At the Preventing Overdiagnosis conference in Dartmouth, US, last week ([www.preventingoverdiagnosis.net](http://www.preventingoverdiagnosis.net)), clinicians and academics who had been ploughing a sometimes lonely furrow within their own specialty found themselves in like minded company and able to compare notes (<http://bit.ly/1a0oX26>).

Barnett Kramer, a long-time commentator on the risks of overdiagnosis from cancer screening, was there, and in an editorial this week he and colleagues focus on the damage done by indiscriminate use of the term “cancer” for lesions that may not progress (p 7). And just published on *bmj.com* (2013;347:f5334), a new study finds that randomised trials of cancer screening are poor at reporting harms. Only 7% of 57 trials identified mentioned the risks of overdiagnosis and only 4% recorded false positive results.

Such concerns will be familiar to those of you who have followed the *BMJ*'s Too Much Medicine campaign ([www.bmj.com/too-much-medicine](http://www.bmj.com/too-much-medicine)) and our recent series on overdiagnosis, which this week turns to screening for pre-dementia (p 15). Another government policy which, based on this paper, might be summarised as daft and damaging.

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