Insurance companies use medical information to assess applicants’ risk of death. A large Dutch study comparing the observed mortality of men who applied for life insurance with their previously predicted mortality risk shows that men who had applied for insurance had better survival than the general population. But, interestingly, the men who died could not have been identified with the mortality prediction method that had originally been applied, even though data from basic medical evaluations can accurately predict mortality rates for large groups. The authors say their data support equal opportunities for people seeking life insurance (PLoS ONE 2009;4:e5457, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0005457).

Can cutting out sweet drinks really make a difference to weight? After potential confounding factors were removed from the equation, researchers determined that a reduction in liquid calorie intake of 100 kcal per day was associated with a weight loss of 0.25 kg at six months and 0.24 kg at 18 months. Cutting out drinks was more effective in changing weight than a cut in solid calorie intake. A reduction in sugar sweetened drinks of one serving per day was associated with a weight loss of 0.49 kg at six months and of 0.65 kg at 18 months (American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2009;89:1299-06, doi:10.3945/ajcn.2008.27240).

“Financial circumstances” was the reason given by 75% of women for requesting a repeat termination of pregnancy between 2001 and 2006 in Bolton, UK. The combined oral contraceptive pill and condoms were the contraceptive method of choice before a first termination of pregnancy, but at the time of a repeat termination 50% of the women were not using any contraception at all. The overall incidence of a second termination taking place within 24 months of the first was 2.3%, and these women were just as likely to be in stable relationships as women who were undergoing a first termination (Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care 2009;35:93-5, doi:10.1783/14711890978931915).

Swine flu was viewed by some of Britain’s “chattering classes” last week as a “middle class disease.” One reason for the misconception was that the largest “outbreak” (as of 6 May) involved six pupils at one private school in London, presumably as a result of one of the infected children being lucky enough to spend the school holidays in Mexico or America. The cartoonist Matt went further in the Daily Telegraph, with one parent commenting to another “We want our son to go to a school with swine flu—the local comprehensive [state school] only has nits” (6 May 2009).

An interactive voice response system advising patients on warfarin dosing was piloted in Canada, on patients deemed stable on warfarin for at least three months. The voice response system delivered 78% of scheduled dosage messages, without any need for further input from clinic staff. Staff intervened when the international normalised ratio was very high or low. Three quarters of the participants chose to continue using the system after the study had ended (CMAJ 2009;180:927-33, doi:10.1503/cmaj.081659).

Writing about being struck down by lobar pneumonia at the age of 7 in 1941 and the astounding lengths to which two determined physicians went to type the pneumococcus and to secure a supply of antiserum for him, John Hedley-Whyte, professor at Harvard Medical School, writes “I woke . . . with pain in my right side. I called my father who came in his dressing gown and then returned with a stethoscope.” Another doctor subsequently told him that “the next three to five days would be like climbing a mountain,” that he would become more breathless, and that it was best to simply put up with the pain (Ulster Medical Journal 2009;78:119-28, www.ums.ac.uk/078_2.html).

A mechanism that admits cancer cells into the brain is reported in Nature (2009; published online 6 May, doi:10.1038/nature08021). Scientists have identified three genes with a role in allowing breast cancer cells to pass into the brains of mice. Two of these genes have already been implicated in allowing breast cancer cells into the lungs. The third gene works specifically at the brain’s “front door,” helping cancer cells stick to blood vessels in the brain, helping them to “slip” through into brain tissue. These observations could offer new therapeutic targets for slowing down or even preventing brain metastases.

The longer psychiatric trainees train, the less dangerous their chosen specialty appears to be. A review says that 67% of UK psychiatric specialist registrars reported physical violence in the workplace, and while it’s not known which personal characteristics render them vulnerable, longer duration of clinical experience does seem to offer some protection (Psychiatric Bulletin 2009;33:189-92, doi:10.1192/pb.bp.107.019000). Psychiatric trainees in Ireland reported less physical violence than did those in the UK, Belgium, and the United States, despite Ireland having the highest rate of victim reported violent assault in the general community in the European Union.

Ischaemic white matter lesions seen around the cerebral ventricles of people who have had strokes caused by small vessel disease may result from a poorly functioning blood-brain barrier. The integrity of this barrier requires vitamin B-12, so researchers measured B-12 concentrations from a poorly functioning blood-brain barrier. Strokes caused by small vessel disease may result from a poorly functioning blood-brain barrier. Two of these genes have already been implicated in allowing breast cancer cells into the brains of mice. The third gene works specifically at the brain’s “front door,” helping cancer cells stick to blood vessels in the brain, helping them to “slip” through into brain tissue. These observations could offer new therapeutic targets for slowing down or even preventing brain metastases.

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An 81 year old woman self reported to the eye clinic with acute loss of vision in an eye that had been operated on for glaucoma five years earlier with good results. The previous week she had been treated in the community for a “red eye” and presumed conjunctivitis. Examination showed florid infection of her glaucoma surgery drainage bleb. Despite an intravitreal tap and antibiotics, her visual acuity remained poor, only giving her perception of light. Glaucoma surgery lowers the intraocular pressure by surgical fistulisation from the internal to the external eye and even mild external infection, such as conjunctivitis, merits prompt referral to the eye hospital for early treatment to prevent intraocular spread. Deepa Anijeet (danijeet@hotmail.com), specialty registrar in ophthalmology, Hannah Timlin, specialty registrar in ophthalmology, Rosshini Sanders, consultant in ophthalmology, Department of ophthalmology, Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline KY12 OSU Patient consent obtained. Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b1885

An 80 year old man with acute onset abdominal pain Try the picture quiz in ENDGAMES, p1217