

MINERVA

Any number of observational studies have shown that people who take regular exercise are less likely to be anxious or depressed. Although it's tempting to think that there might be a causal relation here, findings in a large twin study from the Netherlands point the other way. In genetically identical twin pairs, the twin who exercised less was not more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than the twin who exercised more (*Archives of General Psychiatry* 2008;65:897-905).

"Suddenly I saw a small coloured elephant underneath a wooden chair. It grew bigger and bigger, its trunk grew out to reach the leg of the table and I had the feeling the table was shaking." This is how a patient with Parkinson's disease described one of her hallucinations, which are common in this condition, especially when the patient is taking dopamine agonists or L-dopa. Treatment may be needed if the hallucinations are unpleasant or frightening or the patient lacks insight into them. Atypical antipsychotics should probably be the first choice (*Practical Neurology* 2008;8:238-41).

These days, non-specific symptoms of malaise in middle aged men are usually put down to stressful modern life, but older explanations may be becoming fashionable again. After being dropped from the medical lexicon for the past 40 years, the male menopause has been reborn as the andropause—at just about the same time that impotence was renamed erectile dysfunction, according to a recent study of the social history of the male midlife crisis (*Social History of Medicine* 2008; 21:329-44).

Why are so many elderly patients in nursing homes sent into hospital to die, asks an editorial in the *Postgraduate Medical Journal* (2008;84:281). The interventions they receive after admission are usually futile and can be distressing for the patient, the family, and the medical team. The answer seems to be lack of planning for advanced care, poor back-up by doctors and nurses, and lack of training for care home staff. The decision to send a dying resident to hospital often falls to a junior and untrained carer.

At this time of year, it's traditional for older people to observe how much easier examinations are getting. A commentator in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (8 August 2008) goes a step



A 65 year old man with an overlap syndrome of inflammatory arthritis, lung fibrosis, myositis, and Sjögren's syndrome presented with sudden onset of bilateral symmetrical scapular swellings. He was unable to sleep lying on his back. Fine needle aspiration showed mildly inflammatory synovial fluid (white cell count was $1.4 \times 10^9/l$). Magnetic resonance imaging confirmed bilateral adventitial bursae with internal "rice bodies" related to the underlying inflammatory arthritis and scapulothoracic articulation. Surgical excision was discounted because of high surgical risk, but aspiration and injection of the bursae with corticosteroids helped sleep considerably. Important differential diagnoses include osteochondroma, which usually presents with unilateral swelling of the scapula.

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further and blames our current educational culture for the declining numbers of students in the sciences. "The self-esteem movement may have its merits, but preparing students for arduous intellectual ascents aren't among them," he writes, continuing in similar vein with: "What the movement most commonly yields is a surfeit of college freshmen who 'feel good' about themselves for no discernible reason and who grossly overrate their meager attainments."

It was once thought that phantom limb pain originated peripherally in the severed nerves

of the stump of the amputated limb. There's growing evidence, though, that it's caused centrally by changes in the brain. Functional magnetic resonance imaging has shown that, after the amputation, neighbouring regions of the somatosensory and motor maps of the cerebral cortex reorganise themselves by shifting into the deafferented area. These neuroplastic changes may be reversible: amputees trained in the simple technique of imagining movement and sensation in the missing limb not only obtained pain relief but showed reversal of the shift in cortical representation (*Brain* 2008;131:2181-91).

A high proportion of people treated with antipsychotic drugs have weight gain related to their medication, and young people experiencing a first episode of psychosis are particularly susceptible. Non-pharmacological interventions such as nutritional counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy are effective and should be used more widely, especially as weight gain is a common reason for people not taking their medication (*British Journal of Psychiatry* 2008;193:101-7).

Histamine is a simple molecule with a wide range of biological activities. Released from mast cells, it's a signal for vasodilation and smooth muscle activation, as well as mediating itch and pain. In the stomach, it stimulates the secretion of acid. It's also a neurotransmitter: histaminergic neurones in the posterior hypothalamus send their axons throughout the central nervous system and have a crucial role in maintaining wakefulness, controlling appetite, and regulating metabolism (*Physiological Reviews* 2008;88:1183-241).

Last year, three seamen on board an emergency response rescue vessel working in the North Sea died when they tried to silence a rattling anchor chain. One of the seamen collapsed soon after entering the locker that contained the chain, and the other two suffered the same fate trying to rescue him. A report by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (www.maib.gov.uk) blames oxygen deficiency within the locker, caused by corrosion of the steel structure of the locker and the chain itself. In a marine environment, rust formation within an enclosed space can result in a dangerously hypoxic atmosphere.

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