

Pressure from groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power is forcing regulatory agencies in the United States to modify their procedures for evaluating new drugs—and the process may change attitudes to clinical trials in all branches of medicine (*Science* 1989;246:18-20). In particular patients seem likely to demand a greater say in the design and objectives of clinical trials, the avoidance of placebos, and softer end points. “Even if you have a supply of compliant martyrs you have to infuse your trials with some ethical validity,” said one activist, rejecting the claim by research workers that death is the only reliable measure in trials of drugs for AIDS.

An outbreak of babesiosis in Connecticut has been attributed to tick bites; the animal reservoirs for the disease include the white footed mouse and the meadow vole. According to the “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report” (1989;38:649-50), the disease has been recognised in the north east United States since 1960 but the geographical area affected is growing. Add babesiosis to Lyme disease and the wary traveller to this region will not go down to the woods—or even into domestic gardens.

Occasionally Minerva’s eye skims briefly over a technical paper and halts. One such is a report from Japan (*British Journal of Haematology* 1989;73:18-22) of the use of immunomagnetic beads to isolate megakaryocytes from bone marrow. The beads are coated with appropriate antibodies and the megakaryocytes separated using a magnet. A similar technique has been used to remove tumour cells from bone marrow.

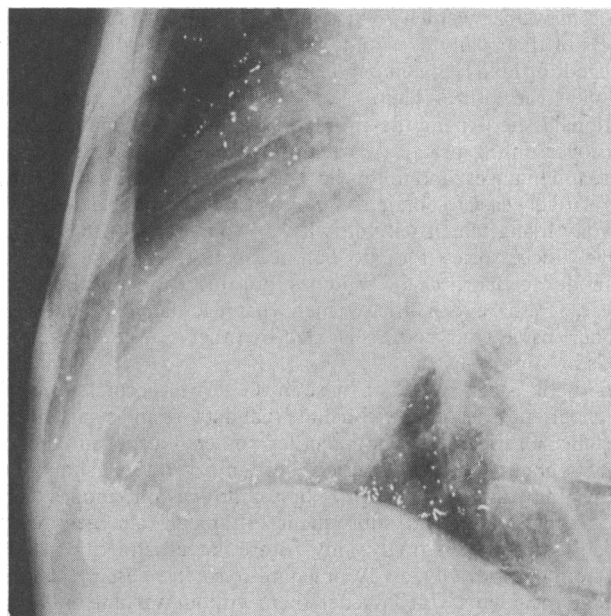
A 23 year old man was known by his friends as “Death Wish” because of reckless behaviour such as smashing glass tumblers with his head. A report in “Medicine, Science, and the Law” (1989;29:308-10) describes his last, fatal escapade; he tried to swallow a pool ball and asphyxiated despite attempts at resuscitation by an ambulance man and others. His blood alcohol concentration was 330 mg/100 ml.

In 1987 Americans spent about £1000 million on treatments for infertility, and both the insurers and the clinicians are making their own assessment of the cost-benefit equations. An analysis (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1989;321: 1052-3) of treatment by in vitro fertilisation at the Beth Israel Hospital showed that 84% of the births occurred in women who had only one or two treatment cycles. Births became extremely unlikely if four treatment cycles were unsuccessful.

Warnings are coming from the United States of yet another addictive drug, an amphetamine derivative known as ice. According to a news item in the “Daily Telegraph” (9 October), police in Hawaii are concerned that ice is even more dangerous than crack. “We look upon it as an instant psychosis,” said one of the local addiction experts. People who have taken the drug are said to be temporarily indistinguishable from paranoid schizophrenics—a description that makes the attraction of the stuff hard to understand.

When omnivores are switched to a vegetarian diet their blood pressure comes down a little, so it might be expected that life long vegetarians might have lower blood pressures than the rest of the population. This hypothesis has now been tested in black Seventh Day Adventists in the United States and in black and white controls (*American Journal of Public Health* 1989;79:1283-8). Black vegetarians had lower pressures than non-vegetarian black people but both categories of black people had higher blood pressures than white people. The greater susceptibility to hypertension among black people remains unexplained.

Quicksilver heart



This lateral chest radiograph is of a hospital porter in his 20s who was known to have been an intravenous drug abuser. He originally presented claiming to have fallen on to and broken a sphygmomanometer and to be concerned that some of the mercury may have entered his body through a small cut on his thigh. He subsequently admitted injecting the mercury intravenously into his left arm, when it was identifiable on radiographs. The chest films showed mercury in the pulmonary arteries of both lungs and in the apex of the right ventricle. The intracardiac collection failed to move when the patient was turned on to his side and could not be aspirated at echocardiography. Presumably it was held within thrombus at this site. The patient remains well and is back at work. I am grateful to Dr D Gibson, Brompton Hospital, for allowing me to discuss his patient. —C R MURCH, Senior Registrar, Radiology, Westminster Hospital, London SW1P 2AP

One of Minerva’s men colleagues recently took a child to his local hospital’s accident and emergency department and was a little surprised to find a condom dispenser in the lavatory. His surprise lessened progressively as he waited over four hours for the child’s treatment to be completed; no doubt the machine has a practical purpose.

Doctors trying to advise the many parents of children with atopic eczema about dietary treatment should read an appraisal in “Archives of Disease in Childhood” (1989;64:1506-9). Tinkering with the problem along the lines of “try cutting down his milk” is most unlikely to succeed, says T J David. Rigorous avoidance of known or suspected triggers is essential—but in the long term no more than a 10th of children with severe eczema derive lasting benefit from dietary restriction.

“Alarming downward curves” are reported in *The Grocer* (30 September p 9) for the consumption of butter (down 16% compared with last year) and milk. The British do seem to be eating a more healthy diet: consumption of fish and low fat milk has risen, that of beef and pork has fallen, and the long term decline of the white loaf is continuing.

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