

Further evidence to suggest that the benefits of giving patients with non-rheumatic atrial fibrillation anticoagulants to prevent stroke may outweigh the risks and inconvenience is presented in a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (1990;323:1505-11). In a randomised controlled trial of long term warfarin in 420 patients the incidence of stroke was 0.41% a year in the warfarin group compared with 2.98% in controls. Compliance with active treatment was high, bleeding events low.

*Around 90% to 95% of children with newly diagnosed acute lymphoblastic leukaemia go into remission with standard drug treatment and have a good prognosis. The remaining 5% have a very gloomy outlook. A report in "Cancer" (1990;66:1671-7) describes attempts to obtain remission in 26 children who had not responded to regimens of between two and seven drugs. Treatment with teniposide and cytarabine proved very toxic; 12 children achieved a complete but temporary remission—but only one of the 26 is still alive, after a marrow transplant.*

After years of research surfactant preparations are becoming available for preventing and treating the respiratory distress syndrome in neonates. A recent review (*Thorax* 1990;45:825-9) suggests that chest physicians may soon be testing out the possibility that surfactant might be of value in some patients with the adult respiratory distress syndrome—a disease with a high morbidity and mortality.

*Minerva occasionally looks at what is going on in veterinary research since it is often several years ahead of medicine in developing new techniques. A report in the new journal "Animal Biotechnology" (1990;1(1):1-10) describes the growth of manipulated sheep embryos on a monolayer of sheep oviductal cells; this allowed assessment of embryos and selection of those with eight or more uniformly cleaving cells for transfer to surrogate mothers.*

How long before selective chorionic villus sampling and amniocentesis are replaced by non-invasive screening tests for Down's syndrome for all women? Two studies in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (1990;163:1248-53, 1186-90)—one based on serum assay of free  $\beta$  protein of human chorionic gonadotrophin taken in conjunction with  $\alpha$  fetoprotein and maternal age, the other on midtrimester ultrasonography—report detection rates of over 80%.

*In the same issue the eating habits of 66 consecutive women attending an infertility clinic are reported. Five had anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa and six non-specific eating disorders; none had disclosed this information to their gynaecologists ("American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology" (1990;163:1196-9)). The authors conclude that all women with unexplained infertility should be screened for eating disorders and treated for such before being investigated further.*

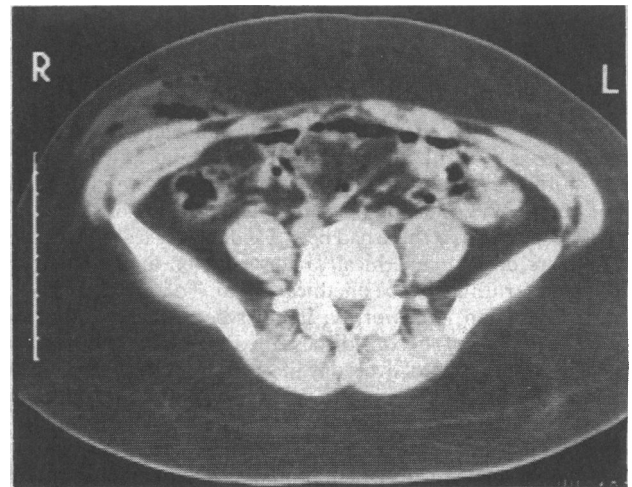
Children with cerebral palsy showed substantial improvement in mobility and skills after their siblings had been given a four month programme of information about the disease and advice on how to help their brother or sister be more independent (*Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology* 1990;32:1049-57). Possibly, say the authors, this pilot study might encourage similar efforts with the families of children with other disabilities.

*Scientists who regularly handle laboratory animals commonly develop an allergy to the creatures concerned—cockroach, mouse, or monkey. According to "The Scientist" (12 November, p 7) research laboratories do not seem to acknowledge that allergies of this kind are an important health problem, but recent studies have put the prevalence of allergy in laboratory*

*workers as high as 35%. Once the allergy is established the scientist faces a difficult choice—switch to another species or use protective masks and clothing.*

"Life is a series of addictions" says Isaac Marks in a recent review (*British Journal of Addiction* 1990;85:1389-94). Eating, drinking, defaecation, micturition, and sex all provoke rising desires to perform an act; the act switches off the desire, which then returns within hours or days. The behaviour is labelled addictive when its results are thought to be counterproductive, but the psychological mechanisms seem the same whether the action is "normal" or abnormal and the addiction behavioural or chemical.

*Air at McBurney's point*



*A 21 year old woman was admitted to the intensive care unit having taken a drug overdose. Over the previous year she presented to the emergency room on 13 occasions with different complaints. Two days after admission she started complaining of right sided lower abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, and fever. She had a tender mass in the right iliac fossa. Two small puncture marks were noted nearby. Abdominal computed tomography showed air bubbles and fluid subcutaneously in the right lower part of the abdominal wall. There was no free air in the abdomen. On persistent questioning, the patient admitted that she had been injecting herself with water and air whenever she had been out to the toilet. She was treated with antibiotics and discharged home well. —ABDULRAHMAN ABDOON, senior surgical resident, HASSAN CHAMSI-PASHA, chief of critical care unit, King Fahd Armed Forces Hospital, Jeddah 21159, Saudi Arabia. (Correspondence to Dr Chamsi-Pasha.)*

The incidence of malignant melanoma in the United Kingdom continues to rise, with the highest ever annual incidence rates—7.4 per 100 000 for men, 13.7 per 100 000 for women—reported in patients in West Glamorgan (*Clinical and Experimental Dermatology* 1990;15:406-9). On the positive side, there was a significant trend over the three year study period for patients to present earlier with thinner lesions.

*Watching the antics of a mother trying, with only partial success, to force a 2 year old to swallow a teaspoonful of colourful but foul tasting antibiotic mixture set Minerva thinking. Surely paediatric formulations could be made more palatable? It might do wonders for compliance.*

MINERVA