

## Minerva

American medical schools are still unsure whether or not to teach complementary medicine, and how to do it if they do (*JAMA* 1998;280:784-7). About two thirds offer some form of teaching, mostly in the form of electives. Less than a third of courses are part of the regular curriculum. Investigators are unsurprised by the confusion and point out that the subject area is also confused; the term complementary medicine covers over 150 different therapies, philosophies, and practices.

There are, however, an increasing number of journals dedicated to evaluating alternative treatments. Minerva mentioned one on 8 August and has been admonished by the editors of another, the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, which is also peer reviewed, included in Medline, and dedicated to non-Western treatments for Western diseases. This year's summer issue includes a review of the best and worst control treatments to use in trials of acupuncture (4:159-171). There is a bewildering number of options, including waiting list controls, placebo treatments such as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, and sham needling at non-acupuncture sites.

A grim article in *Paediatrics* (1998;101:625-9) lists 172 children who died because they or their parents had a doctrinal objection to medical treatment. The commonest killer in the series was pneumonia, followed by meningitis, diabetes, and measles. Most of these children would have survived had they reached the attention of doctors, according to the authors, who call for the repeal of all religious exemption laws protecting parents from prosecution for neglect or abuse.

Problem based learning may suit female medical students better than male medical students, according to a study in *Medical Teacher* (1998;20:349-55). In a questionnaire survey about a case based anatomy course, female students were more positive than their male peers about explanatory discussions about the course and did better in the problem based parts of the exam than in the general essay parts.

Patients may be better than doctors or nurses at measuring their own blood pressure (*British Journal of General Practice* 1998;48:1585-9). A study of 99 patients in general practice found that blood pressure measurements taken by patients at home with an automated device were closer to ambulatory blood pressure measurements than those taken by either the general practitioner or the practice nurse. The authors

conclude that self measurement at home is reliable, as good as ambulatory blood pressure monitoring, and prevents white coat hypertension.

Parents of children with brain damage after cardiac surgery are isolated, angry, and often desperate (*Heart* 1998;80:286-91). Parents interviewed for a qualitative study described "exhaustion," "endless sleepless nights," "wondering where the strength would come from to carry on," and "living in shifts." They also admitted to wanting to end their children's lives and likened their efforts to "battles," "struggles," and "fights." The authors urge hospitals and health authorities to provide better coordinated support services for these distressed families.

Minerva lives next door to a large wasps' nest so welcomed some late summer advice on how to avoid insect stings (*Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology* 1998;8:453-5): don't wear perfume or bright clothing, don't run barefoot through clover, don't hang around dustbins, and if an insect approaches never swat it but brush it aside or wait patiently for it to leave.

Enteral feeds which kick start the immune system seem to reduce complication rates and speed recovery in critically ill patients, report investigators from Guy's Hospital in London (*Critical Care Medicine* 1998;26:1164-72). Their randomised controlled trial is the most rigorous to date and prompts a commentator to recommend immune enhancing feeds for most critically ill patients. It's still unclear, however, which formula is best

Bottle fed infants may be missing out on long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids that aid intellectual development (*Lancet* 1998;352:688-91). Researchers from Dundee, Scotland, randomised babies to receive standard formula milk or milk supplemented with long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids. The babies in the standard formula group did significantly worse at a problem solving test at 10 months old. Problem solving scores at this age are related to IQ later in childhood, say the researchers, who tentatively suggest that term babies who are not breast fed might benefit from supplementation with fatty acids.

An Italian woman was bitten by her ungrateful Doberman dog and presented to an accident and emergency department four hours later with crepitations and swelling of the forearm and hand (*Injury* 1998;29:543-5). Doctors suspected gas



As a young man this 54 year old spent a year and a half working in a silver mine in the Peruvian Andes. He worked outside wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. His occupational exposure to arsenic (used in the extraction of silver) and ultraviolet light caused multiple basal cell carcinomas. We have treated over 75 lesions with local radiotherapy since 1974.

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gangrene or necrotising fasciitis until a canny orthopaedic junior discovered that she had cleaned the wound vigorously with 50ml of neat 6% hydrogen peroxide.

Patients with hypochondriasis are much less anxious about their health after four months and 16 sessions of cognitive therapy (*British Journal of Psychiatry* 1998;173:218-25). A randomised controlled trial found that cognitive therapy initially outperformed behavioural stress management but that both treatments were still working reasonably well after one year of follow up. Waiting list controls did substantially worse than both groups of treated patients; they reported being seriously worried about their health more than half the time.