LEADING ARTICLES

Immunisation against hepatitis B .................................................. 1585
Spectacle problems ................................................................. 1586
Atrial myxomas .......................................................................... 1587
Effects of electric convulsion therapy ......................................... 1588

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Chemotherapy in pancreatic cancer: results of a controlled, prospective, randomised, multicentre trial
C N MALLINSON, M O RAKE, J B COCKING, C A FOX, M T CWYNARSKI, B L DIFFEY, G A JACKSON, J HANLEY, V J WASS .................. 1589
Increased risk of recurrence of pregnancies complicated by fetal neural tube defects in mothers receiving poor diets, and possible benefit of dietary counselling K M LAURENC, NANCY JAMES, MARY MILLER, H CAMPBELL .......... 1592
Adjuvant chemotherapy for breast cancer: side effects and quality of life B V PALMER, G A WALSH, J A MCKINNA, N P GREENING .................. 1594
Prophylaxis of infection after appendicectomy: a survey of current surgical practice W B CAMPBELL .................................................. 1597
Papillary carcinoma of the thyroid in two brothers after chest fluoroscopy in childhood C FISHER, C J EDMONDS ....................... 1600
Thromboxane A., in pregnancy and puverulium O YLIKIVIKLA, L VIINNIKA .......................................................... 1601
Acute folate deficiency during peritoneal dialysis A J S WATSON, E LAWLER, J A B KEONG .............................................. 1602
Acute renal failure precipitated by radiographic contrast medium in a patient with rhabdomyolysis C G WINEARLS, J G LEADINGHAM, A J DIXON ................. 1603
Reporting of blood pressure data in medical journals ANTONIA LEHANE, E T O'BRIEN, K O'MALLEY ........................................... 1603
Coeliac plexus block for control of pain in chronic pancreatitis SIMON N BELL, RUSSELL COLE, IAN C ROBERTS-THOMSON .... 1604

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Volunteer stroke scheme for dysphasic patients with stroke VALERIE EATON GRIFFITH, CHRISTINE L MILLER ........................................ 1605
Observations on patients dysphasic after stroke VALERIE EATON GRIFFITH .................................................. 1608
An aid to reducing unnecessary investigations D W YOUNG ..................... 1610
Statistics and ethics in medical research: VII—Interpreting results DOUGLAS G ALTMAN .............................................. 1612
Clinical pharmacology: The Committee on Review of Medicines T B BUNES .......................................................... 1614
ABC of ENT: Discharge from the ear: otitis externa and acute otitis media HAROLD LUDMAN .......................................... 1616
Medical audit in neonatal care T H C WILLIAMS, D P DAVIES ............ 1618
Lesson of the Week: Autonomic dysaesthesia due to ergot toxicity P J D EVANS, J W LLOYD, K M S PEET ............................................. 1621
Pollution and People: Is low-level lead pollution dangerous? DAPHNE GLOAG .................................................. 1622
Reading for Pleasure: "Satiable curiosity" D A J TYRRELL ................. 1626
Medicine and Books ................................................................ 1628
Any Questions? ........................................................................ 1607, 1609, 1615, 1625, 1627, 1633
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from PAUL WRIGHT, A PINES ........... 1620
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from J SHEMILT, B SMITH ........ 1633
Personal View R S COLTART .................................................. 1634

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents ......................... 1635

NEWS AND NOTES

Views ................................................................................. 1648
Epidemiology—Influenza: 1979-80 ........................................ 1649
Medicolegal—Medical Protection Society: Annual Report .......... 1649
Parliament—Perinatal mortality ............................................. 1650
Medical News—Transport safety action group .................. 1650
BMA Notices ........................................................................ 1651

OBITUARY ........................................................................ 1645

SUPPLEMENT

The Week ............................................................................. 1652
Minister's discouraging response to perinatal report WILLIAM RUSSELL .................................................. 1653
From the CCHMS: Support for proposed complaints procedure .......................................................... 1654
DHSS issues private practice circular ................................ 1656
EEC doctors meet in Dublin ................................................. 1657
CORRESPONDENCE

Millions of mild hypertensives

Sir,—The enthusiasm expressed in your recent leading article “Millions of mild hypertensives” (18 October, p 1024) has been justly tempered by subsequent contributions. Some further reservations are also warranted. It is customary in trials of treatment of hypertension to measure the blood pressure at least four times on two occasions, and often with a random zero instrument. The fifth phase of the sounds is taken as the diastolic end point. Common experience tells us that these precautions are not universal practice. It is therefore likely that the lower the pressure at which treatment is advised the greater the number of really normotensive people who will start a lifetime of drugs. No trials of treatment for diastolic pressures of 80-90 mm Hg are contemplated and we do not know what harm may be done to this group by drugs.

We must be very wary of encouraging people to believe that health can be better preserved by taking a tablet, which is easy, than by altering an unsatisfactory lifestyle, which is difficult. I am reminded of a gouty, hypertensive, hard-drinking, heavy-smoking man recently admitted with a severe gastric haemorrhage related to the taking of aspirin, which he had been told would protect his arteries.

I believe that the first step with the mild hypertensive should be to give him clear advice on what he can do himself to protect his health. Consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, calories, fat, and salt as well as activity may require adjustment. If he remains hypertensive (say, six months later), whether or not he has heeded our advice, there is then good reason reluctantly to start drugs.

A little pause is warranted before we increase yet further the large proportion of the population we supply with regular medication.

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ABC of blood pressure reduction

Sir,—In the article entitled “ABC of blood pressure reduction—special problems” (1 November, p 1200), the authors emphasise the importance of adequate treatment for hypertension in diabetics, in whom both hypertension and diabetes independently increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. We do not, however, agree with their suggestion that methyldopa and the vasodilators should be the drugs of first choice in hypertensive diabetics because of theoretical hazards from the use of beta-blockers. Methyldopa and vasodilators have problems of their own, and we believe that beta-blocking drugs should be favoured in diabetics just as they are in non-diabetics.

Impairment of the metabolic response to hypoglycaemia in insulin-treated diabetics has been demonstrated, and may be slightly less in the case of selective beta-blockade,1 but in practice this does not appear to increase the frequency of loss of consciousness from hypoglycaemia.2 This remains a rare complication of beta-blockade, and there has been only one well-documented case report.3 On the other hand, in non-insulin-dependent diabetics the increase in blood glucose is negligible. Beta-blockers are an important group of drugs whose therapeutic value should not be denied to diabetics.

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