

# MINERVA

Non-attendance at general practice and hospital outpatient appointments wastes time and money. Patients who miss appointments tend to be young and, when asked why they didn't attend, give simple lapse of memory as the commonest reason. Texting reminders about appointments seems a sensible way of reducing non-attendance. Unfortunately, a controlled trial in an inner city general practice found that it made no difference (*Quality and Safety in Health Care* 2008;17:373-6).

They make up a substantial part of the workforce and the job they do is essential. Even so, the people who work as cleaners in homes, offices, and factories have low visibility. A focus group study finds that they are exposed to a variety of respiratory irritants because ammonia, ethanol, glutaraldehyde, alkalis, and surfactants are common constituents of cleaning solutions (*Occupational Medicine* 2008;58:458-63). Few cleaners knew much about the hazards of cleaning agents or had any training in using them, and protective equipment was in short supply.

Ron Rivera was a Nicaraguan potter whose ingenuity brought clean drinking water to many people. He developed a water filter made from clay mixed with finely milled sawdust. The sawdust burnt away during firing, leaving a network of pores that were then coated with colloidal silver, a bactericide. The filters halved the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases among the families that used them. Working through Potters for Peace and funded by the Red Cross and other organisations, he hoped to establish 100 locally owned factories around the world. He was working on his 30th in Nigeria when he contracted falciparum malaria, from which he died ([www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/oct/16/1](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/oct/16/1)).

Doctors caring for people with Parkinson's disease often fail to realise the severity of non-motor symptoms. A large study reported in *Archives of Neurology* (2008;65:1191-4) finds a high frequency of painful dystonias and also of muscular aches, joint stiffness, and arthralgia in the absence of dystonia. Neuropathic pain is common among people with this condition, too.

More than 5000 people born in England, Scotland, or Wales in one week in March 1946 have been studied repeatedly throughout



A 78 year old man presented in acute renal failure with bilateral hydronephrosis. Examination showed a large irreducible inguinal hernia, which decreased in size after urethral catheterisation. His renal function normalised and the hydronephrosis resolved. A cystogram showed bladder in the hernial sac. Obstruction of both ureters from bladder herniation is uncommon but well described. Initial treatment is drainage, either with bilateral nephrostomies or urethral catheterisation; inguinal hernia repair is the definitive treatment.

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Patient consent obtained.

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their lives. At the age of 43 they completed the psychiatric symptom frequency questionnaire, which estimates the intensity of symptoms of anxiety and depression. Among people scoring highly, those who had been taking antidepressant or anxiolytic drugs were less likely to have symptoms when retested 10 years later. One interpretation is that using these drugs during an episode of mental disorder has long term beneficial effects; but, as the authors point out, this may be because the people taking them are willing to seek help rather than because of any pharmacological effect (*British Journal of Psychiatry* 2008;193:327-31).

The most famous biological paper in living memory, the Letter (short paper) in *Nature* in 1953 from Watson and Crick on the structure of DNA, wasn't peer reviewed before publication. This observation prompts some critical comments on the way the peer review process currently operates from the editor of *Disease Models and Mechanisms* (2008;1:73-7). He thinks it is ironic that, at a time when most sorts of information are becoming available more quickly, many scientists complain that getting a paper published is becoming slower and more painful.

Age, presence of a skull fracture, and a Glasgow coma scale score of less than 9 are the most important predictors of mortality after blunt trauma brain injury, according to a retrospective study from Taiwan. These findings aren't surprising, but it's useful to know that prognostic indicators work in settings that are different from the ones in which they were developed (*Emergency Medicine Journal* 2008;25:670-3).

People who have a relative with a history of subarachnoid haemorrhage are more likely to have a subarachnoid haemorrhage themselves. A large, population based study from Sweden finds that the size of the risk depends on how many relatives have been affected. Having one first degree relative with a history of subarachnoid haemorrhage doubles the odds ratio, although the absolute risk remains low. With two or more affected relatives, the odds ratio rises to over 50 and screening may be indicated (*Brain* 2008;131:2662-5).

A survey of more than 600 patients undergoing surgery or an invasive procedure in a university hospital in Israel finds, not for the first time, that many patients could not recall receiving explanations about risks or any discussion of alternatives. An attempt to improve matters, by encouraging clinicians to ask patients to restate what had just been explained to them, didn't work—mainly because the clinicians didn't follow the advice. Lack of time and failing to think of informed consent as an important part of quality of care are possible explanations why doctors resist attempts to improve the process of gaining patients' consent (*International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 2008;20:352-7).

Ten years ago, a randomised controlled trial found that people with coronary heart disease who attended a nurse led secondary prevention clinic had better quality of life in the short term. After four years, the intervention group had a reduced rate of coronary events and of deaths. Ten years later, though, the survival curves for coronary event rates had converged and the groups had a similar number of hospital admissions (*Heart* 2008;94:1419-23).

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