

EDITORIALS

- 1035 Thyroid autoantibodies, preterm birth, and miscarriage**
The association is clear, but the effects of levothyroxine treatment are uncertain, say Roberto Negro and Alex Stagnaro-Green
» Research, p 1065
- 1036 Arsenic in drinking water**
Increases deaths from cardiovascular disease, say Allan H Smith and Craig M Steinmaus
» Research, p 1067
- 1037 Treatment with β blockers in people with COPD**
May reduce respiratory symptoms and mortality independently of cardiovascular effects, say Shamsah Kazani and Elliot Israel
» Research, p 1068
- 1038 The health impacts of cold homes and fuel poverty**
Three reasons to act: the health burden, inequity, and mitigation, say Keith B G Dear and Anthony J McMichael
» News, p 1046
- 1040 Food price crises and health**
Policies on trade, grain reserves, and biofuel subsidies all need to change, says Joachim von Braun
» Observations, p 1060

LETTERS

- 1041 Palliative care; Chemotherapy in terminal cancer**
- 1042 Tackling knife violence; Improving child health services; Unintentional weight loss**
- 1043 Journal's withdrawal of article**
- 1044 Teaching junior doctors; Climate change**

NEWS

- 1045 Road safety plan aims to save five million lives**
Lansley faces increasing isolation over proposed health reforms
- 1046 Scotland may be first UK country to impose minimum alcohol price**
Number of excess winter deaths is three times as high in coldest homes as in warmest
- 1047 Fewer children in England and Wales die violently**
Kennedy excised figures on excess deaths from Mid Staffordshire report
- 1048 Vermont moves closer to providing first US "socialised medicine"**
New EU rules require all herbal medicines to be registered
- 1049 Full smoking ban is needed in Germany as study finds four out of five pubs flout regulations**
Antismoking campaigners lambast packs of 14
- 1050 Many US medical associations depend heavily on funding by drug manufacturers**
Serono pays \$44m to settle promotion of drug
- 1051 Bahraini doctors stand trial for "acting against the state"**

SHORT CUTS

- 1052 What's new in the other general journals**

FEATURES

- 1054 A new deal on disease definition**
How do we replace the old panels of conflicted experts? Ray Moynihan investigates
- 1057 Getting Evidence into Practice: Tackling inequality by implementing high quality research**
Karen Pettersen introduces the shortlist
- 1058 Paul Nurse: Talking about a research revolution**
The Nobel Prize winning scientist at the helm of Europe's biggest biomedical research enterprise talks to Geoff Watts about his aspirations for the new centre and the general culture of UK research

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE CONTRARY

- 1060 Thought for food** Tony Delamothe
» Editorial, p 1040

LOBBY WATCH

- 1061 Reform** Jane Cassidy

ANALYSIS

- 1062 Quality of care in frail older people: The balance between receiving and giving**
The focus on providing essential medical and social care for frail older people often leaves them feeling unable to contribute. But building in reciprocity could help preserve social inclusion and foster autonomy, dignity, and quality of life, say Myrra Vernooij-Dassen, Sheila Leatherman, and Marcel Olde Rikkert

RESEARCH

- 1065 Association between thyroid autoantibodies and miscarriage and preterm birth: meta-analysis of evidence**
Shakila Thangaratnam, Alex Tan, Ellen Knox, Mark D Kilby, Jayne Franklyn, Arri Coomarasamy
» Editorial, p 1035
- 1066 Outreach education for integration of HIV/AIDS care, antiretroviral treatment, and tuberculosis care in primary care clinics in South Africa: PALSA PLUS pragmatic cluster randomised trial**
Merrick Zwarenstein, Lara R Fairall, Carl Lombard, Pat Mayers, Angeni Bheekie, René G English, Simon Lewin, Max O Bachmann, Eric Bateman
- 1067 Arsenic exposure from drinking water and mortality from cardiovascular disease in Bangladesh: prospective cohort study**
Yu Chen, Joseph H Graziano, Faruque Parvez, Mengling Liu, Vesna Slavkovich, Tara Kalra, Maria Argos, Tariqul Islam, Alauddin Ahmed, Muhammad Rakibuz-Zaman, Rabiul Hasan, Golam Sarwar, Diane Levy, Alexander van Geen, Habibul Ahsan
» Editorial, p 1036



PAUL BOSTON

Features, p 1054



Thyroid autoantibodies and preterm delivery, pp 1035, 1065



Paul Nurse profile, p 1058



Health impact of cold homes, pp 1038, 1046



Smoking con trick, p 1049

1068 Effect of β blockers in treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: a retrospective cohort study

Philip M Short, Samuel I W Lipworth, Douglas H J Elder, Stuart Schembri, Brian J Lipworth
 » *Editorial, p 1037*

RESEARCH METHODS & REPORTING

1069 Economic evaluation alongside randomised controlled trials: design, conduct, analysis, and reporting

Stavros Petrou, Alastair Gray

CLINICAL REVIEW

1074 Advising on travel during pregnancy

Natasha L Hezelgrave, Christopher J M Whitty, Andrew H Shennan, Lucy C Chappell

PRACTICE

SAFETY ALERTS

1079 Checking placement of nasogastric feeding tubes in adults (interpretation of x ray images): summary of a safety report from the National Patient Safety Agency

Tara Lamont, Catherine Beaumont, Alan Fayaz, Frances Healey, Tanya Huehns, Robert Law, Caroline Lecko, Sukhmeet Panesar, Michael Surkitt-Parr, Mike Stroud, Bruce Warner

RATIONAL IMAGING

1082 Investigating suspected subarachnoid haemorrhage in adults

S C Brown, S Brew, J Madigan

OBITUARIES

- 1085 Michael Latham**
Global nutrition expert and breast feeding advocate
- 1086 Hugh Cooper Barr; Margaret Elizabeth Barton; James Frew; Robert Neilson Johnston; John Douglas Mitchell; William Mackie Ross**

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

PERSONAL VIEW

- 1087 Libya has hit me hard**
Richard Villar

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

- 1088 The Nation's Health**
Sally Carter

BETWEEN THE LINES

- 1089 A forgotten temper**
Theodore Dalrymple

MEDICAL CLASSICS

- 1089 A Treatise on Insanity** by Philippe Pinel
Mohammad Rahman

COLUMNISTS

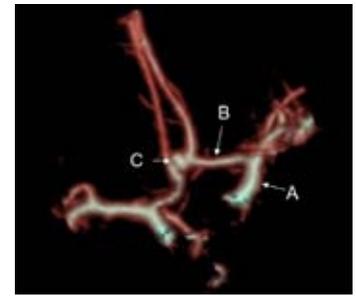
- 1090 A write off**
Des Spence
- Take it like a man**
Ike Iheanacho

ENDGAMES

- 1091 Quiz page for doctors in training**

MINERVA

- 1092 Coffee consumption, and other stories**



Imaging subarachnoid haemorrhage, p 1082



Picturing the NHS, p 1088



Medical Classics, p 1089

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BMJ

14 May 2011 Vol 342

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Published weekly. US periodicals class postage paid at Rahway, NJ. Postmaster: send address changes to *BMJ*, c/o Mercury Airfreight International Ltd Inc, 365 Blair Road, Avenel, NJ 07001, USA. \$796. Weekly
Printed by Polestar Limited



MORTEN SKOVDAL

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Fifteen year old Florance with her grandmother, whom she lives with and cares for in Kenya. The picture is part of an exhibition of photographs and drawings by children who care for relatives dying of AIDS in Africa at the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, until 2 June.

The launch of the exhibition was attended by British children who act as carers for sick parents. Dr Morten Skovdal, research fellow at the Institute of Social Psychology, said, "We found that many of the children identify the benefits of being a young carer and take great pride in their emotional maturity and the life skills they gain through their caring."

See www2.lse.ac.uk

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Editorial: Who cares for young carers? (*BMJ* 1994;308:733)

THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

22% Overall reduction in all cause mortality associated with β blocker use in chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (Research, p 1068)

2nd Trimester of pregnancy that is considered safest for women to travel (Clinical Review, p 1074)

170 000 Number of nasogastric feeding tubes supplied to the NHS each year (Practice, p 1079)

80-85% Proportion of primary subarachnoid haemorrhages caused by ruptured saccular aneurysms (Practice, p 1082)

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"Inadequate homes are a waste of energy, a health hazard, and a shameful relic for their part in fostering persistent, avoidable, social inequity"

Keith B G Dear and Anthony J McMichael, College of Medicine, Biology and Environment, Australian National University, Canberra, on the scourge of cold homes (Editorials, p 1035)

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Last week we asked, "Should the United Nations appoint a representative to investigate violations of medical neutrality in countries like Bahrain?"

81% voted yes (total 203 votes cast)

This week we ask, "Is the peer review system in crisis?"

bmj.com/archive News: Experts deny claims that peer review system is in crisis (*BMJ* 2011; 342:d2858)

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

Who should define disease?

Those who argue that it's too hard to find experts who don't have industry ties are just not looking hard enough

Last year an international panel of professional societies changed the definition of gestational diabetes. The blood glucose threshold for diagnosis was substantially lowered, more than doubling the number of women with the diagnosis. It will now encompass almost one in five pregnancies.

In his feature investigation this week (p 1054), Ray Moynihan highlights this as just the latest example of how the definitions of common conditions are being broadened, so much so that by some estimates almost the entire adult population is now classified as having at least one chronic disease.

Mental illness is an area of particular concern, he says, where controversy already bubbles around the definitions of attention deficit disorder, autism, and bipolar disorder. The revised diagnostic criteria produced by the American Psychiatric Association (*DSM-V*) could, he warns, unleash a wave of what one psychiatrist calls “false positive epidemics.”

And underlying the decisions to broaden disease definitions, he argues, are the conflicts of interest embedded among the decision makers. Of the panel members responsible for the current set of psychiatric definitions in *DSM-IV*, 56% had financial ties to drug companies. The figure for *DSM-V* is unchanged. In other fields the picture is similar. Half the panel members who created the diagnosis of pre-hypertension in 2003 had extensive ties to industry.

As Moynihan says, excuses for the continuation of this state of affairs no longer wash. Those who argue that it's too hard to find experts who don't have industry ties are just not looking hard enough. Major decision making bodies—the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health in America, and the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, among others—have adopted zero tolerance on experts with financial conflicts of interest. NIH has gone a step

further, excluding those with a declared view on a question being considered. As one NIH senior manager says in the article, “intellectual conflicts of interest can be equally important.”

Moynihan proposes going further still, again following the lead from the NIH. Its panels include a broad range of expertise and also, crucially, people representing the wider public interest. Since civil society has a major stake in decisions about where normality ends and disease begins, it should have a say in them as well.

Such panels will of course need good evidence on which to base their decisions, including evidence on the cost effectiveness of changing a diagnostic category. Therein lies the problem. As Moynihan points out, the type of evidence we need is in short supply: “the claims about the nature or extent of medical conditions are rarely exposed to the same rigorous systematic scrutiny as the studies of treatments for them.”

I'm struck by the quote from Allen Frances, the psychiatrist who chaired the task force for *DSM-IV*. “New diagnoses are as dangerous as new drugs, he says. “We have remarkably casual procedures for defining the nature of conditions, yet they can lead to tens of millions being treated with drugs they may not need, and that may harm them.”

So what should clinicians do, especially in their new extended role as commissioners of care? Be wary of new definitions of disease, question their provenance, make patients aware of the debate, demand greater transparency and tougher rules for decision makers, strive for independence yourself, and seek ways to encourage and reward it in others.

Fiona Godlee, editor, *BMJ* fgodlee@bmj.com

Cite this as: BMJ 2011;342:d2974

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Career Focus, jobs, and courses appear after p 1090

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