

EDITORIALS

1319 Safety of tiotropium

Indirect evidence suggests the RespiMat inhaler is riskier than the Handihaler, says Christopher J Cates
 » [Research, p 1348](#)

1320 Treatments for common and plantar warts

Salicylic acid or liquid nitrogen is probably no more effective than a wait and see policy, say Jan Nico Bouwes Bavinck and colleagues
 » [Research, p 1349](#)

1321 Should pregnant women sleep on their left?

The suggestion that this may help to prevent late stillbirth requires further study, say Lucy C Chappell and Gordon C S Smith
 » [Research, p 1350](#)

1322 H1N1 influenza in pregnant women

Vaccination is the key to mitigating the higher incidence of adverse outcomes, say K S Joseph and Robert M Liston
 » [Research, p 1351](#)

1323 The Future Forum proposes major changes to the government's plans for NHS reform

Integrated care should be given priority, with less emphasis on competition says Chris Ham

LETTERS

1325 Prostate cancer screening

1327 Incidental eosinophilia; Infective endocarditis; New management of gonorrhoea

1328 NHS reforms; Patient participation groups; Perniosis or chilblains?

NEWS

1329 UK government spells out new plan for NHS in England

London vaccination summit is a "milestone in global health"

1330 GP groups must learn from US experience

Hospital will continue to offer HIV tests to A&E patients
 UK sues Servier over alleged blocking of generic substitute

1331 Doctors will be asked to help identify people at risk of becoming terrorists

1332 Germany legislates to boost organ transplant numbers

Loss of trials from UK must end, NHS body says

1333 Pfizer launches virtual clinical trial that uses "apps"

Research into treatments for mental illness is under threat

1334 Peer review must stay as guarantee of quality of scientific research, academics tell MPs

More than half of child labourers work in hazardous conditions

1335 Firm sues doctor after he reports slimming product to regulator

Bahraini doctors deny anti-state activities at military trial

SHORT CUTS

1336 What's new in the other general journals

FEATURES

1338 Clinical trials: can technology solve the problem of low recruitment?

Getting people to take part in clinical trials is often difficult. Toby Reynolds looks at new strategies to increase participation

HEAD TO HEAD

1340 Are traditional birth attendants good for improving maternal and perinatal health?

Joseph Ana argues that the shortage of skilled health workers means traditional birth attendants have a valuable place, but Kelsey A Harrison believes they do more harm than good

OBSERVATIONS

ETHICS MAN

1342 Crouching tiger, hidden surgeon Daniel K Sokol

MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

1343 An early warning for Alzheimer's disease? Margaret McCartney

LOBBY WATCH

1344 The College of Medicine Jane Cassidy

ANALYSIS

1345 How foreign policy can influence health Ilona Kickbusch argues that public health experts need to work with diplomats in order to achieve global health goals

RESEARCH

1347 Research highlights: the pick of *BMJ* research papers this week1348 Mortality associated with tiotropium mist inhaler in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials Sonal Singh, Yoon K Loke, Paul L Enright, Curt D Furberg
 » [Editorial, p 1319](#)

1349 Cryotherapy versus salicylic acid for the treatment of plantar warts (verrucae): a randomised controlled trial

Sarah Cockayne, Catherine Hewitt, Kate Hicks, Shalmini Jayakody, Arthur Ricky Kang'ombe, Eugena Stamuli, Gwen Turner, Kim Thomas, Mike Curran, Gary Denby, Farina Hashmi, Caroline McIntosh, Nichola McLarnon, David Torgerson, Ian Watt, on behalf of the EVerT Team
 » [Editorial, p 1320](#)

1350 Association between maternal sleep practices and risk of late stillbirth: a case-control study Tomasina Stacey, John M D Thompson, Ed A Mitchell, Alec J Ekeroma, Jane M Zuccollo, Lesley M E McCowan
 » [Editorial, p 1321](#)

GMB AKASHIPANOS

A Patient's Journey, p 1360



NHS reforms, pp 1323, 1329, 1365



Wart treatments compared, pp 1320, 1349



Recruitment to clinical trials, p 1338

Research into mental illness, p 1333



1351 Perinatal outcomes after maternal 2009/H1N1 infection: national cohort study

Matthias Pierce, Jennifer J Kurinczuk, Patsy Spark, Peter Brocklehurst, Marian Knight on behalf of UKOSS
 » *Editorial, p 1322*

1352 Evidence against the proposition that "UK cancer survival statistics are misleading": simulation study with National Cancer Registry data

Laura M Woods, Michel P Coleman, Gill Lawrence, Jem Rashbass, Franco Berrino, Bernard Rachet

CLINICAL REVIEW

1353 Diagnosis and management of ectopic pregnancy

Davor Jurkovic, Helen Wilkinson

PRACTICE

EASILY MISSED?

1358 Congenital cataract

Heather C Russell, Valerie McDougall, Gordon N Dutton

A PATIENT'S JOURNEY

1360 Living with obstetric fistula

Fatima Aliyu, G Esegbona

OBITUARIES

1363 John MacVicar
 Pioneer of medical ultrasound

1364 John Anthony Robert Anson; Margaret Aureol Austin; Leslie Russell Davis; Christopher John Goodwill; George Kenneth Mackenzie; John Guymer Roberts; Peter Thompson

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

PERSONAL VIEW

1365 For-profit companies will strip NHS assets under reforms Lucy Reynolds

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

1366 Terry Pratchett: Choosing to Die
 Desmond O'Neill

BETWEEN THE LINES

1367 Troubled hearts Theodore Dalrymple

MEDICAL CLASSICS

1367 And the Band Played On by Randy Shilts
 Birte Twisselmann

COLUMNISTS

1368 Undoing diagnoses Des Spence
 The truth hurts Liam Farrell

ENDGAMES

1369 Quiz page for doctors in training

MINERVA

1370 Jumping athletes, and other stories



A nuclear cataract, p 1358



An ultrasound pioneer dies, p 1363



Terry Pratchett and assisted dying, p 1366

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**PICTURE OF THE WEEK**

Two contestants eat cucumbers to establish Germany's "cucumber king" in front of the Brandenburg gate in Berlin. The source of the *Escherichia coli* epidemic in Germany that has cost 35 lives since 9 May has been identified as bean sprouts grown at an organic farm in Lower Saxony. The authorities have lifted the earlier warning against eating raw tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce.

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- News: Bean sprouts are identified as cause of *E coli* outbreak (*BMJ* 2011;342:d3737)
- News: European *E coli* outbreak claims further victims (*BMJ* 2011;342:d3610)
- News: Outbreak of *E coli* in Germany is linked to cucumbers from Spain (*BMJ* 2011;342:d3394)

THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

163 days Median days to clearance of plantar warts with self applied 50% salicylic acid for a maximum of eight weeks (*Research*, p 1349)

12 000 Ectopic pregnancies diagnosed each year in the United Kingdom (*Clinical Review*, p 1353)

200-300 Children born with congenital cataract each year in the United Kingdom (*Practice*, p 1358)

3.93/1000 Absolute risk of late stillbirth associated with maternal non-left sided sleep position (*Research*, p 1350)

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"Large private providers often undercut public providers to achieve market entry, but the true financial and human costs emerge later when the public sector has to pick up the pieces"

Lucy Reynolds, research fellow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, on the implications of the proposed NHS reforms in the wake of the Southern Cross care homes debacle (*Personal View*, p 1365)

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Last week we asked, "Are digital rectal examinations performed in primary care a waste of time?"

65% said no (total 431 votes cast)

This week's poll asks, "Should HIV tests be offered to all patients attending emergency departments?"

See **NEWS**, p 1330

• **bmj.com** Cast your vote

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Better obstetric outcomes

Obstetric fistula is a disease of poverty and is almost entirely preventable

Fatima Aliyu was 25 years old when she went into labour with her first child. Six days later, the baby was dead—stillborn by caesarean section—and Fatima had lost control of her bladder and bowels. “I cried in the dark because I was left behind, my dignity was gone,” she writes (p 1360). Ten years on, still struggling with the effects of her prolonged obstructed labour, with two obstetric fistulas, sphincter damage, and foot drop, Fatima is nonetheless one of the lucky ones. Despite the social stigma and huge practical challenges of her incontinence and her inability to have other children, her family has stood by her. She has also had specialist surgery. Of the estimated two million women who live with the effects of obstetric fistula, most are ostracised and fall into extreme poverty. And according to Gloria Esegbona’s accompanying commentary, at best only 10-20% will get the surgical care they need.

Obstetric fistula is a disease of poverty and is almost entirely preventable. What Fatima lacked, in common with most of the estimated 350 000 women who die each year in pregnancy and childbirth (<http://bit.ly/mBKsis>), was timely access to skilled obstetric care. Esegbona acknowledges the crucial importance of tackling the wider social and cultural issues—poverty, lack of education for girls, early marriage, and pregnancy. But she is clear that even if these were addressed, without improvements in obstetric care women will still suffer the effects of ignorance and neglect during labour that lead to serious pelvic damage.

Achieving the necessary improvements in obstetric care in developing countries is far from simple. In this week’s Head to Head (p 1340), Joseph

Ana and Kelsey Harrison argue out the pros and cons of one approach—the training of traditional birth attendants. WHO suggests that, until sufficient numbers of skilled midwives are ready to live in villages where their services are most needed, the best policy is to identify, train, and support traditional birth attendants. Ana agrees, citing a randomised controlled trial published a few weeks ago in the *BMJ*, which found that training traditional birth attendants in Zambia significantly reduced neonatal mortality (*BMJ* 2011;342:d346). But Harrison argues that traditional birth attendants have little or no place in the better future that women in developing countries are now demanding. He says it’s hard to justify investing in traditional birth attendants. “Their use is a distraction in that it seeks to manage extreme poverty instead of working to eliminate it.”

Of course skilled obstetric care, however achieved, is only one essential factor in reducing maternal mortality and morbidity. Also crucial is the provisions of safe and effective contraception. WHO says that this is still not available to around 215 million women who would prefer to delay or avoid pregnancy, and it estimates that satisfying this unmet need could cut the number of maternal deaths by almost a third. As the clock ticks towards 2015, how much more progress can the world make towards the fifth millennium development goal: reduction in maternal mortality by three quarters and universal access to reproductive health?

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

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Career Focus, jobs, and courses appear after p 1368

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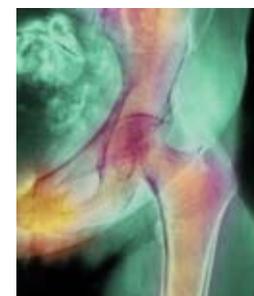
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