

MINERVA

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Forearm injury in a 5 year old boy

Try the picture quiz in ENDGAMES, p 42

Breathlessness is not a good mode of dying, yet it is one of the commonest. “With increasing focus on home death for patients, carers are expected to support breathless people at home. Little is known about how carers experience breathlessness and the differences in caring for someone with breathlessness and malignant or non-malignant disease,” say the investigators in a cross-sectional survey of caregivers of people dying from heart failure and lung cancer in *Palliative Care* (2013, doi:10.1177/0269216313488812). Just as in previous studies, the researchers conclude that “those who care for breathless patients report high levels of unmet needs and burden, equally severe for heart failure and lung cancer caregivers.” The answer lies in anticipatory care, suggests Helen M Sorensen in *Lancet Respiratory Medicine* (2013, doi:10.1016/S2213-2600(13)70083-3). Palliative care for lung disease and heart failure should start early and stay late.



A 68 year old man presented with a large scrotal swelling, and ultrasound scanning suggested a hydrocele. He was subsequently admitted with renal failure, and computed tomography confirmed an inguinoscrotal bladder hernia with associated bilateral hydronephrosis. Percutaneous bladder drainage was achieved followed by normalisation of renal function. On closer questioning, the patient described a reduction in size of the scrotal swelling after micturition. With an increasing reliance on imaging to reach a diagnosis, the clues are invariably in the history, therefore this remains the most important aspect of the diagnostic investigation. Standard treatment for such hernias is surgical repair (herniorrhaphy).

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Patient consent obtained.

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The new director of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, David Haslam, has described his job as impossible. Minerva, as goddess of medicine and wisdom, sighs her agreement. You can instruct mortals all you like, but will they listen? The answer, Minerva finds, is yes, sometimes, if it suits them—as with the institute’s guideline on urinary tract infections in children and adolescents, in an observational study conducted in a tertiary hospital (*Archives of Disease in Childhood* 2013, doi:10.1136/archdischild-2012-303032). Doctors were happy to follow the 2007 guideline if it meant reducing unpleasant invasive investigations like micturating cystourethrography, and they also reduced their use of prophylactic antibiotics. But when it came to ultrasound and nuclear medicine scans, they went against the guideline and ordered more scans, presumably because it made them feel better informed.

The American Heart Association takes a broad view of its role in maintaining cardiovascular health in the land of the free. In 2012, it issued a scientific statement on sexual activity and cardiovascular disease, and this year it is the turn of pet ownership: (*Circulation* 2013, doi:10.1161/CIR.0b013e31829201e1). “Although most studies of autonomic and cardiovascular reactivity involved dogs or cats, several studies demonstrated beneficial effects on these parameters associated with goat, fish, chimpanzee, and snake ownership. One experiment even demonstrated a benefit on

cardiovascular stress responses with ‘virtual’ animals, which were presented in the form of video recordings.” In the end, they recommend a dog, with the caveat that “Pet adoption, rescue, or purchase should not be done for the primary purpose of reducing [cardiovascular disease] risk.” Wuff!

Occupational asthma can be caused by hundreds of substances, and new ones are reported every month in the occupational health literature. One author, Xaver Baur, has undertaken the task of sifting through 3000 papers and grading the evidence for each cause of allergic or irritant asthma in the workplace (*Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology* 2013, doi:10.1186/1745-6673-8-15). But there is no mention of the herring, because the definitive study had not yet appeared when Baur carried out his search. Filleting herring is a hazardous activity when Minerva tries it at home, often resulting in digital injuries—but for centuries, dexterous north Europeans have been able to fillet herring in a matter of seconds, stuffing it into barrels with salt as their staple protein source. For some unlucky workers, modern herring processing can cause respiratory problems, because the herring proteins become aerosolised by high pressure water (*Annals of Occupational Hygiene* 2013, doi:10.1093/annhyg/met021).

As the brain ages, it can become increasingly difficult to think hard and maintain gait at the same time. I suppose that is true generally, or we wouldn’t say: “Now let me stop and think.”

To help older people to think without stopping, a Scottish trial looked at the effect of rhythmical musical training in healthy adults of mean age 71 (*Gerontologist* 2013, doi:10.1093/geront/gnt050). Those who were made to walk to the Bluebell Polka until they got used to it could walk more steadily when given a cognitive task—they wore special shoes to measure this. But once Parkinson’s disease sets in, stronger musical measures may be needed. *BMC Geriatrics* (2013, doi:10.1186/1471-2318-13-54) describes a phase 2 feasibility study comparing standard physiotherapy exercises with Irish set dancing.

Minerva is a great believer in democracy and patient empowerment, but worries about the growing mental burden brought with them. An article in *American Behavioral Scientist* (2013, doi:10.1177/0002764213489015) describes how “media literacy” has become a core competency for engaged citizenship in participatory democracy. It is also becoming a core competency for understanding healthcare, as the work of Steven Woloshin and Lisa Schwartz demonstrates. But all this comes at a price. Even chimps and bonobos get stressed when they have to make decisions they may later regret (*PLOS One* 2013, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0063058). The Italian researchers find that “chimpanzees are more patient and more risk-prone than are bonobos,” but that “both species exhibit affective and motivational responses following the outcomes of their decisions.”

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