

Minerva does not like very hot weather and avoids the equatorial zones. Among their drawbacks are the tropical diseases. *Vibrio vulnificus*, for example, flourishes in water above 20°C and may contaminate shellfish. Human infections (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 1988;109:261-3) may lead to primary septicaemia, with a mortality of 50%. Contact with infected sea water may cause wound infections that may progress to cellulitis and myositis which may cause widespread tissue destruction. The organism is especially lethal in patients with haemochromatosis and other conditions of iron overload.

A series of papers and an editorial in the "New England Journal of Medicine" (1988;319:757-61; 784-90) paint a disturbing picture of the effects of commercial pressures on doctors. Those working for for profit companies are complaining that pressure is put on them to order investigations in order to generate income. In his editorial Arnold Relman calls for safeguards to ensure that professional values take precedence over "business imperatives that may be incompatible with the proper care of patients." There may be lessons here for the National Health Service as its masters attempt to introduce concepts of business efficiency.

Meanwhile in New York the city's public health system—the one that looks after the uninsured—is being overwhelmed by the needs of patients with AIDS. Most are users of intravenous drugs, their sex partners, or their children; and most are black or hispanic and poor (*Journal of the American Medical Association* 1988;260:1453). Recent estimates suggest that by 1991 an additional 1000-1500 hospital beds will be needed. Already poor patients with all kinds of acute illnesses may have to wait hours and sometimes days for a bed to be found. The 37 million Americans without health insurance face a bleak future.

New York's problems may, however, be nothing to those of Africa. The "Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene" (1988;91:212-5) reports a study of 500 blood donors at a transfusion centre in the Ivory Coast. No fewer than 49 (10%) had antibodies to the human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV<sub>1</sub> and HIV<sub>2</sub>). Tests on children with sickle cell anaemia who had had multiple transfusions showed that 22% had antibodies to the virus.

The shortage of money for the treatment of patients with AIDS contrasts with the readiness of the United States Congress to find resources for research into the disease (*Science* 1988;241:1427). The National Institutes of Health has had its 1989 budget increased by 7.3% over the figure for 1988; funding for AIDS research has been increased by 30% to \$606 million.

People with sleep apnoea who continue to drive their cars are a danger to themselves and others. A review in "Chest" (1988;94:225-6) puts their risk of having an accident at 33% over a five year period. Around one quarter of patients with sleep apnoea admit to falling asleep while driving at least once a week. What are the ethical and legal obligations of doctors in these circumstances? Shouldn't the condition be recognised as being at least as dangerous as epilepsy?

Hormone replacement treatment (HRT) for women after the menopause seems to make sense to Minerva: the benefits in terms of prevention of osteoporosis—and possibly cardiovascular disease—seem to outweigh the drawbacks. So isn't it depressing (*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* 1988;38:398-401) that many women still have to persuade their general practitioners to prescribe the treatment? How much medical opposition to HRT is soundly

based and how much is lingering prejudice based on the false belief that menopausal symptoms are mostly in the mind?



An asian man with longstanding vitiligo was treated for non-specific urethritis with Deteclo 300 mg (tetracycline hydrochloride 115.4 mg, chlortetracycline hydrochloride 115.4 mg, demeclocycline hydrochloride 69.2 mg) twice daily for 14 days. He developed an erythematous rash which was distinctly confined to depigmented sites which were exposed to the light, being restricted to the back of his hands. The rash stopped abruptly at his wrists and at the edge of the depigmentation. His residual infection was satisfactorily treated with erythromycin and he has been advised to avoid tetracyclines in future. —MALCOLM GRIFFITHS, Department of Genitourinary Medicine, Guy's Hospital, London SE1 9RT.

Excellent as the results may be from the operation of total hip replacement, complications do occur. One of these is the formation of heterotopic bone, which may sometimes severely restrict the range of motion of the hip. Indomethacin is, however, an effective prophylactic treatment: a study from Denmark (*Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* 1988;70A:834-8) has shown that one year after the operation only 13 of 102 patients given the drug had any evidence of heterotopic bone compared with 72 of 99 given a placebo. Severe lesions occurred only in the patients given placebo.

One of the most obvious blind spots in American society is its attitude to guns. Some recent data in the "American Journal of Public Health" (1988;78:824-6) make startling reading here in Britain. Over 31 000 people are killed by firearms in an average year in the United States, and suicides outnumber homicides. In recent years, indeed, shooting has become the most common method of suicide; and this is true of both men and women in the age range 15-24. In almost all such deaths the weapon is a handgun.

Might smokers be helped more to give up their habit if they were recognised as suffering from nicotine dependence (*Journal of the American Medical Association* 1988;260:1613)? The severity of the nicotine withdrawal syndrome seems to be correlated with the number of cigarettes smoked, and heavy smokers may need to be advised about gradual dose reduction and replacement treatment with nicotine chewing gum. Specific withdrawal symptoms may respond to treatment with anxiolytics, anorectic, or antidepressant drugs. Clonidine is said to help in some patients. Rational medical interventions may give better results than simple exhortations to patients to give up an unhealthy habit.

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