

Last autumn reports began to appear in North America of the eosinophilia myalgia syndrome and it was quickly linked with the consumption of tryptophan products—widely used in the United States as a treatment for insomnia and depression. A study in Minnesota seems now to have established the cause (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1990;323:357-65). The patients who became ill had, with one exception, taken tryptophan made by a single company, and further investigation identified a defect in the purification process. A chemical contaminant detected by liquid chromatography may be the cause or simply a marker, but the mystery illness is a mystery no longer.

Derbyshire Royal Infirmary claims to have been the first hospital in Britain to have a pharmacy shop selling over the counter products to patients, staff, and members of the public. The first year's experience is described in the "Pharmaceutical Journal" (1990;245:146-8); the weekly takings have risen steadily to around £500, with photographic services providing further income. Toilet and sanitary products are sold from a separate shop run by the League of Friends.

Some 1703 medical graduates were accepted as immigrants to Australia between 1978 and 1989; and when they took the standard written/clinical examination only 12% passed at the first attempt (*Medical Journal of Australia* 1990;153:125-32). An editorial in the journal (pp 124-5) warns that Eastern Europe has a large surplus of medical graduates of dubious quality. If working conditions for doctors in the NHS improve (and that's a big if) may Britain find long queues of poorly trained would be medical entrants?

The young psychiatrist, writes R H Cawley in the "British Journal of Psychiatry" (1990;157:174-81) "must be puzzled by the display of pity, scorn, resentment, condescension and superciliousness" affected by psychoanalysts and their critics. "There is no dialogue, no spirit of compromise, for each faction is totally convinced of the God given truth of its position." Yet surely by the 21st century this conflict should have been resolved?

Since 1981 botulinum toxin has been used to treat blepharospasm, torticollis, and other dystonias with consistent success (*Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry* 1990;53:633-9). A review of 477 patients treated with the toxin in Texas has now confirmed its high efficacy, with 90% of patients reporting definite improvement lasting in some cases for up to one year. No serious and few minor side effects were encountered.

As mammography becomes more available should women bother to learn and practise self examination of their breasts? A report from Canada in "Cancer" (1990;66:570-6) argues not only that they should but that their attendances for screening should be used as opportunities for teaching the technique and encouraging the women to use it. After all, most breast cancers are still discovered by women themselves, and inevitably self examination will detect some interval cancers. And in countries such as Britain with its disgracefully long three year interval between screenings self examination must be even more valuable.

Every aspect of preventive medicine seems to carry some risk. A baby of 19 months spent a five hour car journey asleep and strapped into his car seat. He woke up with a limp due to a femoral nerve palsy (*American Journal of Diseases of Children* 1990;144:617). The neurological disability persisted for nearly one year.

On 4 August (p 300) Minerva commented on the low cost of a hospital admission for removal of a bowel cancer in Canada—\$5339—when

compared with the United States. A correspondent has forwarded a paper in "Public Health" (1989;103:413-9) which puts the cost in the NHS as somewhere between £1096 and £1868. The pound is roughly worth two Canadian dollars. Some of the saving by the NHS is attributable to the low earnings of health service surgeons, but overall the British taxpayer gets a bargain. So what about market forces?

Women are usually advised not to gain more than 25 lb (11.4 kg) during pregnancy. A study in California has underlined the wide variations seen in the weight actually gained by women with a "good pregnancy outcome"—a vaginal birth at term of a living healthy infant (*Obstetrics and Gynecology* 1990;76:1-7). Of the 4674 women studied two fifths gained between 10 and 21 kg, some adding on nearly twice the recommended maximum without any apparent ill effects. Women who were initially very overweight gained slightly less. Perhaps this is another example of medical advice having little scientific basis.

Nose bleeders never leave home without one

Epistaxis in the young occurs almost exclusively from the anterior inferior quadrant of the nasal septum. Application of local pressure is a time honoured method for successful arrest of haemorrhage. A 17 year old synchronised swimmer had frequently attended the ear, nose, and throat clinic with bleeding from Little's area of the nose and was advised to apply local pressure 10 minutes by the clock each time. At her last visit she willingly showed her own method of control with a diving clip. She further went on to say that bleeding during college hours no longer disturbs her lessons and she "never leaves home without one."—D J PREMACHANDRA, locum senior registrar in ENT, Lewisham Hospital, London SE13 7HR, PETER PRINSLEY, ENT registrar, Royal Free Hospital, London NW3 2QG. (Correspondence to Mr Prinsley.)



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Another paper has appeared with the question in the title—"Is candidiasis the true cause of vulvovaginal irritation in women with diabetes mellitus?" (*Journal of Clinical Pathology* 1990;43:644-5)—and in this case the answer is "not very often." Most of the 36 women studied had been prescribed antifungal treatment by their general practitioners without a vaginal examination. Only six had candida infections; 14 were infected with haemolytic streptococci and all but three of the remainder had other bacteria cultured. Treatment with antibiotics resolved the symptoms in all the women with bacterial infections.

A brief letter in the "New England Journal of Medicine" (1990;323:350) reports that the skin over a healing fracture in a woman often becomes hairy. The author speculates that the process of repair leads to increased blood flow and that this encourages growth—a similar mechanism to that suggested to explain the effectiveness of minoxidil in bald men.

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