

Research into Alzheimer's disease seems to be making real progress. The β amyloid that accumulates in the brains of patients with the disease seems to be a fragment of a much larger protein, amyloid precursor protein, which is a constituent of normal, healthy cells (*Science* 1992;255:688-9). The hunt is now on for the trigger that leads to the precursor protein being converted to β amyloid rather than other, safer products. Slowing down one or more of the pathways to β amyloid should prove an effective treatment.

Research workers continue to try to find out how electroconvulsive therapy relieves the symptoms of patients with depression. A study reported in the "British Journal of Psychiatry" (1992;160:223-9) showed evidence of a substantial effect on central serotonergic responsivity similar to the known effects of tricyclic antidepressant drugs.

Over 12 000 of the 17 319 children recruited by the national child development study have been assessed at the age of 23. Whereas 22% had had asthma in the past only 4% reported current asthma (*Thorax* 1992;47:19-24). Those with asthma were only slightly more likely to be unemployed or to have had previous problems getting work—reassuring data in an era of continuing high unemployment with little prospect of change.

New rules for the financing of health care in the United States state that liver transplantation programmes must achieve a 77% survival rate at one year if they are to be accredited for Medicare. A letter in the "New England Journal of Medicine" (1992;326:413) points out that this decision will push physicians towards refusing to treat high risk patients. It is, says the letter, an example of Mencken's dictum—"neat, simple, and wrong."

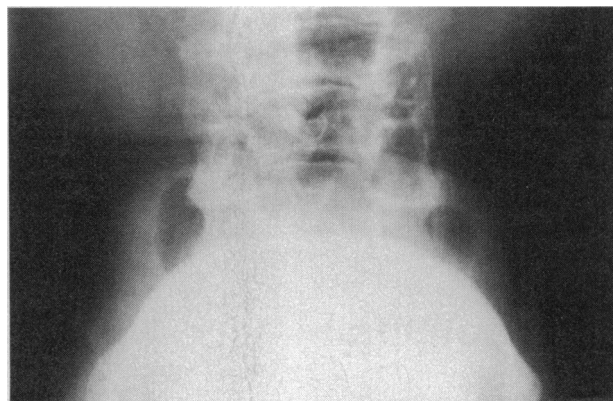
Minerva has repeatedly said that she doesn't want to become a short, bent, feeble old lady with osteoporosis: so she wishes that the bone experts would agree on its management (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1992;326:406-7). She takes exercise, doesn't smoke, drinks alcohol only moderately, but swills down skimmed milk. What more? The choice of drug treatments includes oestrogens, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D₃, calcitonin, etidronate, fluoride, fragments of parathyroid hormones, and various growth factors. All have drawbacks. Little wonder that many women continue to take nothing and hope for the best.

The "BMJ" gets fewer papers from Germany than from Scandinavia; clinical specialists there seem not very interested in research. "Reports of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft" (3/91:3,32) has recently asserted that "More people than ever are questioning the necessity for any basic research in clinics if it is so prohibitively expensive and second rate and is conducted at the expense of medical care." Minerva fears that in a decade likely to be dominated by economic concerns the only medical research to survive in Western countries will be that financed by industry.

Commerce, indeed, is hungry for research projects. An entrepreneur in Seattle is recruiting research workers for a new company which aims at dominating the pursuit of the human genome. (*Nature* 1992;355:483-4). Using industrial techniques to sequence the 3000 million chemical bases could lead to a monopoly in genetic diagnostic tools and treatments—and vast profits.

Treatments of some genetic diseases are amazingly expensive. According to "Nature" (1992;355:381), the treatment of a single patient suffering from Gaucher's disease with the drug Ceredase costs \$250 000 in the first year. In its first eight months on the market revenue from this drug is estimated at \$120 million.

Britain has one of the world's highest death rates from coronary heart disease, so why is its target number of coronary bypass operations—300 per million a year—only half the figure achieved in Australia and one third that in the United States? An audit of one health district (*British Heart Journal* 1992;67:200-3) estimated the need at between 390 and 600 operations per million and reported 20 deaths in patients awaiting investigation or surgery.



This 50 year old man developed a bilateral laryngocele within hours of flying back from a holiday in Spain. Radiography confirmed the clinical diagnosis, but direct laryngoscopy three weeks later did not show any abnormality and his neck swelling had resolved. This was presumably secondary to repeated swallowing in the pressurised aircraft. My thanks to Mr A R Welch for allowing me to report this case.—P BURDETT-SMITH, registrar, accident and emergency department, Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 4LP.

Studies of large numbers of patients with lung cancer consistently show that around 10% are lifelong non-smokers (*Chest* 1992;101:19-25). Some of these are victims of passive smoking, but many (especially those with adenocarcinoma) are not. Should not more effort be made to discover possible preventable causes of this substantial subsection of all deaths from cancer?

The poisoning of children by lead ought to be one of yesterday's diseases, with the phasing out of lead in petrol and paint. Unfortunately, says "Newsweek" (17 February 1992, 32-7), ever more uses are being found for this malleable, chemically stable metal, and world production has almost doubled since 1960. The United States Centers for Disease Control now recommends that children should have their blood concentrations of lead measured as part of their routine health checks.

Unperturbed by the *BMJ's* disavowal of Latin, the Vatican has produced a dictionary of contemporary words and phrases, *Lexicon Recentis Latinitas* (*Harper's Magazine* 1991;283:36). It includes such neoclassical gems as syndrome comparati defectus immunitatis, memoriae amissio, coercitio mentis, and ovata pelvis—otherwise known as AIDS, amnesia, brainwashing, and bidet.

The closer an ultrasound transducer is put to the organ being investigated the better the images. Putting it into a body cavity is one way of improving the value of scanning, and a current example is rectal and anal endosonography. A review in "Gut" (1992;33:148-9) argues that this technique should be more widely used for staging rectal cancers and diagnosing recurrence after surgery and for investigating injuries to the anal sphincter.