

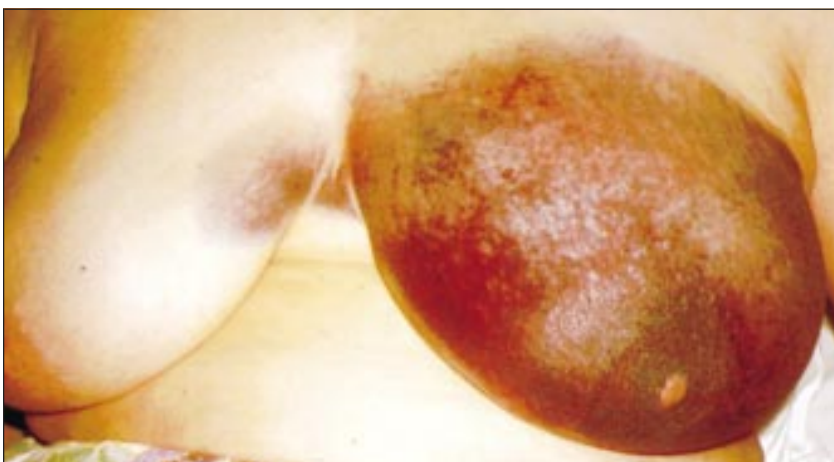
Sniffing drugs may prove a more useful method of administration to the brain when access via the bloodstream is limited, or if they cause undesirable side effects elsewhere when taken by mouth. German scientists got volunteers to sniff compounds known to affect brain function. The concentrations of all but one compound rose rapidly in brain fluid, with little change seen in the general circulation (*Nature Neuroscience* 2002; advance online publication www.nature.com/neuro/10.1038/nm849).

The Cremation Society of Great Britain has announced that the 2002 cremation conference will take place in Torquay in July. Minerva was amused to read that the conference hotel has a "cliff top position" and that one of the talks to be given by a social anthropologist is entitled "Where have all the ashes gone?"

Despite the careful wording on British cremation forms asking doctors about the possibility of pacemakers being left in situ, a recent survey found that half of crematoria workers who responded had experienced a body exploding during cremation (*Pharos International* 2002;68:6-10). Current practice for detecting pacemakers is clearly not effective, and as over 17 000 pacemakers are implanted each year in Britain (70% in people over 70), other methods of notification will have to be considered.

Devotees of Ayurvedic medicine do things naturally. They use an extract of the gum resin of the guggul tree to lower cholesterol. Scientists showed that guggulsterone, the active agent, blocks the nuclear hormone receptor called FXR, which is activated by bile salts. Guggulsterone reduced hepatic cholesterol in mice fed a high cholesterol diet. In mice missing the FXR gene, guggulsterone didn't work. The authors propose that inhibition of FXR activation is the basis of guggulsterone's success (www.sciencemag.org/sciencexpress/recent.shtml 2 May 2002; 10.1126/science.1072891).

The threatened humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan didn't materialise. As of January this year, Oxfam reports, the impending crisis has been resolved by the successful shipment of 120 000 tonnes of food by the World Food Programme. This was enough to meet need in Afghanistan for two months. A paper posted on www.medact.org says there will be no mass starvation inside Afghanistan this year, only isolated deaths.



A 62 year old woman presented to the accident and emergency department with widespread bruising over her left breast. It followed an injury caused by spontaneous deployment of the airbag in the steering wheel. She was driving a 1 litre engine car at a speed of 40 mph and braked suddenly to avoid colliding with a van. She was not taking any anticoagulation or antiplatelet drugs and her clotting profile was normal. Ultrasonography of the left breast showed a haematoma measuring 7×5×3 cm. Injuries caused by spontaneous deployment of airbags are well documented. Severe injuries sustained in relatively minor incidents raise the question of how much protection is actually offered by airbags. Their design needs to be refined.

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A pan-European study of insulin injection technique has some sobering findings: 30% of patients reported a lipohypertrophic lesion (known as a "lipo") at injection sites, and only 38% say they rotate sites each time they inject rapid acting insulin. Less than half of patients had been taught effective lipo prevention, and 22% say they throw used needles into the trash without making the needle safe. But it's not all bad news: 70% say they inject using a skin "pinch-up," which is linked to improved HBA_{1c} levels (*Practical Diabetes* 2002;19:71-6).

Wheat avoidance is enthusiastically advocated by gastroenterologists in the fight against irritable bowel syndrome. But it seems that wheat extracts may be quite beneficial for other gut conditions. A randomised double blind placebo controlled trial of wheat grass (*Triticum aestivum*) juice—an extract squeezed from mature sprouts of wheat seeds—finds that it is an effective and safe single or adjuvant agent against distal ulcerative colitis (*Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology* 2002;37:444-9).

Autopsy rates in trauma and burns intensive care units almost reach 100%. Looking back to see what causes death in these patients is interesting. Of 153 patients who died in one unit, 3% had a major missed diagnosis that could have influenced outcome had it been detected. These conditions included bowel infarction, meningitis, retroperitoneal abscess, and bleeding gastric ulcer. Pneumonia was the most common missed diagnosis (*Journal of the American College of Surgeons* 2002;194:401-6).

A systematic review of 38 trials found that home based and group based interventions to increase physical activity among older adults achieved participation rates of 84-90% (*American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2002; 22:120-33). Meanwhile, a paper in *JAMA* (2002;287:742-8) describes how models of data from 801 subjects show an inverse association between mentally stimulating activities and the development of Alzheimer's disease, lending support to the adage that if you don't use it, you lose it.