



Spider stories and science

pp 180, 199



Commercial corraling of genetics

pp 181, 203



Drug dosing dilemmas

p 195



EDITORIALS

Therapeutic arthroscopy for knee osteoarthritis: time to reconsider?

Adam B Chapman, Julian A Feller 179

Debunking spider bite myths

Julian White 180

Human gene patents: under whose control?

Dianne Nicol 181

Pre-eclampsia: a lifelong disorder

Mark A Brown 182

RESEARCH

Effectiveness of ototopical antibiotics for chronic suppurative otitis media in Aboriginal children: a community-based, multicentre, double-blind randomised controlled trial

Sophie Couzos, Traven Lea, Reinhold Mueller, Richard Murray, Margaret Culbong 185

Local reactions after the fourth dose of acellular pertussis vaccine in South Australia

Michael S Gold, Sara Noonan, Maggi Osbourn, Stella Precepa, Ann E Kempe 191

HEALTHCARE

Dosing information for paediatric patients: are they really "therapeutic orphans"?

Elaine Tan, Noel E Cranswick, Craig R Rayner, Colin B Chapman 195

BITES AND STINGS

White-tail spider bite: a prospective study of 130 definite bites by *Lampona* species

Geoffrey K Isbister, Michael R Gray 199

VIEWPOINT

Human gene patents: the possible impacts on genetic services healthcare

Ian R Walpole, Hugh JS Dawkins, Peter D Sinden, Peter C O'Leary 203

THE PROFESSION

Medical workforce issues in Australia: "tomorrow's doctors — too few, too far"

Peter M Brooks, Helen M Lapsley, David B Butt 206

LESSONS FROM PRACTICE

Delusional parasitosis mimicking cutaneous infestation in elderly patients

Linda Le, Peter N Gonski 209

THE NEW GENETICS

The human genome and the future of medicine

John S Mattick 212

LETTERS (Contents overleaf) 218

MODERN MEDICINE'S MAGIC

The Holy Grail of modern society is health and longevity. In their pursuit, we turn “dis-ease” into “disease”, and we medicalise life’s pleasures and problems. We feel compelled to “do something”, under the illusion that we are “in control”. Central to all this is medical technology.

Medicine, today, is saturated with — indeed defined by — technology. It exploits and feeds our desire to be in control, as shown by a recent media “blitz” extolling the value of whole body scans. If knowledge is indeed power, the promise of an ability to unearth the dark and silent threats to health and longevity is obviously seductive. After all, who could resist the added bonus of a virtual colonoscopy?

But why does technology beguile and enthrall us?

In a recent essay on modern medical technology, Eric J Cassel, a US public health expert, observed that, “Like the broom in ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, technologies come to have a life of their own, not only because of their own properties but also because of certain universal human traits”. These include: the sense of “wonder and wonderment” at technology’s capabilities; the immediacy factor (“it roots us in the immediate, the now of its presence”); its unambiguous value (“the better the piece of equipment, the clearer the values”); its ability to dissolve clinical uncertainty by reducing an illness to a disease and a disease to a lesion; and finally the power it confers on doctors and institutions.

Yet our faith is not merely mechanistic. Is there not a mystical and miraculous sense embedded in modern medical technology? For, as Arthur Clarke, the famed science-fiction author once observed, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

And technology is surely modern medicine’s magic.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

LETTERS

New pharmacotherapies for alcohol dependence: are they being used and what do they cost?
Christopher M Doran, Julia E Fawcett, Anthony P Shakeshaft, Marian D Shanahan, Richard P Mattick 218

Gestational diabetes mellitus: accuracy of Midwives Data Collection
Robert G Moses, Alison J Webb, Christine D Comber 218
Lee K Taylor 219

Addressing the shortage of rural physicians in Victoria: maximising rural trainee recruitment
David Simmons, Amanda Fieldhouse, Leslie E Bolitho, Grant J Phelps, Rob Ziffer, Gary J Disher 219

The effect of female age on the likelihood of a live birth from one in-vitro fertilisation treatment
Nicholas A Tonti-Filippini 220
Robert P S Jansen 221

The effect of recalling paracetamol on hospital admissions for poisoning
Corrine R Balit, Geoffrey K Isbister, Andrew H Dawson, Frank F Daly, Ian M Whyte 221
Elizabeth A Hender, Jeremy Raftos 222
Stephen R Kisely, David Lawrence, Neil J Preston 223

Whither pathology in medical education?
Barbara M Miflin, Kevin L Forbes 223
Donald D Beard 224
H Reginald Magee 224

OBITUARY

Geoffrey Henry Moore
by Graeme G D Moore 205

SNAPSHOT

Myxoedema and a lost wedding ring
Andrei Catanchin, Peter R Ebeling 211

IN THIS ISSUE . . . 178

IN OTHER JOURNALS . . . 217



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