

they found significant improvement in the appropriateness of prescribing.

The authors acknowledge that they are not claiming that their intervention "is the cause or only cause" for change in practice. Areas like antibiotic prescribing and physician behaviour are highly complex and require a series of systematic approaches. Doctors are only one of the multiple stakeholders involved in this process. The level of experience, training background, and awareness of the public health and clinical implications of such interventions vary widely among doctors.

Improvement of South et al's methodology from a passive mailout to gathering systematic baseline information about the medical staff involved, clarifying the purpose of the initiative and finding the proportions of uptake among junior and senior staff would have made the intervention more robust. One of the fundamentals of any change process is to instil a sense of urgency and develop a coalition to drive and lead it.

Development and evaluation of quality initiatives need more than just passive information provision. It has been suggested that any such quality and safety initiative should have set priorities, and these priorities should be developed using a systematic evaluation process with explicit criteria.² Various systemic strategies that involved systematic methodology and evaluation processes, such as antibiotic decision support systems (both computer and manual) and drug utilisation reviews, reported sustainable changes in prescribing practices.³

The intervention by South et al is a welcome initiative, but it is important to realise that simplifying a complex problem like drug prescribing may lead to setting up wrong priorities for action and trivialise the problem and solution. Such initiatives will suffer the fate of the many quality programs that we hear about in hospital corridors but which fail to make a sustainable change.

1. South M, Royle J, Starr M. A simple intervention to improve hospital antibiotic prescribing. *Med J Aust* 2003; 178: 207-209.
2. Ibrahim JE. Prioritising quality. *J Qual Clin Pract* 2001; 21: 160-162.
3. Macintyre CR, Sindhusake D, Rubin G. Modelling strategies for reducing pharmaceutical costs in hospital. *Int J Qual Health Care* 2001; 13: 63-69. □

Debriefing: care and sympathy are not enough

Mai Maddisson

General Practitioner, Mitcham North Clinic,
188 Mitcham Road, Mitcham, VIC 3132.
mmaddisson.nmc@wdgp.com.au

TO THE EDITOR: I read with interest McFarlane's article on post-traumatic stress disorder and debriefing,¹ which reminded me of a long-term patient.

Over a decade ago, I discovered that this patient was a Vietnam veteran, and expressed concern that he had not told me previously. His reply came thus (although, of course, I no longer remember the exact words): "How would you know what it feels like to be, by sheer chance, the only man left alive in a group of soldiers?" I acknowledged that he was correct, that I had no idea.

With that poignant remark in mind, I planned his care. He is doing OK.

Can we really address an abstraction that we cannot conceptualise, or predict the resulting obstacles in a person's journey through life? This is equally valid at the beginning of the journey or anywhere along its course. Perhaps the notion of debriefing at an appropriate time is not the problem; perhaps it is the formula we use.

1. McFarlane AC. Debriefing: care and sympathy are not enough. *Med J Aust* 2003; 178: 533-534. □

MJA Advertisers' Index

Amgen	
Abelcet	p129
Bayer/Glaxo	
Levitra	p122
Corinth Healthcare	
Medical Recruitment	p163
Johnson & Johnson	
Neutrogena	p134
Médecins Sans Frontières	
Doctors For Doctors Day	p161
Schering Pty Limited	
Diane 35	Inside front cover
Androcur-100	Inside back cover
Betaferon	Outside back cover

The Medical Journal of Australia

Editor

Martin Van Der Weyden, MD, FRACP, FRCPA

Deputy Editors

Bronwyn Gaut, MBBS, DCH, DA

Ruth Armstrong, BMed

Mabel Chew, MBBS(Hons), FRACGP, FACHPM

Ann Gregory, MBBS, GradCertPopHealth

Manager, Communications Development

Craig Bingham, BA(Hons), DipEd

Senior Assistant Editor

Helen Randall, BSc, DipOT

Assistant Editors

Elsina Meyer, BSc

Kerrie Lawson, BSc(Hons), PhD, MASM

Tim Badgery-Parker, BSc(Hons)

Josephine Wall, BA, BAppSci, GradDipLib

Proof Readers

Raymond Carroll, Christine Binskin, BSc

Editorial Administrator

Kerrie Harding

Editorial Assistant

Christine Tsim

Production Manager

Glenn Carter

Editorial Production Assistant

Melissa Sherman, BA

Librarian, Book Review Editor

Joanne Elliot, BA, GradDipLib

Consultant Biostatistician

Val Gebski, BA, MStat

Content Review Committee: Leon Bach, PhD, FRACP; Adrian Bauman, PhD, FAFPHM; Flavia Cicuttini, PhD, FRACP; Marie-Louise Dick, MPH, FRACGP; Mark Harris, MD, FRACGP; David Isaacs, MD, FRACP; Paul Johnson, PhD, FRACP; Jenepher Martin, MEd, FRACS; Adrian Mindel, MD, FRACP; Michael Solomon, MSc, FRACS; Campbell Thompson, MD, FRACP; Tim Usherwood, MD, FRACGP; Owen Williamson, FRACS, GradDipClinEpi; John Wilson, PhD, FRACP; Jeffrey Zajac, PhD, FRACP

Australasian Medical Publishing Co Pty Ltd

Advertising Manager: Peter Butterfield

Media Coordinator: Stephanie Elliott

The Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) is published on the 1st and 3rd Monday of each month by the Australasian Medical Publishing Company Proprietary Limited, Level 2, 26-32 Pyrmont Bridge Rd, Pyrmont, NSW 2009. ABN 20 000 005 854. Telephone: (02) 9562 6666. Fax: (02) 9562 6699. E-mail: amppco@amppco.com.au. The Journal is printed by Offset Alpine Printing Ltd, 42 Boorea St, Lidcombe, NSW 2141.

MJA on the Internet: <http://www.mja.com.au/>

None of the Australasian Medical Publishing Company Proprietary Limited, ABN 20 000 005 854, the Australian Medical Association Limited, or any of its servants and agents will have any liability in any way arising from information or advice that is contained in *The Medical Journal of Australia (MJA)*. The statements or opinions that are expressed in the Journal reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the official policy of the Australian Medical Association unless this is so stated. Although all accepted advertising material is expected to conform to ethical and legal standards, such acceptance does not imply endorsement by the Journal. All literary matter in the Journal is covered by copyright, and must not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by electronic or mechanical means, photocopying, or recording, without written permission.

Published in 2 volumes per year.

Annual Subscription Rates for 2003 (Payable in Advance) to: AMPCo, Locked Bag 3030, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012

Individual Subscriptions (includes 10% GST)

Australia—\$A291.50, Medical students (Australia only)—\$A60.00

Overseas Economy Air—\$A370.00, Airmail—\$A505.00

NZ & PNG Economy Air—\$A340.00

Indexes are published every 6 months and are available on request as part of the current subscription.

Single or back issues contact: AMPCo (02) 9562 6666.

Advice to Authors—

<http://www.mja.com.au/public/information/instruct.html>



27,579 circulation as at
31 March, 2003

ISSN 0025-729X