

## EDITORIALS

- 3 New treatments and outcomes in peritoneal carcinomatosis  
Terence C Chua, Winston Liauw, David L Morris
- 5 Non-invasive prenatal diagnosis — toward a new horizon  
Stephen A Cole, Helen F Savoia
- 7 A conversation about health care safety and quality  
Christopher J Baggoley, Imogen E Curtis, Nicola J Dunbar, Christine M Jorm

## CONFERENCE REPORT

- 9 Acute medical admissions in our hospitals: getting it right  
Harvey H Newnham, Campbell H Thompson, Paul F Jenkins, Lauri T O'Brien

## RESEARCH

- 11 Black Saturday: the immediate impact of the February 2009 bushfires in Victoria, Australia  
Peter A Cameron, Biswadev Mitra, Mark Fitzgerald, Carlos D Scheinkestel, Andrew Stripp, Chris Batey, Louise Niggemeyer, Melinda Truesdale, Paul Holman, Rishi Mehra, Jason Wasiak, Heather Cleland
- 17 National survey of management of transient ischaemic attack in Australia: *Take Immediate Action*  
Christopher J Price, David J Blacker, Rohan S Grimley, Helen M Dewey, Richard P Gerraty, Simon A Koblar, Sonia M Denisenko, Catherine E Storey, Christopher F Bladin, Kelvin M Hill
- 19 Evaluation of non-invasive prenatal *RHD* genotyping of the fetus  
Catherine A Hyland, Glenn J Gardener, Helen Davies, Minna Ahvenainen, Robert L Flower, Darryl Irwin, Jonathan M Morris, Christopher M Ward, Jonathan A Hyett

## RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

- 21 The challenge for academic health partnerships  
Peter M Brooks

## HEALTH CARE


- 28 Making cars and making health care: a critical review  
Sarah Winch, Amanda J Henderson

- 30 Sustaining Medicare through consumer choice of health funds: lessons from the Netherlands  
Johannes U Stoelwinder, Francesco Paolucci

## MEDICAL EDUCATION

- 33 Building capacity in medical education research in Australia  
Chris Roberts, Jennifer J Conn
- 35 Medical education: revolution, devolution and evolution in curriculum philosophy and design  
Gary A Wittert, Adam J Nelson

## CLINICAL UPDATE

- 38  A pandemic that's not bird flu? Pigs might fly  
Sanjaya N Senanayake

## NOTABLE CASES

- 41 Congenital tuberculosis after in-vitro fertilisation  
Rhonda L Stuart, Anthony Lewis, C Andrew Ramsden, Richard R Doherty

## LETTERS

(contents overleaf)



### MEDICARE MELTDOWN

Ostensibly, the focus and *raison d'être* of our health system is the care of the sick, but of late it appears that the system itself is sick. Waiting times, not only for elective surgery and access to general practice but also in our overstretched emergency departments, have generally been seen as the main symptom of this malaise.

However, more acute symptoms have recently emerged, encapsulated in the recent newspaper headline "Free health care dead: user-pays system fear as Medicare on life support". The system appears to be in fiscal turmoil, as hospitals hover ever closer to insolvency, unable to pay their accumulating debts. There have even been suggestions that public hospitals open private wings to underpin their financial viability.

Echoing this concern, a recent media report noted: "A boom in the use of Medicare has prompted official caution about the sustainability of the scheme, which costs more than \$14 billion a year and rising".\* Yet the flurry of media reports questioning Medicare's sustainability may simply be political kite flying, testing the electorate's readiness for change.

For more than 30 years, Medicare has ingrained in the Australian psyche the expectation that free medical and hospital care is a basic right. It is as much a part of our culture as the Ashes, Aussie Rules and meat pies. But we now live in extraordinary times of global fiscal crisis, mega-deficits, and a health care system that consumes gargantuan chunks of our gross domestic product.

Gough Whitlam, the founder of Medicare, noted some 40 years ago that "Australia could be a nation free from financial worries that go with illness and incapacity. The Australian economy is rich enough to place the benefit of medical security at the disposal of every one of us".

With Medicare in fiscal meltdown, one wonders what it will metamorphose into.



Martin B Van Der Weyden

\* Metherell M. Questions over future of Medicare as use booms. *Sydney Morning Herald* 2009; 19 May: 3.

### LETTERS

- 44 **Acute lingual tonsillitis: an overlooked cause of severe sore throat in adults who have had a palatine tonsillectomy?**  
Sasa Janjanin, Drago Prgomet
- 44 **Paradoxical nutritional deficiency in overweight and obesity: the importance of nutrient density**  
Julie A Pasco, Margaret J Henry, Mark A Kotowicz, Geoffrey C Nicholson
- 45 **Childhood obesity in Australia remains a widespread health concern that warrants population-wide prevention programs**  
Rae-Chi Huang, Fiona J Stanley, Lawrence J Beilin
- 46 **Comparison of the Framingham and United Kingdom Prospective Diabetes Study cardiovascular risk equations in Australian patients with type 2 diabetes from the Fremantle Diabetes Study**  
Lyn M Roberts, Tessa R Letcher, Alexandra A Gason, Tim Lobstein
- 47 **Hand-foot syndrome after treatment with docetaxel**  
Roland W McCallum, John R Burgess, Timothy M Greenaway
- 48 **Wendy A Davis, Stephen Colagiuri, Timothy M E Davis**

### SNAPSHOT


- 40 **Hand-foot syndrome after treatment with docetaxel**  
Chitra Sivaramamoorthy, Eddy S Thientosapol, Martin H Tattersall

### 2 IN THIS ISSUE

### 43 IN OTHER JOURNALS



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## May MJA BookClub Winner

**Congratulations to:** Prof K Banerja, QLD;  
Dr J Gallichio, VIC; Dr M Hodgson, TAS;  
Dr D Webster, VIC and Dr M Teo, SA, who each win a copy of *Teaching on the Run*.

If you would like to purchase a copy of *Teaching on the Run*, visit the eMJA BookShop <<http://shop.mja.com.au>>.

Thanks to everyone who purchased books from the May MJA BookClub and went into the draw. Annabel Heard, AMPCo's work experience student, drew the May bookclub winners. To see this month's MJA BookClub's great offers, see page 37 and the inside back cover of this issue.

