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EDITORIALS
Prevention of recurrent thrombosis in the antiphospholipid antibody syndrome: how long and how high with oral anticoagulant therapy?
Ross I Baker 436

To exercise or not to exercise in chronic fatigue syndrome? No longer a question
Andrew R Lloyd 437

Estimating disease likelihood: a case of rubbery figures
Ian A Scott 438

POSTCARD FROM THE UK
Modernisation or reform? The NHS approach
Richard F Heller, Konrad Jamrozik, David P Weller 441

RESEARCH
Randomised controlled trial of graded exercise in chronic fatigue syndrome
Karen E Wallman, Alan R Morton, Carmel Goodman, Robert Grove, Andrew M Guilfoyle 444

Generating pre-test probabilities: a neglected area in clinical decision making
John R Attia, Balakrishnan R Nair, David W Sibbritt, Ben D Ewald, Neil S Paget, Rod F Wellard, Lesley Patterson, Richard F Heller 449

HEALTHCARE
Impact of an electronic antibiotic advice and approval system on antibiotic prescribing in an Australian teaching hospital

PUBLIC HEALTH
Increase in type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents in Western Australia
Sarah K McMahon, Aveni Haynes, Nirubasini Ratnam, Maree T Grant, Christine L Carne, Timothy W Jones, Elizabeth A Davis 459

CLINICAL UPDATE
Metformin therapy and diabetes in pregnancy
David Simmons, Barry N J Walters, Janet A Rowan, H David McIntyre 462

EBM: TRIALS ON TRIAL
Does high-impact exercise in the prepubertal period have an osteogenic effect in females?
Jennifer K Peat, Geraldine A Naughton 465

Subgroup analysis: application to individual patient decisions
R John Simes, Val J Gebski, Anthony C Keech 467

LESSONS FROM PRACTICE
Successful reintroduction of statin therapy after myositis: was there another cause?
Leo P Rando, Sarah A L Cording, Harvey H Newnham 472

MJA PRACTICE ESSENTIALS: ENDOCRINOLOGY
10: Management of obesity
Joseph Proietto, Louise A Baur 474

LETTERS (Contents overleaf) 482
POLITICAL PRIORITIES AND THE PUBLIC’S HEALTH

Recently, *The Lancet* had public health squarely in its sights. “Where are the zealous physicians and public health advocates of the 19th and 20th centuries? Where is the new Jenner, Semmelweis, Virchow and Snow?”, it asked. “Public health has become complacent. It is failing.”

This was prompted by the perceived failure of public health physicians and policy makers to tackle rising rates of obesity. Worldwide, people are becoming fatter, and are facing the inevitable consequences — diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke and cancer. And Australia is fast becoming a pacesetter in the “fat stakes”.

But does *The Lancet*’s criticism apply equally to us? Can we not point to nationally coordinated campaigns against our burgeoning obesity? Have we not been bombarded with media messages extolling the health gains of being lean and active? Do we not have a “fat tax” on energy-dense food? Do we not have urban environments that encourage walking, cycling or simply playing outside?

Unfortunately, confronting obesity is not a pressing priority for our politicians or their public servants. Medicare and the woes of public hospitals consume their energies, leaving little time to address an accepted “circuit breaker” for our sick hospitals — a persuasive program promoting health and disease prevention.

Implementing such a program requires thinking outside the square, beyond the life of parliaments, jurisdictional divides, cures for diseases, and moving beyond unilateral to multidisciplinary action. Health ministers need to engage other portfolios, and their public servants other departments, as health and disease prevention requires changing the priorities and lifestyles of individuals and communities.

Making obesity Australia’s newest National Health Priority Area would be a good start. Creating ministers for health and disease prevention would be another.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

**LETTERS**

**Murine typhus: the first reported case from Victoria**
Stephanie L Jones, Eugene Athan, Daniel O’Brien, Stephen R Graves, Chelsea Nguyen, John Stenos 482

**Sublingual glyceryl trinitrate as prehospital treatment for hypertension in Irukandji syndrome**
Mark Little, Peter L Pereira, Richard Mulcahy, Teresa Carrette, Jamie Seymour 482
Geoffrey K Isbister 483
Peter J Fenner 483
Richard J G Bonham 484

**Travel insurance and medical evacuation**
Peter A Leggat, Robin Griffiths 484
Fred Gilligan, Peter Sharley, Andrew Berry 486
Howard Roby 486

**Are the Australian guidelines asking too much of the Pneumonia Severity Index (PSI)?**
Kirsty L Buisin, Karin A Thursky, James F Black, Graham V Brown 486

**El Niño Southern Oscillation and the transmission of hepatitis A virus in Australia**
Wenbiao Hu, Anthony J McMichael, Shilu Tong 487

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Obstetrics, gynaecology and women’s health**
Reviewed by David A Ellwood 466

**PDxMD Medical conditions series**
Reviewed by Stephen C Trumble 470

**PDxMD Psychiatry**
Reviewed by Gregory M de Moore 470

**OBITUARIES**

Robert Frederick Warnock
By Timothy Warnock 471

Jack Raymond Elliott
By Alan D Hewson 471

**CORRECTION**

“Medical management of osteoarthritis of the knee and hip joints”
(*Med J Aust* 2004; 180; 232-236) 464

**SNAPSHOT**

A pulmonary snowstorm
Bobby Bhalotra, Atul Gogia, Pratibha Gupta, Neeraj Jain 454

**IN THIS ISSUE . . .**

434

**IN OTHER JOURNALS . . .**

481

Cover photograph: Courtesy Ray Sherman