There was no difference between groups (22% *v* 21% patients reported good effect). **Versus oral NSAIDs:** Five trials in the systematic review compared topical with oral NSAIDs but they all had inadequate design and power.²⁸ **Versus paracetamol:** We found no RCTs.

Harms

In the systematic review, local adverse effects occurred in 3% of participants in both groups and systemic adverse events in 1%.²⁸ In the trial of copper-salicylate gel, more participants taking the drug reported adverse reactions than with placebo (83% *v* 52%), most commonly skin reactions, and more withdrew from the trial because of these reactions (17% *v* 2%).²⁹

Comment

Sample size bias hampers the interpretation of the available trials. Further, no high quality trials have compared topical with systemic administration of the same NSAID, and no trials have compared a topical NSAID with paracetamol. It is therefore not possible to judge the relative benefit of this route of administration.

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Vaccination against smallpox—1806

"That vaccination should occasion contention, was a thing of course; but this has been carried to unexpected lengths; for both those who approve, and those who disapprove, have accused each other of murdering their patients. It must be owned indeed, that on this occasion, there was superadded to the general tendency of doctors to differ, a particular motive which rarely fails to have that effect on all mankind. Small-pox was the source of no inconsiderable portion of the income of almost every medical practitioner; inasmuch, that neither physicians nor surgeons would abandon this disease to the management of the other. The physicians claimed it as a contagious fever, and therefore a medical case; but as the surgeon was the inoculator, he did not choose to relinquish the profits of the subsequent treatment. While each was eager for the whole, it was hardly to be expected, that a plan to take it from both would be kindly received by either. Jenner's discovery was a touch-stone, to detect what proportion of selfishness alloyed the human heart. It was calculated to make known, whether the

scenes of misery, which medical men are compelled to witness, blunt their feelings. The result has certainly reflected distinguished honour on the faculty; for the plans to exterminate the small-pox, has been zealously adopted by the medical men of every part of the world which it has reached."

Royston W. Historical sketch of the progress of medicine in the year 1806. *Med Physical J* 1807;18:1-43.

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