Nevertheless, the results of the studies discussed here suggest that some surgeons are less competent than their colleagues and that these factors may compromise survival. Considerable effort and resources are currently being poured into large multicentre studies of adjuvant chemotherapy and radiotherapy in an effort to provide a marginal improvement in the survival of patients with colorectal cancer. If, by specialisation, the overall results of surgery could be improved—and evidence suggests that this is so—the impact on survival might be greater than that of any of the adjuvant therapies currently under study.

Further reading

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Outcome seems to differ substantially among surgeons performing colorectal surgery—specialisation rather than volume of work might be a way of improving overall outcome

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The ABC of colorectal cancer is edited by D J Kerr, professor at the Institute for Cancer Studies, University of Birmingham; Annie Young, research fellow at the School of Health Sciences, University of Birmingham; and F D Richard Hobbs, professor in the department of primary care and general practice, University of Birmingham. The series will be published as a book by the end of 2000.

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A memorable doctor Poppy Day again

11 November 1998 was the 80th anniversary of the armistice that ended the first world war. Where I work the fire alarm briefly rang at 11 o'clock, and we paused to remember those killed in war. It was, as a glance around the fixed expressions in the room confirmed, a time for private thoughts. When, two minutes later, the alarm sounded again our committee agenda was cast aside and the unspoken thoughts were put into words. Some of us had visited the Menin Gate or other allied cemeteries and seen the ranks of plain white crosses. One committee member had been to a German war cemetery where the soldiers were buried four to a grave and the crosses were black. The child of another member had been taken in a party from EuroDisney to view an allied cemetery in northern France (you need to be young to take incongruities like that in your stride). The rows of crosses there had left him awed by the scale of the killing in European wars 40 and 70 years before. That same sentiment, in May 1915, inspired John McCrae to write:

"In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below. . ."

McCrae was a middleaged Canadian pathologist, turned army surgeon. He composed these lines in a dressing station by the Ypres Canal during a 17 day battle (the second battle of Ypres) that marked an intensification in the scale and ferocity of the war, and saw the first use of poison gas. There were 100 000 casualties in that battle, and many fresh crosses. Yet McCrae was not a sentimentalist, and in its last verse the poem changes tone, aimed as it was at involving the non-belligerent United States of America in the conflict.

"... Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw

The Torch: be yours to hold it high!"

McCrae was first and foremost a soldier of the British Empire who believed in the universal destiny of the English speaking peoples. He had fought with a Canadian contingent in the Boer war and in August 1914, when over 40 years old, he enlisted in England in an artillery regiment. Within a month he was appointed medical officer to the First Brigade of Artillery. In peacetime, by contrast, McCrae was an academic, joint author of a well regarded textbook written from McGill University at a time when its medical school was internationally renowned. The second battle of Ypres over, McCrae was posted to a Canadian Military Hospital at Boulogne, where he worked for the next two years. Then, in January 1918, at a low point in the fortunes of the allied cause, McCrae contracted pneumonia and died. By then, however, his poem had inspired Poppy Day, and the sale of poppies in aid of the casualties of the war throughout Britain, its empire, and the United States. On each anniversary of Armistice Day the sale of poppies continues to support former soldiers and their families. This year, when you buy a poppy, think of John McCrae, soldier, poet, and pathologist, and the innumerable other victims of that "great" war and the conflicts that have followed. The first world war was sparked by an assassination in the Balkans, and brought to a close 40 years of peaceful prosperity in Europe. In 1999 we have once more been made aware of the capacity of Balkan rivalries to embroil the European powers in conflict, changing the lives of ordinary folk, including serving British soldiers.

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I am indebted to an article "The larks still singing" about John McCrae by Ian Cox, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (13 November 1998, p 6).