hernia with swimming in this way, it could hardly be via the mechanism described in his extraordinary second sentence, which reads "Forced exhalation is produced by simultaneous contraction of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles in the short time that the head is above water in the swimming cycle." Of course, the diaphragm relaxes (not contracts) during exhalation and when the head is above the water inhalation (not exhalation) occurs. Inhalation and not exhalation is the most difficult part of most swimming strokes. Lifting the mouth out of the water to breathe interferes with smooth progress through the water and the skilful swimmer minimises this part of the stroke; inhalation is very rapid and this allows correspondingly plenty of time for exhalation to occur when the mouth is below water level during the rest of the stroke cycle. The hydrostatic pressure of the water surrounding the chest also contributes to making inhalation the most difficult and strenuous part of breathing.

Swimming coaches and medical advisers are well aware that training that is intensely stressful in a cardiovascular-respiratory sense can produce a syndrome virtually identical to that described by Mr Skidmore. Certainly if an umbilical hernia is present under these circumstances it is likely to be revealed or even compromised. Among examples of this syndrome which one might quote were two very highly motivated international swimmers who collapsed with these symptoms on several occasions during training; one, a sprinter, would become visibly cyanosed before such a collapse and the other had a heart rate of around 220 beats/min even after attachment of an ECG following removal from the water.

Regarding the possibility of umbilical hernia as a cause of drowning, I would suggest that abdominal cramp only existed, even in the folklore, before Keatinge in his book¹ and numerous papers so elegantly described the sudden immersion syndrome and the effects of hypothermia in swimmers, both of which can be an even greater threat to life after a large meal.

Swimming being a non-weight-bearing and non-body-contact sport would seem to cause fewer medical problems in relation to the number of participants than any other vigorous sport. However, Mr Skidmore rightly mentions the large number of children now taking this sport seriously and so medical advice is needed by most swimming clubs occasionally. A conference is being held to discuss medical aspects of competitive swimming for the first time on 3 November 1979 at the Post-graduate Centre, Frenchay Hospital, Bristol, and any interested doctors are invited to apply to attend.

P T PENNY

Western Counties' Amateur
Swimming Association,
Taunton, Somerset TA1 5BB

¹ Keatinge, W R, *Survival in Cold Water: The Physiology and Treatment of Immersion Hypothermia and of Drowning*. Oxford, Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1969.

"Man Against Disease"

SIR,—Lord Taylor (1 September, p 540) may find *Man Against Disease* by J A Muir Gray confusing, but is it the form or the content with which he wishes to take issue?

In criticising the form of the book, Lord Taylor seems himself to be confused between

slang and colloquial speech, and to have an idiosyncratic idea of neologisms, describing in this way words which have been in usage for over 300 years. Such points are, however, unimportant.

What is important is his abrogation of the responsibility of medicine (and society) to the individual, by invoking the pejorative and dismissive concept of "self-denial." To paraphrase, people are ill because they indulge too much in those things which society induces them to, and are too unintelligent to know better. Even if this were more than a half-truth, who has the responsibility for this state of affairs? Lord Taylor is impressed by educational campaigns which frighten, but where is the evidence that these either educate particularly well or produce the desired effect? Research on patient-doctor relationships also shows much scope for improvement. Television commercials are not necessarily effective either.

The "anti" lobbies have arisen not to prevent advances but out of frustration at the inability of medicine to address itself to the issues. That their philosophies are unsound is no evidence that medicine is performing its role properly, and no cause for complacency.

To reject testable approaches to prevention on doctrinaire grounds is nonsensical, or, to borrow Lord Taylor's abuse, "a great nonsense."

DAVID COSTAIN

Headington, Oxford

Social factors in marital pathology

SIR,—Dr J Dominian (1 September, p 531) argues that marriages last longer because some "20-25 years have been added to the expectation of life since the turn of the century." This is illogical. The increased expectation of life at birth can have no bearing on the duration of marriage. The important figure is the increased expectation of life after marriage, and this is much less. The Registrar General estimates the expectation of life for men aged 45 in 1900-02 as 22.3 years and in 1971-73 as 27.4 years. The mean duration of marriage for men marrying in 1910-15 was of course shortened by the 1914-18 war.

Possibly the commonest statistical fallacy of recent years is that *old* people are living longer. In 1946 the expectation of life of men aged 65 was 12.4 years, and in 1971-73 it was 12.2 years. At 75 the corresponding figures are 7.3 years and 7.2 years. Women do slightly better. In 1946 their expectation at 75 years old was 8.5 years and in 1971-73 it was 9.5 years.

DENYS JENNINGS

Budleigh Salterton,
Devon EX9 6BZ

Muslims, Ramadan, and diabetes mellitus

SIR,—We were delighted to learn from Dr R N Ebbing's letter (4 August, p 333) that Muslim diabetics in Manchester sought medical advice before embarking on the fast of Ramadan, and the purpose of our letter (7 July, p 46) has been fulfilled.

Unfortunately, Dr Ebbing seems to have drawn conclusions from our data which we felt unable to make. We have not shown that it is safe for diabetics to fast during Ramadan. Fortunately, we did not discover any cata-

strophes, but the control encountered in the six patients on insulin, for example, was far from exemplary, or even tolerable. Intermittent ampicillin, taken by one of the patients, is bad treatment for malaise and is not a therapy for probable hypoglycaemia.

While Dr Ebbing's regimen may be suitable for some patients if they are given the close supervision he suggested, we feel that extra caution is preferable to unnecessary risk. We have *not* produced convincing evidence that it is safe for all Muslims with diabetes mellitus to fast during Ramadan.

S G BARBER
A D WRIGHT

General Hospital,
Birmingham B4 6NH

Training posts, disillusioned registrars and a glut of doctors

SIR,—After reading the letter by Professor G W A Dick and Mr Viner regarding post-graduate training (11 August, p 393) I hold little hope for developments in this sphere. Coincidentally, Dr M T Haslam's letter (p 394) gives support for my many misgivings.

I commend Professor Dick and Mr Viner for their efforts within their own region, but in reality they are "closing the stable door once the horse has bolted." Apart from the numerical imbalance between training posts and senior posts, I see two major problems. I will confine my comments to general medicine.

Firstly, there are far too many training backwaters, which, although recognised by the royal colleges, are regarded by juniors (and many consultants) as poor for future prospects. This creates unduly strong competition for teaching hospital posts and none for posts similar to those mentioned by Dr Haslam. The second problem is the restriction of practising general medicine as a specialty to a hospital environment. Medical registrars therefore either proceed to senior registrar or take up a second choice.

Backwaters can be removed by all hospitals being linked formally to a university teaching centre. The junior posts should rotate throughout the region over periods of four to five years. On completion of general training, it should be possible to practise general medicine in a primary care setting as a specialist rather than as a GP. There are thousands of patients, inconvenienced by travelling to hospital, waiting many hours for review of conditions that could be handled by this sort of trained doctor. The benefits include continuity of care, shorter outpatient clinics, and ambulance savings.

To return to Dr Haslam's comments, I sympathise. York is a nice place, but the influence of patronage and kudos in a numerically unbalanced system can only further increase his plight and decrease our morale.

M G A PALAZZO

London E16

CCHMS proposals

SIR,—Although Mr B A Ross (25 August, p 503) purports to decry the divisions between various sections of doctors, and especially between maximum and part-time consultants, he promptly goes on to exacerbate the situation.