modern means of production and women of childbearing age make a major contribution to the agricultural labour force.

Early this century a system of a "lying-in village" was introduced, where women live with a female relative during the last weeks of pregnancy. Here they have no agricultural duties and only the lightest of domestic chores. Even firewood is provided. Food is brought mainly by the family and a small supplement of rice with palm oil is given out by the medical service. This system is well accepted and about 30% of pregnant women, particularly those from far-away villages, come to the lying-in village without any encouragement.

Birth records (June 1978 to May 1979) show a strikingly lower stillbirth rate in women who used the lying-in village (1.9%) than in those who did not (4.2%)—a significant difference ($\chi^2=5.8$, $P<0.05$). The standard of antenatal care for both groups was similar. Antimalarial prophylaxis (25 mg pyrimethamine every fortnight) was administered to women in both groups who attended antenatal clinics. Iron and folic acid tablets were given in cases of clinical anaemia.

We appreciate that these results do not fully substantiate Dr Briend's assertion that rest in itself improves nutrition during fetal life. The sampling in our study may have been biased by some unknown factors and further observations may be needed. Factors other than improved placental perfusion may have contributed towards the difference in the stillbirth rate. For example, the nutritional state of the women using the lying-in village may have been improved by the reduction in their energy expenditure. We do not know if reduced sexual contacts during the last few weeks of pregnancy might have an effect on the risk of infection of the amniotic fluid.

However, our data support Dr Briend's suggestion that rest at the end of pregnancy could be an important measure in reducing perinatal mortality in developing countries and merits further investigation. If villagers themselves were to adopt this arrangement for women during the last weeks of pregnancy, it could constitute a cheap and beneficial public health measure.

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Nutritional deficiencies in schoolchildren

SIR,—Recent surveys in the West Country confirm the deficiencies recorded by Professor A E Bender (22 September, p 732), but in them I have found other important deficiencies. Modern nutrition knowledge has as yet not influenced the food provided for schoolchildren.

Inspecting school meals with catering officers, I found that dietary fibre is obviously deficient, as white flour, white bread, excessive sugar, and "sloppy" sweet puddings are almost universally provided and eaten.

There is little folic acid or vitamin C in most school meals. In a school visited last week, potatoes were available only as chips, brought into the school in plastic bags, prepared and "blanched" a day or more previously by a "wholesaler." In another school cabbages were four days old, cooked for half an hour, and eaten two hours later. With 500 meals, where a

choice was given, 12 salads and eight oranges were available. Vitamins of the B group were also obviously low or absent.

In a recent publication¹ evidence is presented of widespread nutritional deficiencies, especially in hospital patients and in institutions. Surveys at St Thomas's Hospital² show that the million or so children receiving free school meals, mainly in classes IV and V, are significantly shorter than other children and "of lower nutritional status," and that withdrawal of school meals "might well prejudice their future development."

Before any decision is taken on school meals, I suggest that a detailed analysis should be made of the nutrient content of a random sample of school meals, with blood analyses of the levels of vitamin C and the B group vitamins in children eating the meals.

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¹ Taylor, T G (editor), *The Importance of Vitamins to Human Health*. Lancaster, MTP Press, 1979.

² Rona, R J, Chinn, S, and Smith, A M, *Lancet*, 1979, 2, 534.

Aetiology of appendicitis

SIR,—I am a very busy doctor working (until recently single-handed) in a 120-bed general hospital. It is situated in one of the most rural areas of Nigeria, and I have only just seen the reply from Drs A R P Walker and I Segal (19 May, p 1352) to the letter by Mr F T de Dombal and Dr A H Hedley (24 March, p 820).

Having been working for 29 years in the area I find Mr D P Burkitt's assertion and the comments on it very interesting (3 March, p 620). In my first 10 years here any appendicectomy I performed was because I found the appendix in a sliding hernia, which is common in the area. In the same period I had two cases of appendix abscess. But in the last five years appendicitis and ruptured appendix have become the most common cause of emergency operation in this hospital, which serves an area with a population of 98 000. I see an average of 2000–3000 children under 18 years a month—last month 3815. Schoolchildren, college students, and student nurses form the bulk of the patients seen. Some for various reasons refuse operations or promise to go for their parents, disappear into the villages, and are lost to me. But the figures for those coming to surgery in the last five years are: 1975–5; 1976–9; 1977–11; 1978–13; 1979 (eight months)—7.

Thirty years ago the population consisted of simple natives on subsistence agriculture. Unable to afford protein, their food consisted of carbohydrates—yams, cassava, and cocoyam, all making heavy meals rich in roughage. Years back, all a schoolchild had for breakfast before going to school was a roasted yam but today as he runs along he is tearing at a refined loaf of bread. For student nurses Pepsodent and Maclean toothpaste have replaced the ever-ready gum and tooth-hardening chewing sticks just as Quaker Oats and a glass of milk have replaced the roasted yam at breakfast. In increasing incidence dental caries, dyschezia, haemorrhoids, and many colonic disorders of the colon are running neck and neck with appendicitis.

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Is appendicitis familial?

SIR,—Dr N Andersson and his colleagues (22 September, p 697) report a strong family history of appendicectomy in the relatives of children undergoing this operation. As part of a larger study of psychosocial variables and appendicectomy in adults aged between 17 and 30 years, I have asked the same question.

A preliminary analysis reveals that, of 55 subjects with histologically proved appendicitis, 28 had a history of appendicectomy in a first-degree relative. This compares with 13 out of a control group of 50 randomly selected from the community (after exclusion of four people who had themselves had appendicitis). In the case of affected siblings, 15 of the 55 in the appendicectomy group and three of the 50 in the control group had such a history. Both differences are unlikely to have occurred by chance ($P<0.01$). On two occasions I have discovered at a follow-up interview that a brother of my subject was undergoing appendicectomy almost exactly one year after the index operation. I have also found a strong family history in those whose appendix was found to be normal.

Further analysis, when my data are complete, will search for any relationship between histological diagnosis, family history, and any other variables (such as age and sex) that will help in the interpretation of these findings.

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Treatment of adder bites

SIR,—A small number of cases of adder bite occur every year in this country. The mortality is low but the morbidity quite considerable.^{1 2} Despite the availability of highly refined Zagreb antivenom and an excellent review article,² standard guidelines in many casualty departments and poison centres and in the current *British National Formulary* repeat the misleading statement "the bite is less dangerous than the antiserum." The following recent case illustrates the danger of continuing this policy.

On 29 July a 14-year-old boy picked up an adder, mistaking it for a grass snake, and was bitten on the right wrist. His sister immediately applied a tourniquet and he was brought to the accident and emergency department of this hospital, arriving about 45 minutes after the bite. On arrival he appeared generally well, though he had vomited once before arrival. His right forearm and hand were swollen, blue, and cold. Because of the standard instructions he was not given antivenom but was treated with tetanus toxoid, hydrocortisone, and chlorpheniramide and was admitted for observation.

The boy remained well for the next 36 hours, although the oedema extended to involve his upper arm. During the early hours of 31 July he vomited twice, developed a tachycardia, and became hypotensive. Investigations showed a blood urea concentration of 19.5 mmol/l (117.5 mg/100 ml), creatinine phosphokinase 930 IU/l, white blood cells $17.4 \times 10^9/l$. Although his oral fluid intake had been satisfactory until this time it was felt that he had lost a considerable amount of fluid into the tissues with consequent dehydration, and intravenous saline was started—with some improvement, though he remained ill. At this stage I consulted Dr H A Reid of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, who advised giving antivenom, the rationale being that venom can be released gradually into the systemic circulation and produce relatively late toxic effects. The antivenom was certainly well tolerated and the patient's

general condition improved rapidly from that time. However, the oedema continued to extend across his chest wall and his left arm and, more worryingly, up into his neck; and at one point we began to consider the possibility that tracheostomy would be required. Happily this did not prove necessary, but it was not until 4 August that the oedema began to recede, and on 13 August when the boy was discharged from hospital supervision there was still some residual swelling of his right arm.

It seems likely, since this boy arrived in the hospital 45 minutes after the bite, that antivenom given at that stage would have prevented much of his very worrying illness. I would therefore make a plea for the updating of official policy on the use of antivenom, as suggested by Dr Reid.²

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¹ Walker, C W, *British Medical Journal*, 1945, 2, 13.

² Reid, H A, *British Medical Journal*, 1976, 2, 153.

Vasodilators in senile dementia

SIR,—The *BMJ* has a world-wide reputation for balanced and accurate reporting and informed editorial comment. Your leading article "Vasodilators in senile dementia" (1 September, p 511) is, however, misinformed with regard to dihydroergotoxine mesylate (co-dergocrine mesylate—Hydergine).

You state that vascular (or multi-infarct) dementia is the condition for which drug manufacturers recommend cerebral vasodilators. This is inaccurate as regards co-dergocrine, for which the indication is symptoms of senile dementia presenting as mild-to-moderate impairment of mental function in the elderly.¹

Co-dergocrine is an alpha-blocker, but its mechanism of action is not solely dependent on this property.¹ In addition to the α -adrenoceptor-blocking properties inhibiting the rate of breakdown of cellular ATP, animal studies show that co-dergocrine mesylate also inhibits the enzyme cAMP-phosphodiesterase reducing the breakdown of cellular cAMP and improving the energy balance of the cell²; while more recently it has been shown to have dopaminergic and serotonergic properties,⁴ which may help to explain its effects on symptoms of senile dementia, the cause of which may be due to an impairment in one or more neurotransmitter pathways.

Work in Glasgow⁵ has indicated a broad relationship between slowing of the basic frequency of the EEG and the severity of mental impairment in both vascular and non-vascular dementia. A three-month study⁶ in geriatric patients showed that the improvement induced by co-dergocrine in age-related changes in the EEG was accompanied by clinical improvement in patients with similarly age-related mental deterioration.

Despite the critical review⁷ quoted in your article the evidence was accepted by the US Food and Drug Administration as proof of efficacy, and the same review concluded that "future studies with better methodology and design may lead to more favourable conclusions." Further studies have taken place,^{8,10,13} and a more recent review,⁹ which you also quote, states, "All of these trials note significant improvement of dihydroergotoxine-treated patients on some behavioural or psychological measure; in 18, improvement is considered to be of practical importance. Overall, this drug has the best confirmed efficacy, a result

consonant with a recent quantitative analysis of 12 of these studies."

The reference to sinus bradycardia and hypotension as side effects in the critical review of clinical trials is misleading. One clinician and his colleagues reported sinus bradycardia in an open study involving three out of eight patients,¹⁰ but another reported no such occurrence in a series of 40 patients.¹¹ The incidence of hypotension is small. A controlled long-term study of 100 patients over a period of 15 months reported no side effects,¹² and further data collected from 25 studies on 1593 elderly patients gave an incidence of any form of dizziness or hypotension of 1.82%.¹³

The statement that this ergot compound may lead to vascular insufficiency and gangrene is a serious allegation and must be corrected. Nickerson and Collier¹⁴ state that the prolonged administration "of any of the natural peptide ergot alkaloids can cause vascular insufficiency and gangrene," but co-dergocrine is not a natural peptide. In fact Nickerson and Collier state that "its [co-dergocrine's] overall effects include peripheral vasodilation and a fall in arterial blood pressure." Furthermore, co-dergocrine given intravenously or intra-arterially induces an increase in blood flow in hand and foot.¹⁵

Co-dergocrine mesylate has been available in this country since 1950 and no cases of gangrene have been reported. In fact, though the drug has been used extensively throughout the world for many years, only seven cases of cyanosis of the extremities or gangrene have been reported in the last 10 years, and in none of these was the condition proved to be definitely associated with the drug.

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¹ Manufacturers' Data Sheet, 1979.

² Hyams, D E, in *Textbook of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology*, ed J C Brocklehurst, 2nd edn. Edinburgh, Churchill Livingstone, 1978.

³ Meier-Ruge, W, and Iwagoff, P, *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 1976, 52, suppl No 1, p 47.

⁴ Loew, D M, Vigouret, J M, and Jaton, A L, *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 1976, 52, suppl No 1, p 40.

⁵ Roberts, M A, McGeorge, A P, and Caird, F I, *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, 1978, 41, 903.

⁶ Matejcek, M, et al, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 1979, 27, 178.

⁷ Hughes, J R, Williams, J G, and Currier, R D, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 1976, 24, 490.

⁸ Shader, R I, Harmatz, J S, and Salzman, C, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 1974, 22, 107.

⁹ Yesavage, J A, et al, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1979, 36, 220.

¹⁰ Cayley, A C D, MacPherson, A, and Wedgwood, J, *British Medical Journal*, 1975, 4, 384.

¹¹ Cohen, C, *British Medical Journal*, 1975, 4, 581.

¹² Kugler, J, et al, *Deutsche medizinische Wochenschrift*, 1978, 103, 456.

¹³ Sandoz Information Document, 1979.

¹⁴ Nickerson, M, and Collier, B, in *The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics*, ed L S Goodman and A Gillman, p 540. New York, Macmillan, 1975.

¹⁵ Clark, B J, Chu, D, and Aellig, W H, *Ergot Alkaloids and Related Compounds*, ed B Berde and H O Schild, p 355. Berlin, Springer-Verlag, 1978.

SIR,—Your leading article on vasodilators in senile dementia (1 September, p 511) comments on the treatment of vascular dementia with, among other drugs, vasodilators. Specifically, isoxsuprine, a β -adrenergic stimulant, is indicated as being without value and indeed possibly even causing a reduction of cerebral blood flow owing to a "steal" effect. Unfortunately these claims are not substantiated by any references.

This view is not shared by others; for example, Ussher¹ commented that cerebrovascular dilators like isoxsuprine (Duvadilan)

and cyclandelate (Cyclospasmol) may slow down the process of arteriosclerotic dementia if taken both regularly and at an early stage in the process. Furthermore, Hussain *et al*² in a double-blind controlled study of isoxsuprine against placebo found a significant difference in improvement of mental performance between treated and untreated groups, the treated group having a significantly better score ($P=0.047$, two-tailed tests). This study serves to confirm earlier work carried out by Dhrymotis and Whittier.³

The question of "steal" effect is more difficult to confirm by clinical studies and indeed this very point was made in a previous leading article in the *BMJ*⁴ which indicated that the effect was unproved. However, Horton and Johnson,⁵ who carried out double-blind radioisotope studies with isoxsuprine, concluded that both cerebral blood volume and blood flow were increased. Other experiments⁶ with cerebral angiographs have also demonstrated improved blood flow through the brain in patients taking isoxsuprine after the effect of the contrast medium has been eliminated.

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¹ Ussher, C W J, *Modern Geriatrics*, 1977, 22, 11.

² Hussain, S M A, et al, *Practitioner*, 1976, 216, 222.

³ Dhrymotis, A D, and Whittier, J R, *Current Therapeutic Research*, 1962, 4, 124.

⁴ *British Medical Journal*, 1977, 1, 1.

⁵ Horton, G E, and Johnson, P C, *Angiology*, 1964, 15, 70.

⁶ Gloning, K, and Klausberger, E M, *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift*, 1958, 70, 145.

* * A recent review of clinical trials of vasodilators in senile dementia has found that there have been only five studies of isoxsuprine since 1958.¹ Of these, three meet all the criteria of well-conducted trials. None of these three have shown isoxsuprine to be practically useful, although some improvement in cognitive function was reported in two studies. One study of intravenous isoxsuprine showed that it produced a reduction in cerebral blood flow in most of the patients who were studied.² More persuasive data are needed before isoxsuprine can be recommended for patients with vascular dementia.—ED, *BMJ*.

¹ Yesavage, J A, et al, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1979, 36, 220.

² Fazekas, J F, and Alman, R W, *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 1964, 248, 16.

Current trends in contraception

SIR,—The report by Mr I D Nuttall and others (15 September, p 641) concerning the changes in choice of contraceptive method by women in the Palatine Centre family planning clinic over a period of four years was most interesting. However, the implication that the primary reason for change from pill use to other methods, particularly the intrauterine contraceptive device, was the reaction of patients to adverse publicity concerning pill use and thromboembolic disease leaves out one quite important variable: the physicians who staffed the family planning clinic and their attitudes toward various methods of contraception.

It is my experience that physicians, be they obstetrician-gynaecologists or general practitioners, have a great deal to do with the ultimate choice of contraceptive methods by their patients. Irresponsible and often incomplete reporting of the medical literature