colleagues (13 August, p 455) in the work of Dr D J Betteridge and his colleagues (9 July, p 127). It has the further advantages over the 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme-A reductase assay of being technically easier and considerably less expensive.

We would like to express our thanks to Professor J K Lloyd for her help in obtaining skin fibroblasts from subjects I and II. We would also like to thank the patients and their families for the help they have given us in these studies. This work was supported by the British Heart Foundation (award No 578).

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¹ Goldstein, J L, and Brown, M S, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 1973, **70**, 2804.

² Khachadurian, A K, and Kawahara, F S, *Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine*, 1974, **83**, 7.

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Changing pattern of alcoholic liver disease

SIR,—The report by Dr N Krasner and others (11 June, p 1497) provides interesting information on sex differences in immune response to alcohol hepatotoxicity.

Between 1963 and 1966 Pachas and I found that 19% of patients with Laennec's cirrhosis had positive tests for antinuclear antibody.¹ In this population 38% were women, suggesting that the changing pattern noted by Dr Krasner and his colleagues in London was heralded by events in Boston almost a decade previously. Although positive antinuclear antibody tests were found more frequently and in higher titre in women than in men, the differences were not significant and these data were not included in our report.

We described 13 patients, 12 of whom were women, with a transient polyarthritis, usually occurring during the phase of recovery from hepatic necrosis. The cause of this rheumatic syndrome was unclear but it certainly may have been related to circulating immune complexes, with antigens of bacterial or hepatic origin. I would be most interested to know whether Dr Krasner and his colleagues encountered such patients in their extensive experience.

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¹ Pachas, W N, and Pinals, R S, *Arthritis and Rheumatism*, 1967, **10**, 343.

* * We sent a copy of this letter to Dr Krasner, whose reply is printed below—Ed, *BMJ*.

SIR,—I am grateful to Dr Pinals for his interest in our paper. I have now had an opportunity to discuss his letter with my former colleagues at the Liver Unit, King's College Hospital. We find unfortunately that there are no data available on the question of circulating immune complexes and rheumatic syndrome from within the unit and we therefore feel that

we are unable to offer a useful comment on this question, although we consider it an interesting possibility.

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Screening children for visual defects

SIR,—In your leading article (3 September, p 594) the need for orthoptist participation in preschool vision screening is identified. A preschool vision screening programme run by orthoptists is already effective in this area. The problem of finding accommodation for orthoptic screening has been solved by setting up a simple motor caravan as a mobile unit. This is a practical way of providing transport and standard conditions and equipment for testing. The initial outlay and running costs are justified by the increased early detection of abnormalities and reduction of inappropriate referrals to eye clinics. Of the children screened, 9% have been discovered to have defects requiring treatment. A further 60% were "false-positives" and at least half of these avoided referral to hospital.

Until resources are available for primary orthoptic screening health visitors receive guidance from orthoptists on basic squint identification and are asked to refer from their routine screening of children at 8 months and 3 years. Two orthoptists, each working in the mobile unit for two days per week, alternating with their normal duties (to relieve tedium), are expected to see 6000 children per year.

This orthoptic screening does not include refraction. Orthoptic techniques can now select children in need of refraction as well as those with squint and amblyopia and can then refer children appropriately to ophthalmologists and opticians in eye clinics.

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Vision screening in older children

SIR,—While fully agreeing with Dr J H Cameron (10 September, p 701) that preschool screening to identify children with defects of vision is of great importance if children are to benefit from early treatment, we are concerned about the supposition that "as the preschool screening procedure develops, so the ophthalmic unit's commitment to the traditional school eye clinics will be reduced and ultimately these clinics will disappear."

We are currently engaged in assessing the results of vision screening of a large and nationally representative sample of school-children at ages 7, 11, and 16. The data referred to are part of those collected by the National Child Development Study, which is a longitudinal study of all children in England, Scotland, and Wales born in one week in March 1958. At each age distant vision was screened

with a standard Snellen chart at 20 feet (6 m). The table below shows that of 6634 children in the study with normal (6/6, 6/6) vision at 7 years, 496 (7.4%) had a bilateral defect of vision (6/12 in the better eye) by 16 years. To give two other examples, no fewer than 60% of those with bilateral severe defects at 16 had had normal vision at 7 and 12% of children with normal vision at 11 showed at least a one-line deterioration in visual acuity by 16.

These initial results clearly illustrate that visual defects may first become manifest at any stage in childhood and that if a child has normal vision at 7 this is no guarantee that his vision will not deteriorate. We should therefore like to stress the importance of careful, continued, regular vision screening at school as well as preschool screening.

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An epidural service

SIR,—The successful employment of extradural analgesia in labour by the obstetric staff of Bowthorpe Maternity Hospital, Wisbech, reported by Mr A B W Taylor and his colleagues (6 August, p 370), calls for congratulation. It is arguable that if this type of pain relief is routinely undertaken by obstetricians well trained in the use of the technique women in labour will benefit. The obstetrician will be personally involved and responsible for the success of the method much more than if an outsider from the anaesthetic department has inserted the catheter. It is quite certain, however, that very occasionally a total spinal injection will result whoever handles the needle in this area of "tiger country," and when it occurs with gross hypertension, severe cardiovascular collapse, and apnoea skilled and prompt treatment will be necessary in order to save the life of the mother and probably the child as well. This will include intermittent positive pressure ventilation, elevation of the legs of the patient, the rapid infusion of a plasma volume expander, and intravenous injection of a pressor drug.

But why all this anxiety about the passage of a tracheal tube (Dr J M Anderton, 24 September, p 832)? Surely inflation of the lungs can be performed perfectly well without a tracheal tube being in place. Only a well-fitting mask, a pharyngeal airway, a source of oxygen under pressure (or, failing that, a self-inflating bag using air) will be required. Does the apnoea associated with electric convulsion therapy require a tracheal tube for its management? An obstetrician who can be taught to insert a catheter into the extradural space can be taught how to ventilate an apnoeic patient. Psychiatrists have succeeded well enough and

Visual acuity at 16 of children with normal vision at 7

Normal (6/6, 6/6)	Minor defect (6/6 / 6/9 or 6/9 / 6/9)	Unilateral defect (6/6 or 6/9 in better eye, 6/12 or worse in other eye)	Moderate bilateral defect (6/12 or 6/18 in better eye)	Severe bilateral defect (6/24 or worse in better eye)	Total
5413 (81.6%)	476 (7.2%)	249 (3.8%)	208 (3.1%)	288 (4.3%)	6634 (100%)

with safety, without the help of anaesthetists, in many thousands of administrations in the recent past when they undertook this treatment themselves.

Undoubtedly ventilation is more easily carried out through a tracheal tube when the likelihood of apnoea lasting 30-90 minutes is probable, but in most hospitals an anaesthetist can be called to employ his expertise with a laryngoscope at his early convenience if the obstetrician thinks it necessary and fails to pass a tube himself, bag and mask ventilation being maintained until he arrives.

There may be good reasons why extradural analgesia in labour should remain in the hands of the anaesthetists, but the very rare risk of death from apnoea through the inability of the obstetrician to intubate is not one of them.

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Disseminated histoplasmosis in diabetes

SIR,—Dr D W R Mackenzie's letter (14 May, p 1281) has recently come to our attention. He is to be thanked for his interest in our case (16 April, p 1002) and for finding a reference not covered by the number of excellent reviews available in the more widely read English language journals¹⁻³ and the anecdotal book.⁴ Some clinical points are, however, worthy of reply, particularly as they reflect his divergence of opinion from experienced writers in endemic areas.

(1) *Serological studies.* Both complement fixation tests and precipitin tests are negative in up to 40% of patients with disseminated histoplasmosis, possibly reflecting a state of immune anergy to the overwhelming infection.^{2,3,5}

(2) *Opportunistic infection.*⁵ As judged by conversion to positive skin tests, some 500 000 patients per year receive primary exposure to histoplasma antigen in endemic regions of America.⁶ Of these only 1-2 per 1000 present as the disseminated form,³ and of these one series recorded factors which diminish host resistance in 65%.³ With reference to the patient reported this change in host resistance may be related to the onset of his diabetes mellitus, and with cases referred to elsewhere^{3,5} this picture may hope to explain the "latency" which Dr Mackenzie cites for systemic mycoses. Presumably in the other cases exposed to the antigen the fungus is either overwhelmed by host resistance or lives as a saprophytic commensal awaiting immune paresis. In this it shares features with both accepted commensals (monilia) and accepted pathogens (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*).

(3) *Endemic histoplasmosis in the United Kingdom.* Not having studied the soil of the north-west, we are in no position to comment on Knight's interesting speculation that histoplasmosis is potentially endemic in the United Kingdom as it is in Norway.⁷ Perhaps in denying Knight's data Dr Mackenzie will be able to comment on other possible endemic United Kingdom cases, including the cotton-mill worker in the Manchester area who had two colleagues with positive skin tests.⁸ Since the Manchester region has been the port of entry for thousands of tons of cotton, including cotton from the histoplasma-infected Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, Dr Mackenzie will no doubt be able to help in confirming the absence of *Histoplasma capsula-*

tum from the starling roosts near the Stretford City Hall, where the patient reported works as a doorman.

(4) *Reviewing.* Finally, it would seem appropriate to observe that the choice of referees must be the prerogative of the editor of the journal concerned. Perhaps such decisions are influenced by experiences in the past such as those published in a recent *BMJ* article.⁹

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¹ Goodwin, R A, and Des-Perz, R M, *Southern Medical Journal*, 1973, **66**, 13.

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Starting on the pill

SIR,—Dr Nancy B Loudon's letter (20 August, p 521) should, I believe, produce a much-needed change in the routine advice given to patients starting on oral contraceptives. Some of us have, in special cases where low motivation and intelligence would combine to cause complex instructions to destroy the patient's confidence, already discarded the "traditional" instruction to use additional contraception for the first 14 days of pill-taking. Was this folk-lore? Was it based on a very small number of early failures which, in the light of more recent knowledge, could perhaps have been due to drug interaction? Whatever the reason, we have probably wasted tons of rubber and thousands of pounds sterling (as well as deterring many timid potential pill-users) over the past 15 years. I would endorse a massive effort to ensure that this practice is quickly discarded by all doctors and nurses advising on birth control.

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Acute gastric dilatation in anorexia nervosa

SIR,—I was interested in Dr G K Brooks's report of acute gastric dilatation in anorexia nervosa (20 August, p 499) and would like to make some observations as to its possible causation.

Case 1—A 16-year-old girl was admitted to hospital in November 1972 with a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa. She was treated with chlorpromazine and a high-calorie diet and told that discharge would be entertained once she had gained a certain weight. On 23 December, realising that she would not be discharged for the Christmas holiday, she hoarded food and secretly overate. Early next morning she vomited, collapsed, and assumed a catatonic state. She was found to have acute gastric dilatation, aspiration pneumonia, and some pulmonary oedema. Seven litres of fluid were aspirated from the stomach and after treatment

with antibiotics and hydrocortisone she recovered fully.

Case 2—A 19-year-old girl admitted shortly before Whitsun 1973, having realised that she would not be discharged for this holiday period, undertook a similar gastronomic excess and soon complained of severe epigastric pain. Four litres of fluid were aspirated from the stomach before vomiting started. She later used overeating and impending acute gastric dilatation as a means to achieve hospital admission on several occasions.

It would appear that acute gastric dilatation occurs in anorexia nervosa, that it may result from attempts to gain weight quickly, sufficient to warrant discharge, and that similar episodes may be consciously provoked to gain hospital admission when external social pressures prove too great.

I would like to thank Dr H C Hamilton for allowing me to report these two of his patients.

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Anxieties and fears about plutonium

SIR,—I hesitate before accusing Dr R H Mole (17 September, p 743) of the bias he so dislikes in others, but I fear that in his attempt to allay fears about plutonium he has himself fallen into this trap. Probably he was not intending to do so, but he has implied that those who object to its use are over-reacting to misrepresented and misunderstood evidence of its likely effect on the outside population.

As a member of one of the environmental organisations I have heard many arguing against the use of nuclear energy but very few of them using arguments so obviously distorted as those quoted. Most base their opposition on the known facts—Dr Mole himself states them—that plutonium is a long-lived α -particle emitter capable of causing cancer, especially of the lung, and that any radiation can cause genetic damage.

I disagree with his implication that because environmental radiation exists more will not do harm. If this were the case we would not need to be concerned about the effect of repeated exposure to x rays. Any increased radiation, whether from a nuclear power station or an x -ray machine, increases the risk of genetic damage. Neither do I agree that the natural occurrence of the long-lived potassium-40 in any way proves plutonium less dangerous. The importance of the long half life of this α -particle emitter is that any which escapes into the environment will be there for a long time—not a pleasant prospect if the amount released, whether by accident or terrorist activity, is large.

Basically Dr Mole and I disagree not so much on the facts as on the importance we place on them as compared with the benefits of nuclear energy. Whether the benefits outweigh the risks is obviously a matter of opinion, but this must be well informed. It is in this context that the Windscale inquiry is so important as it is the first time in my recollection that there has been a chance for all interested parties to put their views before an impartial judge. Naturally it will take time: there is a great deal to be said on both sides. It is to be hoped that it will result in an objective assessment of both the advantages and dangers involved in nuclear technology. It may be a mistaken belief that "the only experts to be trusted are those not