MINERVA

Premedicating patients with melatonin before they are given general anaesthetics significantly reduces the doses of propofol and thiopental needed to induce anaesthesia, according to a prospective randomised double blind study in *Anesthesia and Analgesia* (2006;103:1448-52). Successful induction was assessed by loss of response to the command "open your eyes" and disappearance of the eyelash reflex.

The British Doctors and Dentists Group is a self help group of doctors and dentists who are recovering from chemical dependency and addiction—mainly alcohol and drugs. Monthly support meetings take place in 16 centres around the United Kingdom. The group uses a 12 step recovery programme and separate support is available for the families of members. To find out more contact Paul at paulr4bddg@aol.com or go to www.bddgfamilies.org.uk.

It is not bad hair days that hairdressers should worry about, but bad hand days. The Health and Safety Executive (www.badhandday.hse.gov.uk) has warned salon owners to wise up to dermatitis caused by exposure to shampoos, hair dyes, and prolonged immersion of the hands in water. More than half of the 130 000 hairdressers in the UK have an unpleasant skin condition at some point in their career, and it can be avoided simply by wearing disposable non-latex gloves.

Keen cyclists may want to participate in a London to Paris bike ride that is scheduled to take place from 12-15 July 2007, a week after the Tour de France leaves London for the first time. The event will raise funds for Médecins du Monde UK, a humanitarian aid organisation whose medical volunteers provide health care to vulnerable people around the world. For more information go to www.medecinsdumonde.org.uk.

The fourth edition of the Hall report (2003) states that no further check up is needed for acquired undescended testes if the testes are "well down" at six weeks. However, a retrospective audit published in the *Journal of Pediatric Urology* (2006;2:392-7) suggests that the natural course of this condition makes this advice unsafe. Of a total of 228 orchidopexies performed at one hospital between 1992 and 2003, 83 were performed on boys who had scrotally placed testes at birth and at 6 weeks. Vigilance is needed until puberty.

A postmature baby had poor cardiotocogram traces, a cord pH of 6.86, and a base excess of -17.8. He had also aspirated meconium and needed ventilation. On day 8 we noted firm, fluctuant violaceous nodules over his back, buttocks, and thighs, which resolved by 3 months. Subcutaneous fat necrosis of the newborn is an uncommon acute hypodermatitis that affects full term or postmature babies during the first 6 weeks of life. Predisposing factors are perinatal asphyxia, birth trauma, aspiration of meconium, and hypoxia. Complications are hypoglycaemia, anaemia, thrombocytopenia, and hypercalcaemia. The condition is usually self limiting and resolves without scarring within weeks to months.

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The surge in oxytocin when labour starts may make delivery safer. Scientists have found that just before delivery the neurotransmitter γ aminobutyric acid signalling system in the fetal rat brain switches from an excitatory state to an inhibitory one. The switch is triggered by a surge in maternal oxytocin. This "quieting" of neuronal activity may reduce the brain's energy demand, thereby protecting the brain against low oxygen conditions during the birth process (*Science* 2006;314:1788-92).

Scientists have sequenced a gene called SHANK3 in more than 200 people with autism and found

mutations in three families. SHANK3 encodes a protein that interacts with neuroligins—proteins that have an important role in neuronal signalling. Previous research identified mutations in two genes that encode neuroligins. These results indicate that neuroligin may hold the key in the search for the biological basis of autism (*Nature Genetics* 2006).

Next time you are potting out plants, beware. A case control study from South Australia identified *Legionella longbeachae*, which is found in commercial potting mix, as a cause of infection. Recent use of potting mix was associated with illness, but better predictors included poor hand washing practices after gardening, long term smoking, and being near hanging flower pots that drip. Inhalation and ingestion are the likely modes of transmission (*Epidemiology and Infection* 2007;135:34-9).

Minerva's roving eye was caught by the title of an essay in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2006;99:625-7 www.jrsm.org/cgi/content/full/99/12/625?etoc), "Attenti alle bufale" (Beware of red herrings). It is the first in a series about making evidence based medicine work for you. In a nutshell, the authors say that everything and anything we read or hear in biomedical sciences has to be approached critically. Moreover, a critical mentality needs to be developed and nurtured. It doesn't just grow overnight.

Large trials have come out in favour of carotid endarterectomy for asymptomatic carotid artery stenosis, but patients take years to get over the perioperative risks and to benefit from the reduced risk of stroke or death. Estimating long term survival may be useful in deciding whether to proceed with this prophylactic operation. Predictors of decreased longevity identified in a population based study of more than 6000 carotid endarterectomies performed in Sweden were all pretty obvious—age at operation, diabetes, heart disease, and previous vascular surgery (*Stroke* 2006;37:2886-91).

Another case of the blooming obvious is found in a study of snoring in *Chest* (2006;130:1779-83). Risk factors for habitual snoring were confirmed as being male, being overweight, and recent weight gain. Not so obvious factors were the development of asthma and taking up smoking.