tion of the analytical technique used.⁷ Interested readers are referred to this article and two recent reviews.^{8,9} Finally I want to stress the statement of Goldberg and Rimington¹⁰ that whenever an active case of acute intermittent porphyria is discovered it becomes a duty to test the urines of relatives for the presence of porphobilinogen; this test needs to be done with ion exchange chromatography and as far as possible determination of A.L.A. should be included (see ref. 7).—I am, etc.,

TORBEN K. WITH.

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Denmark.

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Foreign Bodies in the Stomach

SIR,—I enclose a photograph of foreign bodies removed from the stomach of a male prisoner. There were no symptoms,

but the ingestion of foreign bodies had been suspected and an x-ray showed knives, etc., and two very strange objects which proved to be prisoners' tightly compressed sugar tins. The knife was in three pieces, which in the photograph have been laid end to end.

The biggest collection of foreign material that I have ever heard of was published in the *Sunday Pictorial* of September 21, 1958, when it was said that a surgeon in Sweden (Dr. Rossman) had at one operation removed: 1,500 pins and needles, 100 nails, 330 buttons, 167

coins, 12 curtain rings, 11 keys, and 176 other things, including fish hooks, badges, stones, a buckle, and a bicycle tyre valve!—I am, etc.,

DESMOND FARLEY.

Royal Northern Hospital,
London N.7.

Part-time Work for Women Doctors

SIR,—I read with interest the correspondence earlier this year regretting the loss of married women to the profession. I have, since qualifying in 1948, worked in general practice almost non-stop, despite having had four children over that period. For the last seven years I had my own small list in London. This spring we moved to Suffolk. Extensive local inquiries indicated that there was no part-time work in any medical field whatsoever. Before starting a fresh N.H.S. practice (the area is intermediate) I realized that I would have to brush up my obstetrics considerably, and thus need to work in a labour ward plus its associated clinics for a few months, a house job being out of the question with a young family. I explained to the departments I approached that I would of course not expect any remuneration. It proved impossible to obtain these facilities. I was able to attend Mr. David B. Brown's excellent two weeks' course in Chelmsford (September 7, p. 597), but that of course was only a beginning. The only department that has so far offered me the facilities is one in the West Indies. Continental medical friends assure me that in various European countries such facilities are made available as a matter of course and courtesy among colleagues.

One appreciates that a busy department might thereby have a little additional responsibility placed on it. On the other hand, it would be sending out into its district a disciple, thereby facilitating the highest level of co-operation that is so desirable. If this is really asking too much, not only will married women doctors be lost to the profession, but the latter shows itself lacking in that flexibility without which nothing can either live or grow.—I am, etc.,

Little Cornard,
Suffolk.

ELEONORE ETTLINGER.

Periodic Health Examination

SIR,—Everybody will agree with your correspondent Dr. A. H. Levers (September 28, p. 810) that in the present state of the National Health Service it would be impossible to carry out all the tests he mentions. "Half a loaf is better than no bread." and from the point of view of malignant disease a yearly check up would be of much value in detecting "early stage cancers." A quick examination of the mouth, tongue, breasts in the case of women, uterus with smear (this latter need only be done every two or three years), and rectum for cancer of the rectum or prostate, would be of

very great value and save many lives. Such an examination should not take more than 20 minutes. To wait until disease is well advanced before diagnosis is a counsel of despair.—I am, etc.,

MALCOLM DONALDSON,
Hon. Secretary.

Cancer Information Association,
Oxford.

Certification

SIR,—As far as the working conditions in general practice are concerned, there has been too much talk of money—and too little demand for positive improvements in the working system. The major difficulty is, and always will be, cost. The Government is loath to implement any scheme—no matter how praiseworthy—which will cost it more money. Any suggestion must then create not only improved conditions but also not cost the Government money to implement.

The suggested need for revision of insurance certification—little changed since its inception—put forward by Dr. Alex Crawford (September 28, p. 808) seems to be a field of possible hope. I agree with his remarks that, in town practice at least, the ritual of certification is very time-consuming.

The attendance of the patient at a surgery has often been necessitated more by the need for a certificate than by the degree of illness, and these attendances make up a fair bulk of patients in surgeries to-day. The G.P.'s time is increasingly taken up by administrative matters, and this insurance certificate field is one which could easily be removed from him and done just as well somewhere else—with a consequent lightening of his work load, and therefore improved care for those really needing his time. A system could be evolved based on a local insurance clinic where a patient could attend for all certificates needed. The clinic could be staffed by a part-time rota of G.P.s, etc. (seeing all patients but their own) and paid on a sessional basis. If treatment was required the patient could still attend his G.P. for this, but a vast number of patients would be able and willing to handle their own minor illnesses without wasting their time in surgery as they do now mainly to obtain a certificate. The deterrent effect of a clinic attendance could prevent the milder lead-swinging activities which must cost the country millions each year, and the scheme would show a profit in no time.

Short or prolonged certificates could be issued at the clinic's discretion and the G.P. notified accordingly. The duration would be based on clinical condition and not on the list-preserving relationship which tends to bias the G.P. The money saved on insurance payments would gratify the Treasury and the guilt complexes of patient and G.P. would be lessened.

Complications and difficulties are obvious—for domiciliary illnesses, etc.—but none are insoluble with a little

thought and planning. I suggest a system based on insurance clinics is a feasible and worth-while goal—to improve general practice conditions. It would save the G.P.'s time and save the Government money—a combination, I feel, which makes for a fair chance of accomplishment.—I am, etc.,

J. DOWNES.

Burnley, Lancs.

Vaccination against Measles

SIR,—I would like to say how much I welcome your leader on measles vaccination (September 28, p. 759) which asked us to consider carefully whether or not general vaccination would be of value in this country. It marks a step forward from a previous less critical leader (November 11, 1961, p. 1274) which stated, when considering the disease in England and Wales, that "a single and safe method of abolishing it would therefore be an immense boon," and it will be particularly welcome to such as myself working in public health, who might have found that our lack of enthusiasm for it would have put us in a difficult position either in carrying out the work or in advising local authorities on its value.

Leaving aside those schemes we already have, may we now hope for reconsideration of the desirability in general of extending our vaccination programmes. As your leader indicates, we may be playing with fire, and yet we tend to make our decisions on the basis of immediate benefit with insufficient consideration of long-term effects. Indiscriminate indulgence in vaccination is little more justifiable than the indiscriminate contamination of our environment by pesticides and the like. Least of all is it justifiable to advocate such procedures to avoid some inconvenience or for small (and nebulous) economic gain, and yet, to consider only one, there is no doubt that 'flu vaccine is in many instances being recommended on just these most dubious grounds.—I am, etc.,

J. H. E. BAINES.

Weeping Cross,
Stafford.

Drugs for Depression

SIR,—The panel discussion on "Drugs for Depression" (September 28, p. 799) raises several interesting points.

Dr. C. A. H. Watts suggests that depression is a complicated subject and says that "if we are to get it across to general practitioners it must be kept as simple as possible." With his first statement no one will disagree, but his aspersion on the general practitioner's ability to comprehend is a little suggestive of dog eating dog.

Dr. Watts is undoubtedly correct when he says that severe classical depressions are only a small proportion of the patients one sees in general practice; indeed only a very small proportion of the depressed patients one sees in general

practice manifest these symptoms. For instance, feelings of guilt are very rarely found in this practice.

This suggests that it would be useful to have a definition of the milder depressions which are so common in general practice. The typical depressed patient's leading symptom, the one which brings her to her doctor, is usually fatigue; this is a persistent and unreasonable fatigue which is not improved by sleep. There may be some delay in falling asleep, but sleep is in fact often described as being long and heavy, and the patient remarks that she is just as tired in the morning as when she went to bed—her sleep never refreshes her. She may say it takes her half the morning to get herself pulled together; she may say she has no energy and that she has to force herself to do her work. She may say she thinks she is anaemic or she may ask for a tonic. Only rarely does she admit to being depressed unless she is asked more or less directly in a question such as: "How are your spirits?" Occasionally this question will bring tears to the patient's eyes immediately; sometimes she will simply say that she is always depressed, that things "get her down" more than they should, that she frequently weeps about nothing at all, and that she is unreasonably irritable and difficult to live with. Occasionally she will complain of loss of appetite. Often she will say that she has everything to make her happy and yet she feels miserable.

This form of depression, which might be called "minor depression syndrome," is one of the commonest in general practice. Its constituent symptoms may be stated briefly as follows: (a) depressed mood (feeling of misery, or tears at interview, or tears reported); (b) retardation (morning tiredness, a constant lack of energy, or inability to concentrate); (c) irritability (lack of patience, or bad temper, or moodiness).

In its simplest terms the syndrome can be said to consist of depression, tiredness, and irritability, and its importance in the context of this letter is that it is this syndrome which responds so effectively to modern psychotropic drugs.

The effect of the doctor's personality on his treatment is mentioned in the discussion, and there seems to be agreement that it is of importance. In my view "personality" is becoming of much less importance with the advent of more specific treatment with a biochemical basis. What is surely of greater importance is to discourage this magic effect of personality because of the obvious danger of causing undesirable dependence on the physician.

I think general practitioners would agree that a very true picture of the worth of any treatment can be drawn by the family doctor dealing in his own accustomed manner with patients whom he is treating in their own environment.

This brings me to my final point, which is an appeal for the controlled use of the term "placebo": it is now used indiscriminately for the true placebo and for

dummy treatment. An example will make the difference plain. A patient says he is unduly tired and asks for a tonic; the doctor realizes that the cause is a domestic disturbance, but nevertheless he prescribes an inherently useless "tonic." The patient expects a bottle of medicine and he gets one: this is a "placebo" (placebo, I will please). On the other hand, a patient says he feels unduly tired and asks for a tonic; the doctor realizes the patient is anaemic and requires iron; if, despite this, he prescribes, say, lactose tablets, then he is prescribing a "dummy."

Nevertheless it was a most interesting discussion.—I am, etc.,

J. J. HOBBS.

Ashington, Northumberland.

Rabies in Tibet

SIR,—Following on your recent leading article on the subject of rabies it might be of interest to you and your readers to know how this disease is—or was—treated in Tibet.

I lived on the Tibetan border for eight years, but my husband lived and travelled in the hinterland of Tibet for three years, from 1947 to 1950. Rabies is fairly common in Tibet because of the large number of dogs, many of them pariahs, and wolves. When any Tibetan is bitten by a rabid dog or wolf every person who can be mobilized is called on to round up the animal, no matter how difficult this may be. If the animal is caught within a reasonable time it is killed, its brain and saliva are mixed together, and the concoction is given to the person or other animal bitten. It is claimed that this is invariably effective as a cure.

A similar claim is made for their treatment of smallpox. When someone is found to be infected, the fluid from the vesicle is taken and either mixed with snuff or mixed with milk. All the members of the community then either sniff or drink the mixture, according to choice, and again, apparently, it is completely effective if taken quickly.—I am, etc.,

MARGARET A. PATTERSON.

London S.W.17.

Steroids and Disseminated Sclerosis

SIR,—Your leading article (August 31, p. 513) refers to the benefit obtainable from the treatment of disseminated sclerosis with high-dosage long-term A.C.T.H. therapy. Its mode of action is still debatable and may not be entirely due to adrenocortical stimulation, as long-term steroid therapy has not been shown to benefit patients suffering from this disorder.¹

Further advances in the treatment of this condition may lie in the use of the newer drugs that have been shown to depress immunological mechanisms both in cases of renal transplantation² and auto-immune disease.³ In this latter instance, a patient with thrombocytopenia and auto-immune haemolytic anaemia