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Adolescent medicine

EDITOR,—Michael Malus highlights several areas of potential ill health among the teenage population in the United Kingdom.¹ His main premise is that improvements in teenage health depend on information and research findings that should be performed by a new form of secondary care specialist in adolescent medicine. He cites the success of the North American experience as being a good reason for promoting this new specialty elsewhere.

His review is based on mortality and morbidity statistics and the fact that they are at best unchanged and at worst have deteriorated over the past 10 or 20 years. This period has coincided with the emergence of the new specialty of adolescent medicine in North America. These data hardly support the concept of a successful introduction for the new specialty, and the one reference provided for a successful American programme describes teamwork rather than a specialty.

The medicine that Malus advocates is not holistic and does not seem to have considered the role of the family, education, or social services departments in the care of teenagers. Social needs may not always be the predominant factor of teenagers' care, but this group cannot be understood if isolated from their social context.

An adolescent medicine specialist with a significant service role would be faced with the difficulty of appropriate handover of care to other specialists. This is already the case with such illness as cystic fibrosis and renal disease in which the paediatrician may well care for the patient beyond the age of 16. However, more difficulties would ensue if the paediatrician were to hand over to the adolescent medicine specialist, who in turn would hand over to the adult physician. The general practitioner would probably be left trying to provide continuing care in the midst of poor communication with the secondary care providers.

American experience suggests that some teenagers may prefer some aspects of their health care to be provided away from their usual family or community clinics. It is unclear if this is the case in Britain. Research data from the Health Education Authority suggest that teenagers are uncomfortable in primary care consultations,² but this does not suggest that hospital doctors perform any better. Data from the United States and New Zealand suggest much criticism of health care professionals in the secondary sector,^{3,4} albeit in different specialties from that of Malus. Donovan has reported that a teenage health clinic carried out in his north London practice met with approval from the teenagers in the practice.⁵

Malus focuses on negative aspects of teenage care and assumes that drug use, teenage pregnancy, and use of alcohol and cigarettes is what teenagers would not do if they were merely better informed. The experience of health educators suggests that the solutions are not so simple. We know very little about teenagers' concepts of health and illness and the priorities they accord to health and lifestyle issues.

We agree with Malus that research into teenage health is an important area for investigation that should be encouraged. However, the creation of yet another specialty in the fragmenting secondary care sector will not necessarily help in the conduct of research which will inform "good practice" in

paediatrics, psychiatry, general medicine, accident and emergency medicine, and general practice.

L JACOBSON C WILKINSON
N CH STOTT P OWEN
R PILL

Department of General Practice,
University of Wales College of Medicine,
Cardiff CF3 7PN

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EDITOR,—Michael Malus's editorial arguing for a separate specialty of adolescent medicine focuses largely on the behavioural, psychological, and psychiatric aspects of adolescence.¹ These aspects of health care need often require skilled and sophisticated interventions if behavioural change is to occur. In the United Kingdom these are already offered by child and adolescent psychiatrists. The Health Advisory Services's report *Bridges Over Troubled Waters* in 1986 highlighted the need for further development of adolescent psychiatry.² Most of its recommendations have not been implemented and remain equally relevant in 1992.

Since the advent of the internal market in the NHS concerns have been expressed about psychiatric services for young people. The president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists has written to those chairing regional health authorities specifically about the continued need for psychiatric inpatient units for adolescents.³

Purchasing authorities need to be aware of the distinctive mental health needs of adolescents as this section of the population has few prominent or powerful advocates and pressure groups. They should seek to place contracts that encourage provider units specifically to address the needs of this neglected group. This will mean being clear about the skills possessed by physicians and those possessed by psychiatrists.

ANDREW CLARK
DAVID ROTHERY

Irwin Unit for Young People
(West Midlands Regional Adolescent Unit),
Hollymoor Hospital,
Birmingham B31 5EX

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EDITOR,—Michael Malus proposes that there should be a specialty of adolescent medicine in Britain.¹ The transition from childhood to adulthood has increasingly become the focus of interest among clinical, educational, and social science professionals. Four key interrelated objectives of transition were identified by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation²: a sense of identity and personal autonomy, taking full responsibility for one's own life; productive activity or employment with a view to self sufficiency (a goal perhaps to be modified in the present economic climate³); adult status in society and law, social interaction, and participation in the community; and adult relationships and roles within the family, establishing a partnership, and looking forward to parenthood.

Accomplishing these developmental tasks is seldom smooth; for young people with disabilities

"[the transition from school to adult life] is likely to be a period of particular stress."⁴ Yet these people have the same aspirations as their able bodied contemporaries, and most have a full life expectancy. We believe that specific transition services offer a way of helping these young people attain their full potential.

In Leeds our experience endorses a multi-disciplinary, multisectoral team approach focusing on the special needs of these young people. The work of our young adult team has recently been evaluated in a study funded by the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust (in preparation), and we are writing a short handbook as guidance for those planning to set up services.

Under the Disabled Persons (Services Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, responsibility for physically handicapped school leavers rests with the local authority. But the health authority has a major role in identification and assessment and in providing health care and aids for daily living, as well as fostering self esteem and growth towards a fulfilled adult life.

MANNE CHAMBERLAIN
SALLY GUTHRIE

Rheumatology and Rehabilitation Research Unit,
School of Medicine,
University of Leeds,
Leeds LS2 9NZ

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Domiciliary thrombolysis by general practitioners

EDITOR,—The clinical criteria for entry to the Grampian region early anistreplase trial¹ were similar to those of previous trials in which electrocardiographic confirmation of the diagnosis was not required,^{2,3} and the diagnostic criteria were the same as those in the Anglo-Scandinavian study of early thrombolysis.³ The diagnostic accuracy of general practitioners and hospital doctors in the Anglo-Scandinavian study may therefore be compared directly.

The percentages of patients with a final diagnosis of any myocardial infarction were 72% in hospital and 78% in general practice, while for definite and probable myocardial infarction the figures were 66% and 61% respectively. This indicates similar clinical prowess even though junior hospital doctors take these clinical decisions every day while general practitioners averaged only about one trial entry a year. We agree that some patients with unstable angina were probably included under "ischaemic heart disease" or "possible myocardial infarction," but the explanation that John E Sanderson gives for the lower proportion of Q wave infarcts in the "home" group⁴ is incorrect: hospital staff were required to cite "hospital injection" unless they could find an alternative diagnosis to suspected myocardial infarction; this happened on only three occasions.

In the trial thrombolytic treatment was given strictly according to an agreed protocol and was not given inappropriately; it is the purpose of clinical trials to show what is appropriate clinical practice. We wished to test the hypothesis that very early thrombolytic treatment might abort infarction, which would be likely only in patients who had not yet developed diagnostic abnormalities on electrocardiography. That hypothesis was not confirmed, and the trial should certainly not be seen as a recommendation to give thrombolytic