from antidepressants. Commonly, patients with moderate or severe depressive disorder suffer prominent low mood in the morning, with their mood lifting towards evening. Thus the observation that deliberate self poisoning peaks in the early evening is unlikely to be due primarily to depressive disorder. The patients studied are likely to vary in motive and psychopathology, but these were apparently not assessed.

The half lives of different antidepressants and their active metabolites vary widely, as do their absorption and elimination in different subjects. These factors make the prediction of the time of peak plasma concentrations difficult. In addition, there is little evidence that mood and suicidal behaviour are correlated with diurnal variations in serum antidepressant concentrations. Much more important are the detection and effective treatment of the depressive disorder if one is present. Recent studies in primary care have shown poor skills in detecting depressive disorder and in treating such disorder effectively—that is, giving sufficient dose of an antidepressant for sufficient time—and poor compliance.²⁻⁴

Finally, the extrapolation of the results of observational studies on deliberate self harm to different countries is problematic. A recent comparison of the characteristics of people who harmed themselves in Oxford and Utrecht showed significant differences in age, incidence of socioeconomic problems, and incidence of psychiatric and personality disorders.⁵ The implication is that the threshold for and nature of self harm may vary among nations, making conclusions regarding prevention drawn from observational studies specific to the population studied.

JONATHAN R PRICE

Senior house officer in rheumatology, rehabilitation, and metabolic medicine

Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre,
Oxford OX3 7LD

- 1 Manfredini R, Gallerani M, Caracciolo S, Tomelli A, Calò G, Fersini C. Circadian variation in attempted suicide by deliberate self poisoning. *BMJ* 1994;309:774-5. (24 September.)
- 2 Bridges K, Goldberg D. Somatic presentation of DSM-III psychiatric disorders in primary care. *J Psychosom Res* 1985; 29:563-9.
- 3 Scott AIF, Freeman CPL. Edinburgh primary care depression study: treatment outcome, patient satisfaction, and cost after 16 weeks. *BMJ* 1992;304:883-7.
- 4 Johnson D. Depression: treatment compliance in general practice. *Acta Psychiatr Scand* 1981;63(suppl 290):447-53.
- 5 Grootenhuys M, Hawton K, van Rooijen L, Fagg J. Attempted suicide in Oxford and Utrecht. *Br J Psychiatry* 1994;165:73-8.

Managing sharps injuries

EDITOR,—Ruth R White and Elisabeth J Ridgway show considerable variation in the management of sharps injuries both between and within hospital departments and emphasise the importance of clear and consistent advice and appropriate intervention and follow up.¹ Although they allude to the need to reduce the number of sharps injuries, they do not specifically comment on some of the enduring problems of preventing and managing them—namely, poor uptake of hepatitis B immunisation and failure to report sharps injury, particularly among doctors.

A survey of all doctors employed by South Glamorgan Health Authority between August 1990 and February 1991 indicated that only 27% of respondents were fully immunised against hepatitis B.² The main reason for non-immunisation was a low perception of risk; the main reasons for incomplete immunisation were forgetfulness and job movement.

A further survey of this cohort found that as few as 5% of needlestick injuries were reported.³ Doctors who were not fully immunised against hepatitis B were no more likely to report incidents than those who were fully immunised. The reasons for non-reporting included a low perception of risk

or of the importance of the incident, insufficient time, and unfamiliarity with reporting procedures.

Proper management of sharps injuries depends on good reporting. Without it prophylaxis after exposure, counselling, and follow up are likely to be inadequate. The requirement that health care workers involved in procedures that are prone to result in exposure must be able to show immunity against hepatitis B means that many more doctors are probably immunised than hitherto, but doctors' complacent attitudes to the health and safety hazards of sharps injuries are still a cause for concern. Doctors' perceptions of low risk patients have been shown to be inaccurate.⁴ Doctors clearly need to be better educated about the importance and desirability of prompt reporting of all sharps injuries.

M R EVANS

Consultant in communicable disease control
PHLS Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre,
South Glamorgan Health Authority,
Cardiff CF4 3QX

- 1 White RR, Ridgway EJ. Managing injuries from sharp instruments in health care workers in Mersey. *BMJ* 1994;309: 989-90. (15 October.)
- 2 Llewellyn LJ, Harvey I. Hepatitis B vaccination: how many doctors are fully covered? *J Public Health Med* 1994;16: 352-6.
- 3 Donnelly PD, Evans MR. Incidents involving exposure to blood. *BMJ* 1992;304:1507.
- 4 Gordin FM, Gilbert C, Hawt HP, Willoughby A. Prevalence of HBV and HIV in unselected hospital admissions: implications for mandatory testing and universal precautions. *J Infect Dis* 1990;161:14-7.

Matching inhalers and spacer devices

EDITOR,—Concern has been generated by the pharmaceutical industry about inhalation treatment and large volume spacer devices in advertisements in the *Pharmaceutical Journal*.^{1,2} General practitioners and pharmacists are being informed that generic bronchodilator metered dose inhalers should not be used with a large volume spacer since this could lead to decreased efficacy. We believe that clinicians and pharmacists should know that some metered dose inhalers may be more efficient than others in terms of depositing drugs in the lung airways and, therefore, that the same amount of drug will not necessarily enter the lungs when different metered dose inhalers are used with the same spacer system. In our opinion these differences are unlikely to be of significant clinical relevance with regard to bronchodilator treatment.

There are differences between the pulmonary depositions achieved by different inhalation devices, and this is particularly important with dry powder inhalers. There can be considerable differences between the pulmonary depositions achieved by different dry powder inhalers, metered dose inhalers, and a metered dose inhaler with a large volume spacer. It is, therefore, important for clinicians and pharmacists to be aware of this and that a change of steroid inhaler could lead to a clinically significant increase or decrease in pulmonary deposition and in clinical efficacy. Whenever an inhaled steroid device is changed close clinical monitoring is necessary so that treatment can be stepped up or down as appropriate. However, we do not believe this to be as important with inhalation devices containing bronchodilators.

GRAHAM K CROMPTON

President

KEITH PROWSE
Chairman

British Thoracic Society,
1 St Andrews Place,
London NW1 4LB

- 1 Advertisement. *Pharmaceutical Journal* 1994;252:between pages 876 and 877.
- 2 Advertisement. *Pharmaceutical Journal* 1994;253:between pages 8 and 9.

n of 1 trials

EDITOR,—I am not at all sure where you are trying to lead us. In the "editor's choice" in the issue of 22 October you say: "One sort of study that most doctors could undertake is an n of 1 trial in which treatments are allocated randomly and in double blind fashion to a single patient. . . . If you have a patient for whom you are not sure whether one drug will be better than another then maybe you have an ethical commitment to embark on such a trial."

I do not have any patients who take drugs and do not fall into the above category. The decisions that I make (salbutamol or ipratropium bromide? Azathioprine or cyclophosphamide? Bendrofluazide or co-amlofruse?) are invariably not made on a double blind basis but are based on some reasonable (to me) therapeutic hypothesis and partly on the results of trials that pertain to a relevant group of patients (but not necessarily to the patient in question); observations both clinical and investigative of the apparent effects in that particular patient; cost; and, not least, what the patient tells me of any apparent symptomatic effect, good or bad.

Suppose I select just one patient for an n of 1 trial out of the 12-16 whom I see in an outpatient clinic. Suppose all my colleagues do the same. We then go to the pharmacy and ask it to make up double blinded packs of the two drugs, as Lyn March and colleagues did for their comparison of paracetamol and diclofenac, which were "identically presented." This week I shall need nifedipine versus amlodipine, next week amoxycillin versus erythromycin. It is not, even remotely, practicable.

March and colleagues did not do a series of n of 1 trials with different pairs of drugs. They did a series of n of 1 trials in a defined group of patients with the same pair of drugs. In short, they did a standard double blind randomised trial in a group of patients in the standard way and then looked at individual responses within the group. Our pharmacy would respond on that basis, but what's new?

Could it be that editorially you have somewhat exaggerated the point?

K B SAUNDERS

Professor of medicine

Department of Medicine,
St George's Hospital Medical School,
London SW17 0RE

- 1 March L, Irwig L, Schwarz J, Simpson J, Chock C, Brooks P. n of 1 trials comparing a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug with paracetamol in osteoarthritis. *BMJ* 1994;309:1041-6. (22 October.)

Postnatal sexual health

EDITOR,—The author of the personal view who believed that she could not be the only woman to have felt "physically and mentally broken by the experience of childbirth and its aftermath"¹ strongly echoed findings from our survey of sex after childbirth undertaken for the National Childbirth Trust earlier this year (G Barrett and C Victor, British Sociological Association's medical sociology conference, York, 1994). Altogether 1010 women replied to a questionnaire placed in the winter edition of the trust's magazine (circulation roughly 10 000). They gave details of their background, most recent delivery, and subsequent sex life. The characteristics of respondents broadly reflected the profile of the membership of the National Childbirth Trust (91% were married, 76% were aged 30 or over), and, as would be expected of members of the trust, a high proportion (97%) breast fed. Rates of intrapartum procedures (caesarean section (12%), forceps and ventouse delivery (14%), and episiotomy (28%)) were similar to rates found in the wider population.³