and we owe it to them to ensure that they ultimately progress to a senior registrar appointment.

For this reason I would urge that *Achieving a Balance* is instituted as soon as possible and that target numbers for career registrars should be achieved within the shortest time possible. This will seriously curtail and may even prevent the entry of new trainees over the next few years, but this has to happen if the majority of those currently in training are to be given a chance of progressing to the senior registrar grade.

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Pitfalls in the glucose tolerance test

SIR,—I am grateful to Dr Hilary King and colleagues (30 January, p 357), representing the World Health Organisation and the United States National Institutes of Health, for their authoritative comments on issues raised in my leading article (28 November, p 1363).

On the topic of whether 75 g of anhydrous or monohydrous glucose should be used for the glucose tolerance test they say that most data have been obtained using 75 g of "pure" glucose and that this should be adhered to. In the survey I carried out over half of the 230 participating laboratories claimed to be administering the dose as the monohydrate. Most of the commercial preparations for glucose tolerance tests are packaged to give a dose of 75 g of the monohydrate, whether in the form of glucose powder or ready made solution. In the case of the glucose syrup preparation Lucozade the manufacturer recommends a volume of 235 or 353 ml as equivalent to 50 or 75 g respectively of glucose monohydrate.

There is, however, confusion in the published reports. Some workers have said that 235 ml of Lucozade is equivalent to 50 g of anhydrous glucose,^{1,2} while others have been less specific, saying it is equivalent to 50 g of "liquid glucose."^{3,4}

The term "pure glucose" used by Dr King and others is also ambiguous. To them it obviously means anhydrous glucose, but to others it can mean either form, as distinct from glucose syrup preparations, which also contain higher molecular weight carbohydrates that are digested to glucose. Furthermore, I think the World Health Organisation's first report on this topic in 1965 actually recommended using a dose of glucose monohydrate (then 50 g).

Clearly, the situation is confusing and while I have no very strong views on whether we should be using 75 g of anhydrous or monohydrous glucose, I do put in a plea for uniformity throughout the world and would ask the World Health Organisation to state its preference clearly and to publicise it as widely as possible so that all interested parties—clinical laboratories, clinicians, pharmacy departments, and specialist manufacturers—will be aware of it: they certainly are not at present.

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SIR,—The World Health Organisation recommends using a 75 g load for the oral glucose tolerance test. This is a compromise between the 50 g load widely used in Europe, which has been criticised for insufficient provocation, and the 100 g load used in the United States, which often causes nausea. Despite these recommendations there is still much variation in the type and quantity of glucose given as part of the test. This has been pointed out by Dr K Wiener (28 November, p 1363) and Dr H King and others (30 January, p 357).

The results of an oral glucose tolerance test are often used to define normality, impaired glucose tolerance, and diabetes mellitus. Small differences in blood glucose concentrations can have profound implications for patients. Although small variations in the quantity of glucose given do not produce significant variations in blood glucose levels, it is important to define precisely the protocol for the test.

Dr Weiner explains the problems in interpreting the term "75 g of glucose." We suspect that most laboratories would supply 75 g of glucose as the anhydrous compound or an equivalent quantity of the monohydrate. Pharmacy departments would refer to the *British Pharmacopoeia* and find that glucose BP was in fact glucose monohydrate. They would supply 75 g of glucose monohydrate (equivalent to 67.5 g of glucose anhydrate). If the *Système International d'Unités* were used for both prescription and supply these misunderstandings would be avoided. We agree with Dr King that the glucose used in the oral glucose tolerance test should be defined as 75 g of glucose anhydrate C₆H₁₂O₆ (or 82.5 g of glucose monohydrate C₆H₁₂O₆.H₂O). Future publications from national and international organisations must be precise about the degree of hydration of the glucose to be used.

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Paediatric oncology information pack

SIR,—Dr J A James and his colleagues (9 January, p 97) report on a valuable initiative to improve communication between a paediatric oncology unit and general practitioners by providing an information pack for general practitioners on the management of childhood cancer. In the same issue Dr Nick Black (p 82) comments on the potential gains to be had from partnership between health authorities and voluntary organisations. Information sharing is a good example of these benefits. Information provided by the voluntary agencies often distils the experiences of families and other carers in a form that can benefit those with responsibility for medical management of the child. Effective communication over the care of sick children and the support of their parents should also include other primary care workers and representatives of family carers.

Voluntary organisations have often taken the lead in providing information to health professionals about the needs of families with particular problems and to parents about rare conditions and available support. Information which user groups have helped to prepare can be particularly useful in drawing attention to the non-medical needs of parents, but volunteers and other carers also have considerable practical experience of the organisational barriers to providing sensitive health care to children. Their experience indicates that improved communication between agencies and more widely available

information about the management of serious conditions could reduce the difficulties experienced by parents before and immediately after diagnosis, while caring for a sick or handicapped child, and when facing bereavement.¹⁻³

Coordination would also be improved by the wider distribution of background information on the management of rare conditions. Those who could usefully benefit from the information include clinical medical officers, community nurses, social workers, head teachers, and voluntary groups. Most primary care teams do not yet have sufficiently established routine contacts with these other agencies to enable them to take responsibility for passing on general information. In particular, as the Bristol study showed, distributing information to general practitioners alone is likely to result in patchy dissemination to community nursing staff. Consultant community paediatricians might be best placed to provide overall coordination and to circulate relevant information.

Gaps in community provision—such as nursing support for sick children—might be more clearly identified if there were clearer channels of communication between hospital and primary care workers. The benefits of such consultation will, however, be attained only when communication is two way. Staff in specialist units could benefit from knowing what community resources are available, and the unit could be a useful route for introducing parents to local contacts. Parents who have experienced similar problems also have a great deal to offer and their views can be invaluable in ensuring that arrangements are sensitive to parents' needs.

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Shift system for a neonatal intensive care unit

SIR,—Having worked as a neonatal senior house officer for Dr Brian Speidel at Southmead Hospital I was interested to see his recent description of the "shift" rota (30 January, p 343). The objectives of introducing this rota were twofold: to improve care of the babies and to make life more tolerable for the senior house officers in a specialty with a heavy night time workload.

The system has a number of advantages for the operation of the unit. In particular, working continuously in special care baby units for a week allows the senior house officer to develop a more thorough knowledge of the problems and progress of each baby than is gained when covering only every fourth day, as previously occurred. This improves the continuity and, it is hoped, the standard of care.

There are still disadvantages, however, for the senior house officers concerned. The main problem is that although nominally on a 1 in 4 rota they effectively work 1 in 2. Long shifts fully occupy alternate weekends and although the paper points out that social activities must be curtailed during the week of night shifts, they are also severely restricted during the week of long days since the nominal finishing time of 2100 or 2300 is often overrun when problems occur in the special care baby unit or the delivery suite.

Dr Speidel correctly points out that the longest