

Letter from . . . Chicago

Clandestine clippings

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As every tribe of human endeavour develops a jargon of its own, it comes as no surprise that the prairies of Wall Street should be populated by a characteristic fauna. On a busy day one comes across optimistic bulls, always looking up to the sky because they expect the market to go up; pessimistic bears, whose sad faces point to the ground in anticipation of a crash; swift hares, for ever investing in a hurry; and slow tortoises, moving so cautiously that they end up being licked by inflation. There are also martial stockbrokers, who never buy shares but for ever "take positions," like fearless generals deploying their cavalry behind the impregnable Maginot Line. All this may be learnt in a slightly immoral way by carrying on an illicit affair with a financial newspaper.

A clandestine affair

My own liaison began almost a decade ago, as a commuter. In common with other important executives I had fallen into the health-preserving habit of buying a martini in a paper cup at the station and taking it on the train for the ride home. I would then blissfully sink into a comfortable chair, so that the debate about opening a medical journal was usually resolved in the negative. Instead, I would reach casually for one of the many fragments of the *Wall Street Journal* which the important businessmen had abandoned as they rushed home for a second martini. I enjoyed the succinct presentation and review of the news—clearly the way busy executives keep up with the affairs of the world; and I was pleased to read an editorial favouring classics over comics, though disappointed with the statement that reading the classics will not necessarily help in the course of an active life. For after all, what is history, or for that matter philosophy, but an endless story of bulls and bears and generals who with their pens or swords took the right or wrong position. I should also add that at first the affair remained clandestine, because my wife, an ardent supporter of newspapers, had always said one should only read what one pays for. But eventually, after we moved into the city, I formalised my break with commuting and martini drinking by taking out a regular subscription, though continuing the now legitimised affair by clipping articles on medical and related subjects.

This year's clippings began with an admonition from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that young lovers should beware of Valentine candy in heart-shaped boxes. The danger, we are told, is that the boxes are contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyl, a deadly killer of laboratory rodents that now stands ready to migrate into the delicious chocolate and poison the ardent lovers and their virtuous damsels. Those afflicted with an irrepressible sweet tooth should at least limit

themselves to chocolate wrapped in silver or gold foil; and they must certainly not eat the box (14 February). No less alarming was the "red sweats," a mysterious disease causing airline hostesses to break out with red spots and exude a worrisome purple fluid that looks like blood (but isn't). Women's makeup, chrome hydrosis, cleaning fluids, altitude changes, and dehydration were first suspected, but eventually it was found that the red paint on the emergency gear was rubbing off on the hostesses during safety demonstrations (10 March). Perhaps less remediable, though not at all mysterious, is the problem of violence in schools. We learn that each year more than 100 000 public school teachers are assaulted by students, parents, or intruders; and that the problem is due at least in part to a decade of misguided social and liberal legislation, so that punishment is now outmoded and discipline has become an anachronism (10 September). Controlling costs in hospitals, another clipping informs us, is equally difficult, because present systems of reimbursement provide the hospitals with wrong incentives, tending to increase costs rather than reducing them (8 September). In the same context the introduction of automated blood-testing has unleashed an epidemic of hyperparathyroidism; and with 35-86 000 new asymptomatic cases of hypercalcaemia being uncovered each year nobody knows whether it is better to cut or to wait (26 February).

From Washington comes a report of a successful "Gutline," a telephone-answering service conducted by anonymous gastroenterologists for patients having questions about their gas pains, constipation, diarrhoea, belching, or heartburn. Some 60% of inquirers are women; some 15% have spastic colon; a few have lactose intolerance; most are offered an explanation for their symptoms but some are advised to see their doctor for further investigations (15 September). For other doctors, however, MD means medical deduction, because they travel far afield to obtain the necessary credits for relicensure, taking refresher courses aboard ship in the tropics, skiing on the slopes at Aspen, or even sailing to Rio de Janeiro (19 June). But while these modern pilgrims may find their mornings cluttered up with discussions about computed tomography scanners, the manufacturers of these revolutionary diagnostic tools are having a difficult time. Already the original pioneers, British EMI Ltd, have had to sell their interest in scanners to General Electric; and the market has become so competitive that only large companies with considerable technological resources will survive, and the field may eventually be reduced to three or four manufacturers (6 May). Less dependent on complex technology is the psychiatric necropsy, a discovery of a professor of thanatology who "psychoanalyses" the deceased by means of interviews with survivors or by reviewing notes, letters, diaries, or medical records. In some instances such posthumous "psychological profiling" has turned the victim into the accused, who may have persecuted the murderer and driven him to violence in self-defence (23 July).

On the subject of malpractice, we find the insurance premiums paid by hospitals amount to \$1.2 billion and add about \$5 a day to every patient's bill. Although plaintiffs lose nine out of ten

cases coming to trial, the total number of suits is increasing by 10% a year; and awards of over \$1m may reward the successful attorney with a fine reputation, a handsome contingency fee (up to one-third of the award), and admission to an exclusive club limited to the select 95 who have hit the \$1m mark. About 1% of America's 500 000 lawyers specialise in medical malpractice; and for some who could not afford to become doctors this provides an opportunity to "practise medicine once removed" (19 February). The cases brought before the courts are often surgical but some are even metabolic, such as when a chloride deficient soybean artificial milk formula caused an outbreak of metabolic alkalosis in infants. Yet even safe artificial diets may be nutritionally deficient, at least according to those paediatricians irrevocably committed to the notion that "breast is best" (21 March). But for adults issues of diet are equally controversial, nor are the debates confined to the cool dispassionate precincts of scientific meetings. There was extensive coverage of the recent report of the National Academy of Science suggesting that healthy people need not reduce their intake of fat and cholesterol to prevent ischaemic heart disease. Several Congressmen worried that contradictory scientific advice was confusing the public; but those representing agricultural interests were generally pleased with the report (5, 27 June).

All these issues receive wide coverage in the press, even as the editors of medical journals are reassessing the late Dr Ingelfinger's rule not to publish articles already covered by the daily newspapers. Yet it is from the daily press that we learn how drug companies are developing a whole host of powerful new antibiotics (24 September); how the calcium antagonist verapamil will soon be marketed through the combined efforts of an American and a German firm (24 September); and how "researchers" have found that low-dose oestrogen-progesterone contraceptives are as effective as high-dose ones but safer (10 September). The FDA, meanwhile, warns pregnant women to eschew the pleasures of coffee and Coca-cola (5 September); refuses to release the promising new drug isoprinosine for patients with subacute sclerosing panencephalitis; delays the release of the artificial sweetener Aspartame (2 October); fabricates letters to frighten juveniles on the dangers of saccharin (5 September); recalls some brands of vaginal tampons and requires others to carry a label warning of the dangers of the toxic shock syndrome (26 September); is upset because farmers still fatten their cattle with stilboestrol (15 July); wants drug companies to conduct postmarketing drug surveys (23 January); will require patient information leaflets for 120m prescriptions a year at a cost of millions of dollars (11 September); and may yet kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, because already it takes ten years and costs \$50m to market a new drug (21 April); which suggests too high a price for safety in these days of cost-benefit analysis (11 June); especially if manufacturers can be held liable for adverse effects that could not have been foreseen 30 years earlier, such as vaginal cancer in the daughters of women who had taken stilboestrol while pregnant (21 April).

Medicine and money intertwined

Yet "medicine and money are becoming more intertwined than ever before," so the American Cancer Society recommends fewer screening tests at less frequent intervals (21 April); Medicare and the Massachusetts General Hospital decide against heart transplants (15 September); and heart surgeons conduct studies to prove that coronary bypass surgery pays for itself in terms of patient's income, taxes collected, and no disability payments (29 August). Those interested in the anti-hypertensive drug captopril may enjoy the fascinating story of its development (6 June), but they should also pay close attention to what is happening to the stock of the manufacturing company. Indeed, eyewitnesses describe how the latest hearing of the FDA panel was held in a small overheated room that might have put Suraja Dowlah to shame. The room was packed with stockmarket analysts, the discussion and vote were public, and

as soon as the result was known there was a general stampede towards the door as the brokers rushed to the telephones to tell their firms whether to buy, hold, or sell.

Other clippings also inform us that issues of cost-efficiency and paying an excessive price for safety (10 July) are equally germane with regard to the environment (19, 30 June), especially when industry is under pressure to compete and the country is being urged to reindustrialise (27 August), a goal that Democrats would try to achieve with considerably more governmental intervention than the Republicans (10 September). Yet even a Democratic mayor can successfully stand up to union demands, as shown by Chicago's Mayor Jane Byrne, for while the city did "hang on by its nails" (21 February) it has survived and remains reasonably solvent. Then we read that in the Western world jobs are increasingly being looked on as a form of property, this being in part the answer to Karl Marx's accusation that workers are alienated because they cannot identify with the means of production (4 March). But we also learn that inflation threatens mental health, leading to increased depression, suicide, child abuse, wife battering, homicide, and aggressive acts—especially among husbands who fly into attacks of uncontrolled rage as they go through the monthly bills (15 May). Furthermore, recessions are even more dangerous to health, causing more deaths from all illnesses, especially alcoholism, drugs, road accidents, but also increased infant mortality and cardiac deaths. Indeed, a 1% rise in unemployment is said to cause roughly 37 000 deaths (25 August).

Finally, we learn that the crocodiles in Zimbabwe are enjoying a comeback and are no longer an endangered species. They grow as much as 20 feet (6 m) long; weigh half a ton (508 kg); stay under water for two and a half hours; grow 45 sets of 66 teeth each in a lifetime; mate under water, where they are sweetly gentle in their passion; and have an enviable life span of 100 years, with sexual potency maintained right to the end (18 September). If let loose on Wall Street, one may conjecture, a smiling crocodile could cause worldwide financial confusion by gobbling up all the bulls and bears and hares and tortoises and even the brokers imprudent enough to take a position on the street on that unlucky day.

Should undescended testes be operated on at the age of 18 months or thereabouts?

Although there is still controversy about the optimum age for operating on undescended testes, because of the need to wait for a boy to grow up to the stage at which his fertility can be assessed, recent histological studies have indicated that irreversible progressive changes in the germinal epithelium are first seen at the age of 2 to 3 years. It is therefore advised that the operation should be performed some time in the third year^{1 2} but that if before that, at any time in infancy, an operation is being done for an inguinal hernia, the undescended testes should be dealt with at the same time. Some do operate on undescended testes (without hernia) as early as 18 months.

¹ Gellis SS, Kagan BM. *Current pediatric therapy*. Philadelphia: Saunders, 1978.

² Vaughan VC, McKay RJ, Behrman RE. *Nelson's textbook of pediatrics*. 11th ed. Philadelphia: Saunders, 1979.

What are the long-term effects of cyproterone (Androcur)?

Cyproterone is an antiandrogen with progestogenic and antigonadotrophic properties. If used alone in women menstrual irregularities are common, and it is usually combined with ethinyloestradiol. This combination acts as a contraceptive, but should pregnancy occur while the patient is taking cyproterone there is a risk of feminisation of a male fetus. Side effects occur early in treatment and usually disappear after the first few months, though painful breasts may persist for longer. No other late adverse effects have been reported. Large doses of cyproterone have produced liver abnormalities in animals, and the manufacturers recommend periodic checks of liver function. There is, however, no evidence that it is hepatotoxic in man.

Westerholm B. Sex hormones. In: Dukes MNG, ed. *Meyler's side effects of drugs*. 9th ed. Amsterdam: Excerpta Medica, 1980:689-90.