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Correspondence

GENERAL PRACTITIONERS AND CONTRACEPTION

Sir,

Dr J. J. Hobbs' important observations (September *Journal*) on the effect of vasectomy on the acceptability of the Pill will have a far reaching effect on health education, but his comments on the Health Education Council's advertisement suggest that its purpose has not been understood.

The intention was to provide a service to the public by offering *information* about every form of contraceptive practice available at the present time. There is, of course, a need for a comprehensive contraceptive service within the NHS which is available to all, but in the meantime the advertisement has opened the door to discussion of a matter which still tends to be avoided.

Emotional factors are amongst the reasons why couples are willing to rely on "less-than-perfect practices". The factual situation is revealed in the recent report of the Birth Control Campaign (1972)

which quotes an estimate of the Family Planning Association that of 4,350,000 women using contraceptives, only 1,800,000 are using the Pill, while the numbers where husbands use a condom is approximately the same—1,750,000.

Over 600 letters were received in this office as a result of the advertisement and these revealed many doubts and anxieties, as well as misunderstandings, about contraception which are not likely to be resolved merely by telling people that oral contraception and sterilisation are the only completely reliable methods.

Emotional barriers to the adoption of health practices are gradually overcome by educational techniques and these can be employed by health educators in person-to-person sessions in family planning clinics. One result of our advertisement has been to provide diagnostic clues to the nature of these emotional barriers.

We are impressed with the success of this advertisement and we intend to repeat it in the

near future. The replies from younger correspondents reinforce the opinions of health educators that an integrated curriculum for schools should include the subject of contraception.

A. J. DALZELL-WARD
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REFERENCE

Birth Control Campaign (1972). *A Birth Control Plan for Britain*. London.

QUALITY IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Sir,

The paranoid squeal when someone stands on a doctor's corns is deafening and unbecoming.

Maybe Mr Honigsbaum (*July Journal*) did make an overstatement but his article should serve to remind us that some of us are not very good: some of us who think we are good could be a great deal better, and that none of us are good all the time.

We have made a lot of progress since many of Mr Honigsbaum's references were originally penned but we have no room for complacency; no time to rest on laurels.

The paper was depressing and unfair but it nevertheless needed to be said.

ROBIN HULL

Hastings House,
Wellesbourne,
Warwick.

QUALITY IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Sir,

I write about the article by Mr Honigsbaum in the *July Journal*. Like many other people his article seems to me unbalanced, out-of-date, and amateurish; not really worthy to be regarded as serious criticism.

He makes very simple deductions from his statistics and is clearly able to relate in his own mind, for instance, the rise in the number of tests performed each year in laboratories as a sign of increasing excellence amongst certain doctors, and, by the same reasoning I suppose, the opposite in his mind would indicate a lower quality of care.

We have recently started doing our own haemoglobins and E.S.R.s in the surgery and there would be no doubt that this very common test, which could have previously shown on statistical figures given by the hospital laboratory, would indicate that we were practising a lower standard of medicine.

Many of his arguments seem to me to be very naive. He mentions a grey-wedge photometer as being an essential part of a general practitioner's equipment, which is so often lacking. By July of this year the grey-wedge photometer was out-of-date and anybody wishing to do their own haemoglobins would normally be advised to get a more

modern haemoglobinometer. Criticism is very necessary for us, but it is of little value when made at Honigsbaum's level.

C. H. MAYCOCK

55 High Street,
Crediton,
Devon, EX17 3JY.

REFERENCE

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DIETICIANS IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Sir,

I am studying, with the financial support of the Department of Health and Social Security, and the full approval of the British Dietetic Association, the use of dieticians on the community.

In order to obtain information concerning the current experience in general practice, I should be grateful if any reader who is a general practitioner and who employs a dietician in his practice would contact me at the Health Services Research Unit, Cornwallis Building, University of Kent and Canterbury.

K. SHERIDAN DAWES
Senior Research Fellow

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Kent.

Sir,

Dr M. J. Whitfield (*October Journal*) reports his findings in a study of the relationship between the year of patients' registration and morbidity in his practice. A number of conclusions are made in this publication which cannot be allowed to pass without further comment.

(1) The paper is presented in a haphazard manner with methodology, results, and part of the discussion all coming under the heading 'Method'.

(2) There is no indication of which system is used for disease classification, i.e., was it the International or the College of General Practitioner's Classification of Disease?

(3) Two groups of males and females matched by date of birth are compared to ascertain differences in consultation rates by year of registration. This cannot be a valid comparison as the groups are not matched by social class which is known to have a significant effect on consultation patterns.

(4) It is stated that "12 of the female patients who registered in 1970 consulted during the first week of registration; only two of the males who registered in 1970 consulted in the first week. This indicates the tendency of patients to register only when they are ill". There is no evidence presented to support this conclusion.

(5) The results in Table IV are not tabulated and no totals are given. If one calculates the