

## WHAT IS A PATIENT?

Sir,  
I have not found myself beset with the doubts expressed by your editorial on this subject (August *Journal*).

A patient is a person who comes to a doctor because of a condition from which he is suffering or is at risk of suffering which he thinks may require medical attention—and it doesn't matter at whose instigation he comes or if he merely requires reassurance.

For National Health Service purposes, however, a "patient" is defined in NHS regs. 1974 Schedule 1 Part 1 Par. 4 and is roughly speaking any person for whose treatment a doctor is responsible under the NHS. Thus a private patient is not a "patient" for NHS purposes—at least not of that doctor, whilst a person he may never see but who is registered on his list—is.

So provided we keep NHS rules and common sense apart (a good idea anyway) there should be no confusion.

Medical treatment is not defined in the regulations or anywhere else as far as I can make out. I have always worked on the following definition: Treatment is what a doctor does for a patient with a view to preventing, curing or alleviating any form of ill-health from which the patient is suffering or is at risk of suffering. It includes advice and physical treatment. For NHS purposes (and ethically for all patients) it also includes certification.

Ear piercing carried out at the patient's request without medical indication would not under this definition be treatment. Mutilation if you like—but not treatment. The subsequent care of such an operation would be treatment.

A. LEWIS

190 Sutherland Avenue,  
London, W9.

## REFERENCE

*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* (1974). Editorial, **24**, 513-514.

## CONFUSION OF COLOUR VISION

Sir,  
I was interested in your editorial *Confusion of colour—a significant social handicap* in the August *Journal* as I have recently reorganised the pattern of the Isle of Wight School Health Service and now test colour vision at 4½ before school entry. In fact the Ishihara does not depend entirely on the child's recognition of numerals as it is possible to ask the child to trace the coloured pathway. I find that 90 per cent of 4½-year olds are able to do this. Very few under the age of three are able to be sufficiently accurate with their finger pointing for a conclusive result to be obtained. The child may understand what is required but finds the procedure too difficult.

I agree with you that diagnosis should be made as early as possible but would like to comment

that colour vision has always been part of vision testing during school medical examinations. It is true that in many areas this was postponed until the age of 11 on the grounds that children did not know their numbers before this.

It is unfortunate that so few colleagues in general practice or in hospital are apparently aware of the content of the school medical examination.

M. V. BURRAGE  
*Area Specialist for Child Health*

Isle of Wight Area Health Authority,  
Community Services Division,  
County Hall,  
Newport, Isle of Wight,  
PO30 1UD.

## REFERENCE

*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* (1974). Editorial, **24**, 514.

Sir,

May I make two points? Firstly many, if not all, school health services carry out a test of colour vision on male pupils. Certainly this is done here in Buckinghamshire and a space exists on the computer-based school health record for recording the result of the test.

Secondly, it would appear that the Ishihara test is over sensitive. In this county there have been at least two firemen who have failed the Ishihara test but subsequently been passed when referred to a local Royal Air Force unit for testing with the slit lamp.

D. P. B. MILES  
*Specialist in Community Medicine*

Health Department,  
Old County Offices,  
Walton Street,  
Aylesbury, Bucks.  
HP20 1XB.

## REFERENCE

*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* (1974). Editorial, **24**, 514.

THE FUTURE GENERAL PRACTITIONER—  
LEARNING AND TEACHING

Sir,  
This book goes wrong on page one and it never fully recovers. Its job definition for the general practitioner "His diagnoses will be composed in physical, psychological and social terms," is unrealistic and over-ambitious. It is difficult enough in all conscience, always to make a diagnosis in physical terms even when supported by scientifically based information. 'Diagnosis' in psychological and social terms should properly be called 'assessment', as indeed it is in the section on human development.

The most serious failure of the book is in its handling of psychological medicine.

Under 'Mental Disorders' it refers to the