

London or Birmingham and are not within local call distance of a dataplex link incur considerable telephone costs when making trunk calls to gain Prestel access.

It is unfortunate that British Telecom's pricing policy discriminates against rural areas. Communications are particularly important for general practitioners working in these areas; it seems a pity that they will be discouraged from using this useful medium.

PETER SAUL

22 Penyceae Avenue
Gobowen
Shropshire
SV10 7UD.

Withdrawal from Benzodiazepines

Sir,

I have started a support through withdrawal scheme for people coming off benzodiazepines. The enormous amount of suffering I see makes me wonder how much information on the toxic effects of these drugs, and illness caused by their withdrawal, reaches the doctors. The pharmacological manuals grossly understate the dangers of tolerance, dependence and withdrawal that have been demonstrated so

clearly after the use of these drugs. This is not only after long-term use at high dosage, but also after very short-term use (two weeks), on a normal therapeutic dose.

We must look urgently for the most effective treatment, since a quarter of benzodiazepine users will become severely physically dependent. Widespread dependence, as much as overprescribing, must be the reason for the enormous use of these drugs.

The withdrawal syndrome has many unique features and needs to be treated as a new disease. In acute withdrawal, psychosis, convulsions and suicides are a great deal more common than the literature would suggest. The physical symptoms, many of which are not typical of anxiety, are the worst aspect of the illness. Some of the symptoms are belated and are not associated with the drugs by patient or doctor. Rebound insomnia is a persistent symptom. Unfortunately, and so often, doctors prescribe another benzodiazepine for night sedation when the patient complains of this.

Psychological dependence is less of a problem. Many users report craving for the drugs, but at the same time feel revolted by them, and angry that they have to take them to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Thousands of people could not

possibly invent the bizarre symptoms caused by the therapeutic use of benzodiazepines and reactions to their withdrawal. Many users have to cope, not only with a frightening range of symptoms, but also with the disbelief and hostility of their doctors and families. It is not uncommon for patients to be 'struck off' if they continue to complain about withdrawal symptoms. Even when doctors are concerned and understanding about the problem, they often have little knowledge of withdrawal procedure, and even less about treatment. The drugs newsletter on benzodiazepines issued in this region will help them. Is anything being done elsewhere?

Banning benzodiazepines would be unrealistic; there is nothing to replace them. But I would urge doctors to seek more information about them, and to listen to what their patients are saying. Release and self-help groups all over the country have done wonderful work, but why should people need to form groups for an urgent medical problem? This is drug-induced disease, not drug abuse.

SHIRLEY TRICKETT
Nurse

160 Tosson Terrace
Heaton
Newcastle upon Tyne NE6 5EA.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

British Psychological Society

Dr C. P. Elliott-Binns, general practitioner, will speak on 'Back to square one: the Hippocratic approach' at an open meeting of the British Psychological Society Section of Medical Psychology and Psychotherapy.

The meeting will be held on Wednesday 28 September at 20.00 in room 97, Tuke Building, Bedford College, Regents Park, London NW1.

Paediatric Symposium: Child Health Surveillance

This symposium will be held at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh on Wednesday 16 November 1983. The speakers will include people working in general practice, paediatrics and community medicine. Further details can be obtained from the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, 9 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE. (Tel: Edinburgh (031-225) 7324).

CIS/MARU Symposium

The next symposium on premises will take place at College Headquarters on 2 November 1983. The two previous seminars were aimed at architects but the next seminar has been organized for general practitioners. Anyone interested in attending should contact Annie Murray, Central Information Services, The Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU. (Tel: 01-581 3232).

10th British Congress on the History of Medicine

The History of Medicine Society of Wales will be hosts for the Congress of the British Society for the History of Medicine on 'Child Care through the Centuries' at the picturesque Clyne Castle, Swansea between 6 and 8 April 1984.

Speakers have been invited from

many fields to cover a variety of subjects from the earliest textbooks on children's diseases to the latest ideas on the care of the newborn. The programme provides for discussions on the social, scientific and clinical aspects of the care of the infant and young child.

Those interested in attending the conference should write to Dr John Cule, Abereinion, Capel Dewi, Llandysul, Dyfed SA44 4PP, and details will be sent to them in December 1983.

How valuable is Your Time?

A symposium on Organization in General Practice is being held on Saturday 22 October 1983 at Whipps Cross Hospital, London. The symposium is approved under Section 63 and further details can be obtained from The Secretary, Medical Education Centre, Whipps Cross Hospital, London E11 1NR.