

the files. I personally deal with the deaths, and check through each envelope to make certain that all the contents relate to the patient. I then notify each service that has been involved with the patient and tick the relevant code mark. If the patient did not die in hospital but has hospital records, we send a standard letter (photocopied in batches) to the hospital records department, giving all the necessary details about the patient, especially if there has been a referral where an appointment might still be outstanding.

Just inside the reception area we have a noticeboard giving details of all admissions, discharges and deaths, and so this is seen each day by our district nurses on their morning visit. The social services and after care services are informed by telephone to discontinue any services and are given details of any equipment which may have been issued along with a telephone number of a relative who may be contacted after a few days, should the patient have lived alone. The local office of ALAC is notified by phone if a wheelchair has to be collected and again a telephone number is given where possible. Finally, the cause of death is recorded on the age-sex card. This is then given to the health visitor to remember to make a bereavement visit to relatives in about two to three weeks time. Occasionally a patient may die within a short time of hospital discharge or being seen at the hospital. In these cases a telephone call is made to the consultant's secretary with the standard letter still going to the records department.

This has been my routine for the past 10 years or so, and it is satisfying when contacting any of the services to hear such comments as 'I wish other surgeries notified us as you do. Perhaps we would not lose so much equipment if they did'. Even our family practitioner committee was interested enough to ring and enquire as to what the coding meant.

On paper this may look to be a lot of work, but I can assure everyone that once the system is running it only takes a short time to operate. I am certain that if all practices thought more about putting the records straight, and carried out a similar system to Dr Balfour's and my own, then there would be many hospital appointments available to other patients, and more equipment available in the community for reissue.

One other record that I keep may be of interest. On the back of the age-sex card I keep a summary of all cancer patients with details of their treatment. This saves me having to request the family practitioner committee to return the records should we be asked for a report from the Cancer Register.

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Prevalence of disability in an Oxfordshire practice

Sir,
We regret that our previous criticisms (December *Journal*, pp.586-587) of Dr Tulloch's paper on the prevalence of disability in an Oxfordshire practice (August *Journal*, pp.368-370) have not been acceptable to him. The question of defining severity of disability is, however, central to its interpretation, and unless a validated measure is used, for example the Nottingham Health Profile¹ or the McMaster Health Questionnaire (Chambers LW, Segovia J. Indexes of health. Meeting, London Ontario), then assessment of Dr Tulloch's findings is limited to the context of his practice. We agree that this in itself is valuable and interesting, reflected in the enjoyable presentation of his findings. If however other general practitioners are to compare Dr Tulloch's work with their own experience, a repeatable measure of disability would have been preferable.

One doctor's interpretation of loss of independence might be lack of functional capability while another's might be lack of motivation or support.

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Place of birth and perinatal mortality

Sir,
May I be granted the opportunity to clear up the misunderstandings which Dr Madeley, Professor Symonds and Dr Watney express in their letters (November *Journal*, pp.536-537) and which are apparently causing some doctors to block discussion of policy on home delivery at health authority meetings.

We all know that certain maternal characteristics and events in pregnancy and early labour are associated with increased risk of perinatal mortality. Obstetricians assume that their system of intranatal interventions will make this risk less than it would be with the low-intervention care practised by midwives and non-specialist doctors. The booking and transfer policies are based on this hypothesis.

To test whether the hypothesis is supported by results, simple logic requires that the results compared should be those of the actual and not the intended treat-

ment by the two systems, after as complete allowance as possible has been made for differences in the pre-delivery risk status of the births concerned. The best instrument so far devised for assessing pre-delivery risk is the obstetricians' own labour prediction score which incorporates most of the factors which influence the doctor's booking and transfer decisions, reflecting their relative risk. The perinatal mortality of births with the same degree of predicted risk but having different systems of intranatal care, can properly be compared and it was found in the 1970 survey of British births to be far higher under obstetric management. Since this impartial finding is so unpleasant to received opinion, fault must be found in the method of analysis.

A score based on antenatal factors is criticized as being a poor predictor of outcome — of course it is. In the labour prediction score more weight is given to adverse factors occurring near delivery than to those known earlier, though the former are more likely to affect mothers with high risk characteristics. However, most of the risk occurs during birth itself and though this too is highest where the labour prediction score is highest, much of it is independent of the predicting factors. The crucial need is to establish whether the intranatal risks are higher under one system of care than under another and the analysed results, when antenatal risks are equal, show unequivocally that intranatal risks are higher under obstetric management.

The second criticism is that the labour prediction score does not make sufficient allowance for pre-delivery risk because it does not include all the possible predicting factors which have, or have not yet, been identified. All the excluded factors which have been identified and measured, such as height and smoking, are known to be interdependent with the included factors. The point of controlling for single factors in the article was precisely to show that allowing for the combined factors explained little more of the hospitals' excess mortality than did allowing for single factors, because they are largely interdependent. Thus allowing for additional interdependent factors would explain very little more. To account for the large unexplained excess the excluded factors would have to be totally independent of the included factors. No such factors have yet been identified and their effect measured. If there are potent but unidentified factors, no amount of 'clinical acumen' could produce an excess of hospital births at high risk on account of them.

This criticism, like that relating to intra-uterine deaths, was clearly dealt with (August *Journal*, p.392). Likewise, the hospitals' excess of low weight births was acknowledged (p.391) and the limited contribution this made to explaining the

hospitals' excess mortality was shown (Table 1, p.391). To dispose further of Dr Watney's thought about premature births, it is virtually certain that the mortality rate was much higher in hospital at every specific birthweight, low and high.¹ Supporting evidence for this probability was found in New Zealand in 1978-81, where mortality was significantly higher at all weights over 1500 g in the specialist hospitals.²

The other criticisms can be more briefly answered. I apologize that the reference index was omitted from the paragraph dealing with the correlation of trends in hospitalization and mortality rates (p.393). The detailed data can be found in references 11 and 8 (p.394). Dr Madeley and Professor Symonds can be reassured that the technique of trend analysis is valid³ and leads to valid inferences which the data as quoted by them do not. The Dutch study referred to was a comparison of outcome between matched groups.⁴ It is irrelevant that the proportion of births in hospital in Holland is increasing, a trend which, as in Britain, is not justified by their results. Sweden's low perinatal mortality reflects the high standard of health of the Swedish population, confirmed by other indicators. The Nottingham finding of mothers' equal satisfaction with hospital and home care is not confirmed by other studies^{5,6} and may not be independent of the setting in which the research was conducted. The example of standardization in Appendix 1 (p.393) illustrates an orthodox statistical technique appropriately applied; the 'assumptions' required of Dr Watney are no more than the rules of multiplication and division.

The fact is that the criticisms made of this article, of its data, its analysis or its reasoning, cannot be sustained. Its inferences, therefore, are not refuted. If health authorities continue to disregard them and fail to modify their policy accordingly, it will be clear that the maternity service is organized in the interest of the most influential of those who provide it and not of those who have to use it.

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Out-of-hours calls revisited

Sir,

The general conclusions from the study by R.D. Walker (September *Journal*, pp.427-428) were that fewer than expected night calls were made to children by general practitioners. Of the calls made, the majority were to children who were suffering from infections (61%) and the majority were under five years of age (68.7%). Fewer than 5% of children were admitted to hospital after the general practitioner referral.

As part of a study evaluating the work of a night duty health visitor service in North London¹ analysis was made of the reasons for contacting the service. Sixty-five per cent of parents contacted the health visitor because they were not sure if the problem was serious enough to contact the general practitioner. Several said their general practitioner was not available and others said that they did not want a deputizing service. The main problems were crying (19%), vomiting (15%) and diarrhoea (14%). If the health visitor service had not been available 32% would have used a deputizing service, 25.5% would have adopted a 'wait and see' position, 12% would have used casualty, 17.5% would have contacted relatives and friends, 10% would have used the midwifery service, and others would have contacted the police, neighbours or a chemist. As can be seen, several would have used casualty. Indeed a survey of casualty attendances by children under five years of age at a north-east London hospital during the same three-month study period of the night duty health visitor service² identified that 143 children (9% of the total number of attendances) were seen out of usual working hours with minor disorders, the same type of minor infections that were seen by both the night-time health visitor and the general practitioners in Dr Walker's study.

A study by Jackson³ looking at attendances of children at an east London paediatric hospital found that parents perceived the hospital as offering faster attention and doctors who were better trained and that the unavailability of general practitioners led to the use of casualty by non-urgent cases. Other studies⁴⁻⁸ have supported the view that accident and emergency departments are

inappropriately used and deal with paediatric problems which are well within the range of primary care.

In a study by Tulloch⁹ of calls to a general practice from 18.00 hours onwards on weekdays, he suggested that a nurse could have handled 46% of the calls alone. Cartwright's study of doctors and patients¹⁰ showed that general practitioners often found their work 'trivial' and 'tedious'. In her study 'trivial' work included such problems as colds, constipation, coughs, teething and minor sickness. While Walker's study indicated that a lower than expected number of parents contacted the general practitioner at night for their child's problems, the reason may not be that the problems do not exist in greater number, but that the parents may choose alternative sources of help or may delay seeking help because of not wishing to bother the doctor. Alternative sources of help may include the inappropriate use of the casualty department.

These studies indicate the need for general practitioners and their trainees to explore when their patients may be using alternative and possibly inappropriate forms of care, and if they are doing this — why?

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