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Note to authors of letters: Please note that all letters submitted for publication should be typed with *double spacing.* Failure to comply with this may lead to delay in publication.

General practitioners and alternative medicine

Sir,
In response to Drs Skrabanek and McCormick's letter (May *Journal,* p.224) we would like to correct a number of their comments on our study of general practitioners and alternative medicine (February *Journal,* p.52). It was not our purpose to ascertain what is or is not alternative medicine but rather to document what doctors themselves considered as alternative medicine. Although the BMA report[1] considered manipulation as part of orthodox medicine, it is interesting to note that in our study many doctors considered it as an alternative therapy. In a recent report[2] a working group of the MRC Epidemiology and Medical Care Unit and the British Chiropractic Association considered chiropractic treatment to be an alternative therapy. The term 'alternative medicine' is obviously not as clear cut as Drs Skrabanek and McCormick believe. Therefore, we do not consider it 'unfortunate' that the specific therapies in our study were identified by the general practitioners themselves.

Of our sample of 222 doctors, 35 (16%) stated that they practised one or more forms of alternative therapy, including homoeopathy, acupuncture, food allergy, manipulation and yoga. A further 93 doctors (42%) wanted training in alternative medicine. Why such a large proportion of doctors who wanted training had not taken it up will form part of a planned national study. Adequate and recognized training in alternative therapies should be provided for doctors especially in view of the fact that some were practising alternative therapies, such as acupuncture, without training.

We welcome constructive criticism but a comment such as what makes a doctor dangerous is 'his inadequate training in the processes of rational thought' is not only insulting but casts a slur on the integrity of those doctors whose primary concern is the well-being of their patients.

There have been few studies of alternative therapies in comparison with the number on orthodox medicine. Although many of the trials show contradictory results, there exist clear-cut reports of the effectiveness of alternative therapies. We are well aware that the rationale of one system of thought is measured against another. What common ground do these trials measure? In a study of six patients diagnosed as having peptic ulcer by Western medicine, each was given a different diagnosis according to Chinese medicine and their subsequent treatment was also individual.[3] Was it the treatment or the patient that was being tested? Part of the difficulty with alternative therapies is that their models for the causation of disease and methods for achieving health are very different from those of Western medicine. Nevertheless, randomized controlled trials are possible.[4-6]

The results that Drs Skrabanek and McCormick chose to ignore and which we think are important are: first, that 59% of doctors had referred patients to alternative practitioners and secondly, that 95% had discussed alternative medicine with their patients. Obviously some guidelines should be provided for doctors. We believe that not only the interest of general practitioners but also, more importantly, the public's need and demand are sufficient reasons to provide training for those doctors who want it.

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The dying child at home

Sir,
We were interested to read Dr Burne's editorial (July *Journal,* p.291) and we support the first three 'conditions which must be met before successful terminal care at home is possible'. It is often necessary to educate and support the parents (or carer) so that not only do they have the ability but also the confidence to care for their child.

We work in a paediatric oncology unit and once a diagnosis of malignancy has been made an information pack is sent to the patient's general practitioner informing him of the diagnosis and telling him about the unit, about chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and their potential side effects. When it has been decided that no further curative treatment is possible and the relatives wish to care for their child at home we contact the general practitioner by telephone to inform him of the decision, meet him and members of his practice within a few days, and discuss our joint management of the child at home. A 'terminal care team' is nominated consisting of our community liaison nurse and one of two clinical assistants with input from the consultant paediatric oncologist. Daily contact is made with the family, either by early morning telephone call or visit and the community liaison nurse and general practitioner visit the home once or twice a week or daily as appropriate.

Responsibility for symptom control usually remains in the hands of the hospital team but the input from the

primary care team varies and we try to fit in with what they feel they can do. Experience has been gained in drug dosage in children and knowledge of the value of, for example, palliative radiotherapy as a better means of pain relief than opiates in certain specific conditions. Our community nurse liaises with the primary health care team in caring for the family, including sharing visits during terminal care and bereavement. She also advises on pain and symptom control aids.

In the field of paediatric oncology we would argue that more than 'basic nursing care and love' is required. Knowledge of the likely course of these rare diseases in their terminal stages enables anticipation of symptoms and prevention or early relief, thus gaining the confidence of the parents.

It is our experience of working with the primary care team in this situation that a good working relationship is built up between hospital and general practice with trust on both sides, to the benefit of family and patient. The families of children dying of malignant disease do need specialist expertise in their management but this can be achieved as described above with the general practitioner playing a central part in the management and bereavement that follows.

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Variation in general practitioners' referral rates to consultants

Sir,

Drs Wilkin and Smith (August *Journal*, p.350) have demonstrated elegantly that there is a huge variability in referral behaviour by general practitioners and that this is not associated with any characteristics of the doctors or their patients. This applies to almost every clinical activity in general practice which has been measured and is associated with the consistency of any pattern of activity by one general practitioner over time and with the lack of association between any of the measured activities themselves.

We believe that the conclusions drawn by Wilkin and Smith are wrong. Research workers may indeed require more sophisticated information to explore variation among doctors and we welcome the initiatives of Dowie and others. Practising general practitioners are, however, not so concerned with doctor variation as they are with rationalizing their own performance. For this they need simple information about their own activities and this provides the rationale of the prescribing reports from the Prescription Pricing Authority. Such information is not generated from the routine collection of data but is based on a sample. We agree with Wilkin and Smith that the continuous collection of referral data is unnecessary, except for certain research purposes, but the implication that no referral data should be collected is highly damaging to present attempts to increase quality of care. We have argued[1] that standards in general practice evolve first from knowledge of performance, secondly from discussing performance with peers, thirdly from the identification of hypotheses capable of being tested and finally from the results of such tests. The hallmark of quality is a willingness to embark on this road but we emphasize the starting point. Once standards are defined then we may determine if and how behaviour should be modified in a 'desirable' direction. Only by providing information for general practitioners working in the field will we identify the hypotheses worthy of test. Information from studies on variation among doctors will contribute to the debate but by itself can never lead to the identification of standards.

We also disagree with the conclusions about information for health authorities. Health authorities (districts and regions) need to know what is going on. It is not their function to influence performance but to provide information and to meet patient need which can be equated with doctor demand on behalf of patients with problems.

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Reference

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Table 1. Annual call and visit rates for 1985.

	All calls		Night calls	
Management	Number (%)	Call rate per 1000 patients per year	Number (%)	Call rate per 1000 patients per year
Telephone advice	203 (*49*)	84	14 (*29*)	6
Home visit	208 (*51*)	86	34 (*71*)	14
Total	411 (*100*)	170	48 (*100*)	20

Telephone advice in managing out-of-hours calls

Sir,

I was interested to read the paper by Dr Marsh and colleagues (July *Journal*, p.301). I wholeheartedly agree with them that the work that a general practitioner does 'on duty at home' (being available for telephone advice to patients and visiting them in their homes) is work that receives little attention in medical literature. It is often the most stressful and irksome part of the doctor's workload.

I have kept a detailed telephone log for several years, and recently looked at the results for 1985. I work in an urban teaching practice of seven partners looking after 14 500 patients. We do not use a deputizing service; each partner is on call for the whole practice in a rota. Weekdays on call at home are from 18.30 to 08.00 hours, weekends from 11.00 hours Saturday to 08.00 hours on Monday. During 1985 I was on duty at home for a total of 990 hours, approximately one sixth of the practice on-call time. I have used this figure to calculate the annual call and visit rates of our practice in a similar way to Dr Marsh and colleagues (Table 1).

In my series no caller was refused a visit but I was able to manage 49% of callers with telephone advice. My figures are in broad agreement with those of Dr Marsh and colleagues, although at weekends more visits were made, and less managed with advice alone. The contrast with deputizing services who often visit all callers is again apparent.

One of the costs of such a system is disturbed sleep for the partners. When on duty my sleep between 23.00 and 07.00 hours was disturbed on 45% of weekday nights by calls, and on 28% of weekday nights by visits. However, 95% of weekend nights on duty were disturbed by calls and 74% by visits and this helps to explain why weekends on duty feel more stressful than weekday nights. I trust that this subject may be opened up to informed research and debate by Dr Marsh's helpful paper.

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