increased incidence of pre-term delivery, fetal distress and of stillbirth.[2,3]

A mother will often relate her symptoms to the first professional carer with whom she is in contact, and, if they are played down, will not mention them again. It would be good practice for all professionals to ask directly. The condition may, however, be clinically obvious when the mother attends her antenatal visit with visible scratch marks on her legs.

As a consultant obstetrician, I have personally known five mothers whose obstetrician/midwife/general practitioner had been unaware of the potential hazard of this condition and these mothers had six stillbirths between them. Four have had a subsequent pregnancy in which they again developed obstetric cholestasis, but delivery prior to 38 weeks gestation achieved a live child. Another mother in whom cholestasis was diagnosed had a sister with similar symptomatology who had suffered two 'unexplained' stillbirths. A mother with proven obstetric cholestasis must be regarded as having a high risk pregnancy and thus additional monitoring must be instituted and the pregnancy ended by 38 weeks gestation.

Various drug treatments have been tried to treat obstetric cholestasis and the present drug of choice would appear to be ursodeoxycholic acid given orally, up to 750 mg per day throughout pregnancy. This drug stops the puritis and reduces serum levels of bile acids and liver enzymes.[4] Loss of control of the symptoms would be an indication to deliver the baby early. Ursodeoxycholic acid is thought to act by replacing more cytotoxic bile salts (possibly linoleic acid) in the bile acid pool. Unfortunately, it is not licensed for use in pregnancy and therefore can only be used on a named patient basis with her understanding and consent. At present it would be difficult to be certain that it definitely protects the fetus from unexpected probable biochemical death.

A more widespread understanding of the potential risk of obstetric cholestasis is of even greater importance as obstetric/midwifery practice changes with the implementation of the Cumberledge report.[5] This means that mothers who are judged to be 'low risk' will not necessarily have any obstetricians involved in their antenatal care and all deviations from normal will be expected to be detected in the primary care setting.

JUDITH B WEAVER

Birmingham Maternity Hospital
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TG

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General practice–psychiatry liaison by audioconference

Sir,
With the National Health Service reforms and the development of community oriented psychiatric services, improved communication between general practitioners and specialists is of paramount importance.[1] Audioconferencing provides a new method of communicating. The procedure involves a moderator, present in one location and several other participants located in different places, all linked together by telephone.

In February 1994, a small study was carried out to evaluate an audioconference between a psychiatrist and four local general practitioners. Two of the general practitioners were men and two women. Two had no previous experience of audioconferencing and two had minimal experience. The psychiatrist (a man) had no previous experience of audioconferencing.

A detailed agenda was sent to each participant one week before the meeting. The topic chosen for discussion was community psychiatry and the planned duration of the conference was 55 minutes. For the audioconference the psychiatrist and two hospital representatives were based in a private hospital facility. The general practitioners were in their surgeries. The technical equipment needed was a voicepoint, provided by a communications company. A voicepoint is like a hands-free telephone set and one speaks at it from a distance of about three feet. It is voice-activated which means that only one person can speak at a time. To speak, one has to interject after the previous speaker has finished or during a pause. The hospital-based participants used the voicepoint and the general practitioners used their standard telephones.

The conference began at 12.30 hours when the psychiatrist contacted the telephone operator and the operator then contacted the general practitioners. The psychiatrist invited each general practitioner to speak in turn. An interactive discussion followed.

Each general practitioner was interviewed by a hospital representative, using a semi-structured interview devised by the psychiatrist, within one week of the conference. The method of audioconferencing was generally acceptable to the general practitioners. The main advantages were considered to be networking with colleagues, convenience, reduced travel and savings including time and money, but these were not quantified. The problems identified were technological difficulties including staccato speech and poor sound quality. All the general practitioners felt extra concentration was required owing to the lack of non-verbal cues and unfamiliarity with the technology. Three general practitioners indicated a preference for an additional visual component (that is, seeing a face).

Two general practitioners were satisfied with the timing of the conference and two dissatisfied. Evenings were chosen as the most convenient time by two general practitioners, lunchtime by one and before afternoon surgery by one. The surgery was seen as the most convenient place to participate in a conference by all the general practitioners.

Three general practitioners recommended improved sound and visual aids, and one general practitioner recommended having a microphone or hands-free telephone rather than a hand-held telephone.

Future uses for audioconferencing were suggested: giving general practitioners who do not attend meetings the opportunity to participate in an interactive discussion from their surgeries or homes; enlisting prominent distant speakers; holding seminars with postgraduate education accreditation approval so that doctors living in remote areas would not be disadvantaged regarding their continuing medical education; and running section 117 meetings (section 117 refers to the statutory duty of trusts/NHS hospitals to provide aftercare for patients detained in hospital under sections 3, 37, 41, 47 and 48 of the mental health act 1983).

When asked if they would participate in further meetings, one general practitioner replied no, one probably and two yes. Further evaluation of audioconferencing is warranted.

JOHN D SHEEHAN
JAMES P WATSON

UMDS
Guy's Hospital, London SE1 9RT

GED DALY
JUDITH BONNER

Hayes Grove Priory Hospital, Kent

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Emergency contraception

Sir,
The paper by Julie George and colleagues

is a welcome addition to the literature on women's knowledge of emergency contraception (October *Journal,* p.451). Among those who use contraception, those choosing barrier methods are the most likely to have reason to resort to secondary methods,[1] hence it is sensible to target these individuals during consultations. Were accurate knowledge of the availability of emergency methods more widespread, sex which has not been planned (a characteristic of much early sexual activity[2]) might less often result in unwanted pregnancy.

During the summer of 1994 a random sample of 30 general practices in the London district health authority of Camden and Islington were visited to address the following question: Would a member of the public, walking into the waiting room, encounter anything to suggest that emergency contraception is available here? Although a number of general contraception leaflets have a small section on emergency methods, only two sorts of leaflets which deal exclusively with emergency contraception were found in 10 of the practices. The most common was the Family Planning Association 1992 leaflet which was found in eight practices. Another two practices had copies of a 1984 Family Planning Association leaflet entitled the 'morning after pill'.

Practices were visited rather than invited to respond to a postal survey, allowing us to consider the impact of the material as well as simply recording its presence or absence. Where material was available this impact varied considerably, from prominently displayed posters to out-of-date leaflets positioned at the back of a rack.

In an attempt to locate innovative materials, a postal survey was conducted of all young peoples' advice centres and clinics throughout the United Kingdom, listed in a directory compiled by the Department of Education at the University of Aberdeen. Among the 79 responses received it was found that 30% of advice centres were still using the 1984 'morning after pill' leaflet, despite longstanding concerns about the misleading nature of this term.[3] There were isolated examples of well designed posters and credit-card sized reminders, which had been developed for specific clinics.

The potential benefits of increasing knowledge of emergency contraception are enormous. As well as providing individual advice to users of barrier methods, general practitioners can help to increase public knowledge of emergency contraception through judicious display of well designed, informative and accurate publicity, including the conspicuous positioning of posters in their waiting rooms.

SUE ZIEBLAND

General Practice Research Group
Gibson Building
Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford OX2 6HE

PILAR GARCIA

Department of Epidemiology and Public Health
University College London
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

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Managing violence in the practice

Sir,
Hobbs' study of general practitioners' fear of aggression at work, reports findings from 611 respondents who 'completed at least some of the questions on their levels of intimidation at work' (September *Journal,* p.390). This represents only 22.7% of the original sample of 2694 doctors. No details of the non-respondents are reported and this severely limits the conclusions which can be drawn from the paper. Such an unrepresentative sample can carry little weight in the argument for a change of practice.

Hobbs' previously published findings from this survey[1] reported on the prevalence of assaults on general practitioners. The problem of violence in the community is not confined to doctors, however, and we disagree with the assertion that training in the management of aggression has long been available to other professional groups. Nursing, social work and education department staff have much in common with general practitioners and are plagued by similar problems of lack of resources, inadequate training and poor organizational support.[2] Although also hampered by a low response rate, a recent Royal College of Nursing survey found that 88% of practice nurses reported having been the subject of verbal abuse in the previous year.[3] Despite this, only 12% reported any training in dealing with violence while 7% were aware of a practice policy on violence. Clearly the problem of violence in primary care is not borne solely by doctors.

There is an urgent need for continuing research into occupational violence, and into the effectiveness of competing strategies for prevention and management. General practitioners can do much to lead this process of turning research findings into practice by carrying out risk assessments of their premises, reviewing their policies on violence and seeking appropriate training for themselves and the staff with whom they work.

BRIAN A KIDD

Edith Morgan Centre
Torbay Hospital, Torquay TQ2 7AA

CAMERON STARK

Ayrshire and Arran Health Board
Seafield House
Doonfoot Road, Ayr KA7 4DW

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Alzheimers Disease Society

Sir,
It is a shame that a paper mentioning the Alzheimers Disease Society (September *Journal,* p.405) gave no details of the society's address. For those who are interested, and every general practitioner should be, the address is: Alzheimers Disease Society, Gordon House, 10 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1PH. Tel: 0171-306 0606. The national society can give details of any local branches and activities.

My wife was the chief carer for my sister for 12 years when my sister suffered from the disease, and we know from personal experience how helpful the advice and information from the society was at that time. Unfortunately, one of the chief grievances expressed at carers' meetings is the lack of information and help given by general practitioners. If a general practitioner puts a carer in touch with the society, he or she will have done the carer a great service.

H W L OLIVER

45 Tunwells Lane
Great Shelford, Cambridge CB2 5LJ

Communication in the year 2000

Sir,
I welcome the editorial on communication in the year 2000 by Robert Walton and Tony Randall (October *Journal,* p.434). The information super-highway is here: it is called the Internet and is currently accessed by 16.5 million people worldwide.[1] The Internet is a global network of computers that includes huge machines at