situations are associated with strong emotions.

In an empirical way, I may suggest that the patient try to desensitize the area by stretching and by applying firm pressure. This idea corresponds to the first osteopathic treatment quoted by Williams: that of 'soft tissue techniques'. Such suggestions must be made having considered the patient's comfort with her own body and the possibility of underlying body fantasies, as well as her psychological tensions as reflected in the developing doctor–patient relationship.

Further study of the mechanisms of dysfunction as opposed to pathology would provide a scientific thrust for the much-needed paradigm shift towards body/mind doctoring.

RUTH L SKRINE

Castanea House
Sham Castle Lane
Bath
Avon BA2 6JN

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Pain: a functional disorder

Sir,

In the discussion paper on osteopathy (October *Journal*), Nefyn Williams puts forward the concept of back pain as a functional disorder. This concept originated from, and has long been integrated in, conventional thinking about back pain;[1] it is not an osteopathic idea as Williams would like *BJGP* readers to believe.

Williams goes on to discuss diagnostic osteopathic techniques without mentioning their (probably low) validity. (Asymmetry of movements or anatomy, for instance, has low specificity as these signs are also present in most people without back pain.) Williams then cites slightly outdated clinical evidence suggesting that chiropractic has been proven to work for acute (but not chronic) low back pain,[2] and states that 'an updated review is awaited'. Alas, an updated review appeared in 1996[3] and concluded that 'the efficacy of spinal manipulation for patients with acute or chronic low back pain has not been demonstrated with sound randomized clinical trials.'

Finally, Williams finds that, on the basis of all this, it is time for a 'paradigm shift' in favour of osteopathy. I ask myself whether this would truly be a paradigm shift or a shifty paradigm.

E ERNST

Department of Complementary Medicine
Postgraduate Medical School
University of Exeter
25 Victoria Park Road
Exeter EX2 4NT

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The new-look *BJGP*

Sir,

I read with interest the new-style *Journal* but found that, as before, some of its contents were not relevant to me, a busy service general practitioner. Could a solution to this problem be that the *BJGP,* like the *BMJ,* has two separate editions: an education and research edition for those involved in teaching and research, and a general practice edition for the rest of us?

IAN HAMILTON

St James Medical Centre
19 St James Street
Paisley PA3 2HQ

MRCGP

Sir,

I write to you saddened and angry that there is to be yet another change to the MRCGP.[1]

Let me set the scene. I sat the MRCGP, along with five other trainees, in 1996. We formed a group and set to working towards the exam. We realized that examiners were looking for decent GPs rather than standard 'College' answers. We learnt to critically appraise, we learnt that there are several ways of looking at the same problem, each with pros and cons, we met every week from January to June and, as you would expect, we all passed.

I say this to assure you that there is no sense of sour grapes in what I have to say; so why my complaint? It is because of the impression that the examination gives of the College. I had an odd moment walking out of the examination room, knowing I had been well prepared, knowing I was a decent enough GP, and feeling 'I didn't expect that'. From that moment my opinion of the College fell. It was as if I was attempting to enter a College more proud of its examination than of its candidates. You have a wonderful quotation, made by Denis Pereira Gray, of the MRCGP as 'a lively institution, ready to review itself, ready to respond to the policies of the RCGP, ready to incorporate new ideas and new techniques in the light of evolving practice.'[2] If you had substituted 'obsessed with the need to', you would be spot on. However, I thought the point of the examination was to test for decent GPs with a lifelong commitment to education. I see no reason why an exam that constantly changes will be the one producing the most valid results. In fact, a good MEQ (modified essay question) may run as follows: 'An examination changes its structure as often as it can. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach with particular reference to its repeatability and reliability as a test and to the impression candidates will gain of the good sense of the institution they seek to join.'

There seems to be no thought given to the strategic importance of the MRCGP to the College. It is a new GP's first contact, and first impressions last. It is both demoralizing and daunting preparing for an examination when you have little idea of how you will be examined. Of course there needs to be change — the medical world is very different now to 1965 — but I question the wisdom of perpetual change that merely gives the illusion of progress.

I am somebody who loves general practice. I am passionately committed to the need for lifelong learning, but my commitment to the College is constantly undermined by the MRCGP, by its obsession with fashion as opposed to content, and by its need to be clever rather than to test.

ST JOHN LIVESEY

60 Onslow Road
Sheffield S11 7AG

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