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June Focus

THE central problem of primary care, and what makes it so rewarding, is illustrated by this month's *BJGP* and the emphasis on deprivation. Our patients need us to concentrate all our attention on them and their personal, particular concerns, but such attention will be of little help to them unless we can bring to bear our understanding from large scale studies so that we simultaneously see them as individuals and as members of different groups. When we deal with the poor and dispossessed, if we fail to remember this aspect of their lives, we risk blaming them for the problems over which they have so little control. Somewhat to our surprise, we have managed to capture some of the difficulties of such questions within this month's .

The scale of deprivation and its consequences are described by Kath Moser on page 438, who suggests that there would be large reductions in the rates of mental illness, coronary heart disease and diabetes if all groups had the same rates as those of the least deprived. Think of that next time you are working at targets of coronary disease reduction. Possible links between deprivation and illness appear in Debbie Lawlor's editorial on fuel poverty on page 435 and Sikorski *et al*'s paper on breast feeding on page 445. Such explanations tantalise as much as they illuminate: when the middle classes smoked more than their poorer compatriots they still had lower rates of coronary heart disease, and it's not so long in the past that middle class babies were the ones less likely to be breast fed.

In the introductory editorial on page 435, Iona Heath and Liam Smeeth plead for general practice to 'become part of the solution, not part of the problem'. The painfully honest paper from the West of Scotland by Stirling *et al* on page 456 illustrates their point, with the most deprived groups getting shorter consultations despite higher rates of psychological distress (but why are the over-90s in the West of Scotland so cheerful?). It isn't obvious what we have to do to become part of the solution, and the discussion papers by Norman Beale on page 478 and Farmer *et al* on page 486 set out some of the problems of definition and classification from different perspectives. Directing more resources to deprived communities must be correct, even if we have little faith that it will achieve measurable improvement, and we should applaud the efforts of the UK Department of Health to improve the crude system introduced in 1990, as Alves *et al* show. The more privileged articulate groups may complain that they are being discriminated against, but AC Grayling recently quoted Aristotle in the Guardian: 'Injustice arises when equals are treated unequally, and when unequals are treated equally.'

When it comes to Injustice however, one article in this issue dominates the landscape, namely Iain Bamforth's long essay in the Back Pages on Anton Chekhov's journey to Russian penal colonies on the island of Sakhalin in the 1880s (page 510). He recorded conditions for prisoners that were frankly bestial. This is not Chekhov the dramatist or peerless writer of short stories, but Chekhov the doctor, methodical observer, and humanitarian. (And also, surprisingly, Chekhov the owner of a pet mongoose that 'used to chew hats', but that's another story …) Bamforth shows us that Chekhov's experiences moulded his mature style. Of greater benefit to the wretched convicts, however, was that he managed to accelerate reform, worth remembering as we survey our own patients and communities and see all that is unfair. Maybe we need not always be impotent.

For those readers who find such discussions too irrelevant, difficult or disturbing, there are other matters to consider. This month's case report from Steven Hunyi on page 466 is a different microcosm of primary care, discussing the difficulties of distinguishing physical and psychological causes of common symptoms. The systematic review of treatments for conjunctivitis by Aziz Sheikh and Brian Hurwitz on page 473 confirms what many would expect: topical antibiotics are effective, but the condition would mostly resolve without them.

DAVID JEWELL
Editor

ALEC LOGAN
Deputy Editor

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS AND READERS

These notes supercede those published in January 2000. The information is published in full in each January issue of the Journal They are also available on the RCGP website at http://www.rcgp.org.uk/rcgp/journal/info/index.asp

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