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September Focus

WHATEVER the future of primary care, both in the UK and everywhere else, it will not be dull. The challenges are endless, and as Nick Bosanquet (not a doctor himself, but an wise observer) pointed out many years ago, the difficulty for the doctors is to try to respond to at least some of the challenges without being driven insane by the seemingly endless nature of the task. It is a cliché to talk about the challenges, but they seem to jump off the pages of this month's *BJGP*. The advent of statins and the evidence of their effectiveness has transformed the landscape of coronary heart disease prevention. It should be a simple matter to ensure that everyone who can benefit from them receives them, but the study on page 684 explores the difficulties. These include the expected barriers of added workload and record keeping, but the doctors also discussed trying to resolve the conflicting demands of effective prevention and containing costs, and the confusion associated with different treatment guidelines. Using guidelines is another challenge, and on page 690 there is a description of a technique to reduce sets of guidelines to simple, usable criteria. At the bottom of page 691 the authors have included a helpful list to show how the simplified criteria might be used. In the UK the prospect with the new GP contract is that some of these will be used to measure and reward GPs' clinical performance. The study from Tayside on page 709 argues that fairness demands an adjustment for case-mix and points out that the contract, as currently agreed, contains a perverse incentive to refer more patients to secondary care. As Barbara Starfield's William Pickles Lecture argues, this may not be best for patients: 'there is a point at which the unnecessary seeking of care from specialists becomes dangerous to health.' (page 723).

Sometimes the guidelines are clear and not being followed: patients receiving domiciliary oxygen should have better organised follow-up (page 714). One area where primary care has responded to the challenge is in miscarriage, where patients are managed at home more often. The study on page 704 confirms that increasing bleeding predicts a completed miscarriage. The previous paper on page 697 points out that the challenge here is to provide satisfactory emotional support for women who experience a miscarriage. The same message is echoed in the review, on page 746, of Keri Thomas's book on caring for patients dying at home, where the author includes some thoughts on why dealing with such emotionally raw areas remains so difficult. One area where general practice has triumphed is that of postgraduate education, and the Dutch group on page 677 provide the long overdue evidence of its effectiveness. The trainees showed measurable increases in skill levels, with the largest increase during the first 6 months. By the end of the year they comfortably outscored the more experienced GPs. However readers are advised to restrain their celebration: in the accompanying leader on page 675 McEvoy points out that the success has fuelled demands for primary care to take on teaching in many other areas, and the risks that this entails.

Looking beyond the immediate challenges is a gripping vision of the future provided by Ebrahim (page 744). Some of the outline will already be familiar, although the prospect of the 'beanpole' families sketched by Hodgkin on page 745 is less so. More surprising, was the picture of retirement villages being constructed in countries far from the inhabitants' original homes, a phenomenon already here and set to expand. As for the NHS, he paints a very gloomy picture, directing readers to a website where Pollock and Price have presented a view of what Foundation Hospitals might really mean for us all.

Finally, and with apologies to readers for the dangers of repetition, I have been taken to task by David Church on page 732 for claims of editorial freedom. I draw attention to this only to agree with much of what he says. As if to emphasise it, we have two pieces in the Back Pages specifically addressed at RCGP matters: a suggestion for a College dish from Roger Neighbour (page 749), and the preservation of the College archives by John Horder on page 750. The reason for making the claim was not to pretend complete independence, but to remind readers that the College cannot and should not answer for the content. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves ...'

DAVID JEWELL
Editor

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