lovers staring into each other's eyes and holding, but not playing, flutes and old age with an old man in the distance holding two skulls. Music is the food of love but playing is deferred since the theme, the transience of human life and love, is too serious. All this in a sublime pastoral setting gives further information about Venetian values and the importance that they attached to the countryside.

As in consultations, there are often shadowy figures in the background. Who is not, or had previously been, in the composition, is often fascinating. Alongside one painting is the painting of the head of another character who was not included in the final painting's story. The most interesting action may be in the corner of the frame and, for instance, involve, not the king bringing the gift to the infant Christ, but the interaction between two soldiers. In *An allegory of love*, by Bernardino Licinio, the main figure gazes out of the side of the frame. The main action appears to be somewhere else, often the perception gained in interactions with patients and a technique used to good effect by several contemporary photographers.The contrasting styles of different painters of the age are illustrated. Erotic themes were treated in a delicate and poetic manner by Titian. Later, Bordon, for instance, dealt with them in a more explicitly sensual way. Some painters have chosen muted colours, some, like Andrea Schiavone in the *Infancy of Jupiter*, have chosen glorious ones.

This beautiful exhibition gives satisfying and fascinating insight into the social, political and artistic context of the city state of Venice in the 15th and 16th centuries. It pulls together paintings from a wide range of sources, some never seen in public before. Go whenever you can, be the day dreich or otherwise …

Lesley Morrison

[a]Dreich = dreary.

diary

6 September
MRCGP Preparation Course
Lyngford House Conference Centre, Taunton
Contact: John Martin
E-mail: severn@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01179596030

14 September
Annual General Meeting
Queens Hotel, Aberdeen
Contact: Jo Lyttle
E-mail: jo.lyttle@pcrc.grampian.scot.nhs.uk
Tel: 01224 558042

14 September
Ian Murray Scott Lecture
Queens Hotel, Aberdeen
Contact: Jo Lyttle
E-mail: jo.lyttle@pcrc.grampian.scot.nhs.uk
Tel: 01224 558042

14 September
Preparing for professional general practice
University Club, University of Nottingham Campus
Contact: Janet Baily
E-mail: janet.baily@nottingham.ac.uk
Tel: 0115 8466 902

15 September
Medical Terminology and Managing Results
Mackenzie Building, Kirsty Semple Way, Dundee
Contact: Fiona Robertson
E-mail: rcgp@tcgp.dundee.ac.uk
Tel: 01382 420089

16 September
Consultation Skills Seminar for MAP/ MRCGP Exam candidates
Bodington Hall, Leeds, West Yorkshire
Contact: Amanda Lakin
E-mail: yorkshire@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0113 343 4182

17 September
MRCGP Exam Preparation Course
Weetwood Hall Hotel & Conference Centre
Contact: Amanda Lakin
E-mail: yorkshire@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0113 343 4182

24 September
RCGP Ceilidh
Bonar Hall, University of Dundee
Contact: Fiona Robertson
E-mail: rcgp@tcgp.dundee.ac.uk
Tel: 01382 420089

29 September
Mental Health in Clinical Practice Course — Module 1
The Woodlands Conference Centre, Chorley
Contact: Jackie Dartnell
E-mail: jdartnell@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01925 662351

neville goodman

An own goal

Oh dear, another own goal, at the worst possible time. It looked as if the MMR row was slowly ebbing away. The wide publicity given to Andrew Wakefield's undeclared conflict of interest prompted much re-examination of the supposed link with autism. The hardened believers didn't change their minds, and never will, but a glimmer of rationality flickered through the clouds of suspicion. MMR inoculation rates were rising again. And then came the five-in-one injection, and rumours of compulsory inoculation.

Perhaps it is a good idea, but it's not yet time. The Department of Health (DoH) is in too much of a hurry; sometimes they just don't seem to understand the worries of the ordinary person. The MMR episode has been damaging, and it will take time for its effects to wane. Someone should give the DoH some lessons in simple psychology: don't risk rejection by association. Instead of a careful and coordinated explanation of the changes to the inoculation programme, we got a jumble of stories, complicated by a leak that demanded a rushed press release.

What should have happened is that stocks of the five-in-one vaccine would be readily available. Almost as an aside to its introduction, the DoH could then have added that an extra advantage of the five-in-one was that thiomersal would no longer be a component. Thiomersal contains mercury, so it's a good idea to abandon the whooping cough vaccine that contains it. Many of the same people who think MMR causes autism think the same of thiomersal. They're wrong,[1] but won't be convinced.

What actually happened was that the DoH said there was no evidence that thiomersal causes autism, but the vaccine would be withdrawn as a precautionary measure. Not yet, though, because there was not enough stock of five-in-one. But parents shouldn't worry about inoculating their children in the meantime.

Meanwhile, the newspapers resurrected the 'linked with autism' stock phrase. Out came the completely without foundation 'Five vaccines will overload the immune system'. In the red corner: every official body thinks MMR is safe. In the blue corner (complete with photograph): Mrs Smithers knows her son was never the same after the MMR. Victory to Mrs Smithers by a knockout.

This month's dead metaphor: there are increasing worries about the volatility of oil prices. Nothing to do with vaccines, but light relief.

1. Hviid A, Stellfeld M, Wohlfahrt J, Melbye M. Association between thimerosal-containing vaccine and autism. *JAMA* 2003; **290:** 1763-1766.