EDITORIAL
1411 Labour Government's tobacco spin spins them off track

COMMENTARY
1412 Single daily doses of aminoglycosides
K A Rodwell and others
1413 JNC VI: timing is everything C O Furberg, B M Psaty
1414 Blood transfusion and risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma F E Alexander
1415 Benefits of post-mastectomy radiotherapy
J Turrisi
1416 What is this thing called "randomise"? S Mason and others

ARTICLES
1417 Effect of prophylactic amiodarone on mortality after acute myocardial infarction and in congestive heart failure: meta-analysis of individual data from 6500 patients in randomised trials
Amiodarone Trials Meta-Analysis Investigators
1418 Mortality from liver cancer and liver disease in haemophiliac men and boys in UK given blood products contaminated with hepatitis C
S C Darby and others, for the UK Haemophilia Centre Directors' Organisation
1419 Airways responsiveness and development and remission of chronic respiratory symptoms in adults
X Xu and others
1420 Global assessment of El Nino's disaster burden
M J Bouna and others

EARLY REPORT
1421 Preliminary evaluation of recombinant amino-terminal fragment of human bactericidal/permeability-increasing protein in children with severe meningococcal sepsis
B P Girvin and others

CASE REPORT
1422 A woman on the toilet
P J Rackoff

RESEARCH LETTERS
1423 Severe necrotic polyserositis after third stage of labour
T Austin and others
1424 Thalidomide in Crohn's disease
A R Wettstein, A P Meagher
1425 Angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors in early pregnancy
G Y H Lip and others
1426 Cholesterol supplements in type 2 diabetes: Mercury and child development
M J Smit and others
1427 Lassa fever in Sierra Leone
“Mercy killing” in Canada
J Yarnold
1428 Windy city plays host to gut and radiotherapy

REVIEW AND OPINION
Seminar: Lower-limb arterial disease
Vaccine series: Medical history:
Ancient British medical kit

CORRESPONDENCE

DISSECTING ROOM
Poetry, Books, Art
Life Line, Jabs & jibes

NEWS
Science & medicine
1451 Vascular gene therapy studies
1452 Wrist city plays host to gut and radiotherapy
1453 Vascular gene therapy studies
Liver damage with troglitazone
Vitamin and colon cancer

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Michael Kirby

Michael Kirby, now a justice of the High Court, Australia's highest court, served on the Global Commission on AIDS of WHO and is presently a member of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee and of the Ethics Committee of the Human Genome Organisation.

Who was your most influential teacher and why? Professor Julius Stone from a Lithuanian Jewish family via Leeds and Oxford; he taught his Sydney law students to appreciate the leeway for choice open to judges of the common law tradition. Many of them now occupy top judicial posts.

What do you enjoy most about your work? Seeking, if possible, to find just solutions to complex legal problems consisting of legal authority, principle, and policy. Appellate judges are lucky to be paid for solving puzzles—a kind of life with The Times crossword.

Which single medical advance would benefit most people? A cure and a vaccine for HIV/AIDS.

What events have had the most effect on your work and why? It happens all the time. Getting out of court and law and mixing with scientists to unravel the genetic mystery in the coming millennium. To really understand DNA and to puzzle out the why, not just the how, of human existence.

What alternative profession would you have liked to pursue? Why, medicine of course.

What would be your advice to a newly qualified doctor? Keep up with genomic research. It is your future.

Who do you most admire? The brave patients, doctors, nurses, and others who daily struggle against HIV/AIDS.

What was your biggest mistake? Too many. Most happily corrected in the past by the Court on which I now sit.

I recently returned from a visit to Australia, and, more recently still, to my normal biorythms. I had gone to a conference, and it was a medical conference, much of the talk in the early days, and late nights, was about jet-lag. Personal greetings were deroated by comparisons of severity and discussion of mechanisms, individual responses, and private tricks for prevention and treatment. The subject was discussed extensively. Some talked jet-lag, almost beautifully, others used it as a tallman against, or excuse for, giving a poor paper. I took part in this communal game, if only to say I am less affected nowadays and suspect that to be an effect of ageing, just as I get less motion sickness now that the hairs on my movement sensory cells are becoming fixed by smilax. But, irrespective of that improvement, like many others, I had taken melatonin as a personal, and somewhat stupid and unintelligible experiment.

But at no time during these extensive first-day discussions was a related but private problem discussed. My bowels, usually a friction-free part of my functional anatomy was out of sync. At first, I had no idea how many of my colleagues were suffering likewise, but, encouraged by various tangential observations, and by the response to a few oblique remarks, I finally moved to direct questions—each of which was repeated extensively to friends when I returned—and found that my problem is in fact a common, albeit silent, indignity.

The reason for the previous silence was only in part an unwillingness to publicise a personal and traditionally costly matter, medical will announce all things, personal or otherwise. The reason for the silence was, I am certain, that the condition had not been recognised, let alone defined. It does exist, and it is a common, albeit troublesome problem, as my direct questions have revealed. Since recognition of a syndrome is always helped by a name—just as jet light leg revealed the swelling that was commonly concealed under jeans—I have called the condition "gut-lag". The pessic brother of jet-lag. That gut-lag occurs after long flights is hardly surprising. It defaecation was initiated only by the gastrocolic reflex of eating, there would be no problem. But bowel voidance is a response to a combination of stimuli in addition to food intake, and a habit built of convention, in its several senses. Such a habit cannot but be embraced by the clock, and therefore confused by its changing. With gut-lag, a running habit may continue to make its usual timely request, now at some diametrically unequal hour of the day or night, when it cannot be served by a direct answer. This displacement between desire and fulfilment would require a gastrointestinal event for full exploitation.

As with the disturbed sleep pattern of jet-lag, all roses in time, usually days. But for some, those few days could be less troublesome were the condition better known and prepared for. From personal experience, melatonin does not do the trick and, surely, only flights on April 1st would be suitable for a double-blind randomised trial of its efficacy for gut-lag as well as jet-lag. Nor would a gastrointestinal equivalent of melatonin be necessary because the effect of drugs such as sena retain their home-based efficacy, and are easily used prophylactically, if not therapeutically. Indeed one can take its place in the travel pack side by side with Imodium, completing the wanderer's gastrointestinal Yin and Yang.

I hope my naming and naming the condition of gut-lag will make the indignity less silent, but will lead to its better definition and amelioration. Perhaps, too, those who stay firmly on the ground, but remain envious of those who don’t, can now feel some consolation in knowing some of their ailments are based on the condition of gut-lag, even though they may be envious of what they are missing.

Sam Shuster