



Unusual findings in a patient with acute abdominal pain
Try the picture quiz in **ENDGAMES**, p465

How do relatives or other surrogate decision makers view the use of the “futility rationale” to limit life sustaining treatments in patients? A study in three American hospitals found that 64% of surrogate decision makers expressed doubt about the accuracy of the futility predictions offered by doctors and 32% of surrogates elected to continue life support despite a less than 1% chance of survival. In addition, 18% of surrogate decision makers elected to continue treatment when the doctor thought the patient had no chance of survival. People with religious objections were more likely to request continued life support than those with secular or experiential objections (*Chest* 2009;136:110-7).

Severed spinal nerves can be anatomically reconnected in rats, according to *Nature Neuroscience* (published online 2 August 2009; doi:10.1038/nn.2365). Previous attempts to reconnect neuronal connections between the body and brain of rats failed because the nerves didn’t reach their correct target sites in the brain. Now researchers have developed a method of using a naturally occurring molecule that attracts growing nerves, together with grafted bone marrow cells to act as a cellular “bridge” for regenerating the nerve tract. They still have a way to go to restore full limb function, but they say it is an important step in promoting recovery.

Editors of science and healthcare journals seem to be less concerned than perhaps they should be about publication ethics (redundant publication, gift authorship, plagiarism, and data fabrication). A questionnaire sent to 524 editors in chief of Wiley-Blackwell science journals, which was responded to by 44% of them, showed that most editors believed that misconduct occurred only rarely in their journals. Many of them were unfamiliar with available guidelines but would welcome more guidance or training (*Journal of Medical Ethics* 2009;35:348-53).

At the end of the 19th century, infant mortality in Glasgow was well over 100 deaths per 1000 live births. “Improper feeding” was recognised as an important risk factor, so the public health authorities set up infant milk depots to support breastfeeding mothers and to provide artificial milk feeds when necessary.



These marks on an infant’s antecubital fossa were caused by delay in removing Ametop topical anaesthetic cream. In this case, it was hidden below clothes, and not noticed for more than 12 hours. Ametop is widely used in children to reduce pain during venepuncture and cannulation. The manufacturer recommends, however, that it should be applied for no longer than 30-45 minutes. Mild skin erythema results after one or two hours.

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Infant mortality started to decline in 1900 and has continued to do so ever since. Artificial milks posed a risk to the health of babies, but attention to infant nutrition, growth, and feeding may well have played an important part in improved infant survival (*Scottish Medical Journal* 2009;54:42-7).

One of Britain’s largest supermarket chains with in-shop pharmacies has declared that it will not provide antiviral collection points during the current swine flu pandemic. The reason given for this decision was to allow “day-to-day running of its pharmacies.” Odd then that other pharmacies don’t seem to have that problem. A pharmacist who works at a pharmacy that has agreed to be designated an antiviral collection point questions whether the supermarket chain should have pharmacies at all if it doesn’t want ill people to visit its stores (*Pharmaceutical Journal* 2009;283:119).

Minerva recently noticed a useful tip from the readers’ forum of *Pain Matters* (the magazine of Pain Concern, issue 44, p8). The reader recently bought a pair of “magic knickers”—the ones that keep bulges under control. To her delight she found that the knickers not only controlled her flab but also held the electrodes of her Tens machine firmly in place. They now stay put even during yoga classes.

Are general physicians born or made? A cohort study of medical students at entry and exit in New Zealand showed that more than 75% of exiting students reported an interest in pursuing a career in general medicine. Interest was strong

in 42% of exiting students, compared with 23% in the entry cohort. A good experience in a clinical rotation correlated positively with the reported level of interest in that specialty. Other influential factors were positive role models and flexibility in training. Just 11% of participants reported that the burden of student loans played an important part in career decisions (*Internal Medicine Journal* 2009;39:447-52).

It is an odd thing to look at, but a team of doctors wanted to see the effect of drinking coffee straight after having an ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI). They conducted a randomised controlled trial with 103 patients admitted to their coronary care unit with acute STEMI, giving them regular caffeinated coffee or decaffeinated coffee and measuring their heart rate variability five days after sustaining their infarct. A regular coffee intake increased parasympathetic activity by up to 96% after five days, but it had no detrimental effect on cardiac rhythm after STEMI (*QJM* 2009;102:555-61).

Alcohol is usually thought to be protective when it comes to cardiovascular disease and death, especially in women. But why is it? An American analysis of moderate drinkers and abstainers indicates that the effects of alcohol on lipids and insulin sensitivity may account for a large proportion of the lower risk of cardiovascular disease and death seen with moderate drinking. The assumption is that the alcohol-cardiovascular disease association is causal (*Circulation* 2009;120:237-44).

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