- 20 Matthews DE, Farewell VT. *Using and understanding medical statistics*. Basle: Karger, 1985.
- 21 Nicoll A, Jenkinson D. Decision making for routine measles/MMR and whooping cough immunisation. *BMJ* 1988; 297: 405-7.
- 22 Gattrell A. Immunisation against whooping cough in Salford: a spatial analysis. *Soc Sci Med* 1986; 23: 1027-32.
- 23 Mant D, Phillips A, Knightley M. Measles immunisation rates and the good practice allowance. *BMJ* 1986; 293: 995-7.
- 24 While A. Child health clinic attendance during the first two years of life. *Public Health* 1990; 104: 141-6.
- 25 Jeffries S, McShane S, Overton J, Victor C, Beardow R. Low immunisation uptake rates in an inner-city health district: fact or fiction? *J Public Health Med* 1991; 13: 312-8.
- 26 Barker W. *Child development programme*. Bristol: Early Childhood Development Unit, University of Bristol, 1984.
- 27 Haskey J. One parent families in Britain. *Population Trends* 1986; 45: 5-13.
- 28 Popay J, Jones G. Patterns of health and illness amongst lone parents. *Journal of Social Policy* 1990; 19: 499-534.
- 29 Pearson M, Dawson C, Moore H, Spencer S. Health on borrowed time? Prioritizing and meeting needs in low-income households. *Health and Social Care in the Community* 1993; 1: 45-54.
- 30 Cooke RWI. Trends in preterm survival and incidence of cerebral haemorrhage, 1980-89. *Arch Dis Child* 1991; 66: 403-7.
- 31 Luker K, Chalmers KI. Gaining access to clients: the case of health visiting. *J Adv Nursing* 1990; 15: 74-82.

'Ecstasy', Ophelia, and the nightingale

That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me,

(Ophelia) *Hamlet* Act 3, scene 1

Is it hypocrisy to drink alcohol and condemn the use of 'Ecstasy'? Reports from the United States have suggested that Ecstasy (3, 4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, MDMA) is widely used and usually only mildly toxic. A recent paper in the *Lancet* from the National Poisons Information Service at Guy's Hospital, London (J A Henry and colleagues, 1992; 340: 384-7) describes experience during 1990 and 1991 and records seven fatal cases and five cases of severe acute toxicity in young people after apparently modest doses.

In the series of fatal cases there were five males and two females aged between 16 and 21 years. In two the dose is not stated but the other five had taken 1, 2, 3, 3, and 5 tablets, all of them at a party, club, or concert. One patient had a liver transplant after four days but died 18 days later. The remaining six died from 2.5 to 60 hours after admission to hospital. All had tachycardia and a temperature of 40°C or more at presentation. One had fixed, dilated pupils and severe cardiac arrhythmia and died after 2.5 hours. Six had seizures and three developed rhabdomyolysis, disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC), and acute renal failure. Two were hypertensive and four hypotensive when first seen. The authors attribute the deaths to heatstroke caused by taking the drug in circumstances involving vigorous exercise (dancing), high ambient temperature, and inadequate fluid intake.

A 13 month old child who swallowed a single tablet of Ecstasy was described in detail in this journal (1992; 67: 1114-5). Four other people aged 19 to 25 years took 2, 2.5, 3, and 3 tablets. Two developed rhabdomyolysis, DIC, and acute renal failure and one needed haemodialysis for 20 days. One was comatose and had diarrhoea and vomiting but recovered with forced diuresis and chlorpromazine. One had a subarachnoid haemorrhage within a few hours of taking the tablets. A further seven people aged 19 to 29 years developed hepatotoxicity as a late complication. One died and one needed a liver transplant.

Is Ecstasy different from alcohol? The answer must be 'Yes' because the toxicity seen in this series was not dose related. Whereas the moderate 'social' use of alcohol is free of this kind of severe acute toxicity, there appears to be no 'safe' dose of MDMA. Taking a single tablet can kill. It looks as if we can continue to enjoy the Jacob's Creek dry red while advising against the use of Ecstasy and still avoid a charge of hypocrisy when, like Keats listening to his nightingale, we need 'A draught of vintage'

'That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan'.

ARCHIVIST