SISTER JOURNALS—UNITED STATES

Pediatrics
Each issue of Pediatrics, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), is sufficiently weighty as to perhaps deter the casual reader. Overcoming this feeling and investigating further, despite the excellent scientific content, one is not altogether reassured to find that almost 30% of the pages are given over to commercial advertising, mainly pharmaceuticals. I suppose this reduces the costs to subscribers, but I find it worrying to see in one issue 12 pages devoted to antitussives, antipyretics, and decongestants, together with adverts for products of dubious utility such as an adsorbent for treating acute diarrhoeas, fructose/dextrose mixture for nausea, and carnitine for the lethargic, hypotonic child; the fretful infant who doesn't eat; no specific evidence of disease... yet something clearly is wrong. Although there is a disclaimer to the effect that publication of an advertisement does not imply endorsement by Pediatrics or the AAP, I can't help feeling that the volume and content of the promotional material somehow detract from the primary aims of the journal to inform and educate its readers.

If this tells us something about the relationship between the medical profession and the drug industry in the United States, the generally high standard of the papers and their wide ranging subject matter tell us more about the fostering of high quality scientific research there. Many different areas of paediatric care are covered and there is much to interest UK paediatricians. In addition, some intriguing insights into health care and society in North America are offered, for example the hospital in the Bronx which sees 60,000 children a year in its paediatric casualty department, 95% of whom are Hispanic, African-American, or Asian. To inform and educate patients waiting their turn to see the doctor, there are companies vying with each other to supply a television in the waiting room exclusively showing health education programmes. However, too much television can be bad for you, and perhaps explains the reported finding that only 42% of American 17 year olds can read well enough to understand an editorial in a major newspaper.

Not surprisingly some areas of professional concern are common to both the UK and the United States. Accident prevention is given a laudably high profile and in this issue of Pediatrics the AAP policy statement on safe transportation of newborns discharged from hospital is reproduced. Parents may also buy a video film featuring a well known actress discussing car safety, and management of choking, drowning, poisoning, cuts, burns, and head injuries in children. Perhaps we in the UK should explore video film as a means of disseminating popular health information. The policy statements of the AAP are published regularly in the journal and I wonder if similar space in the Archives of Disease in Childhood could not be given to the British Paediatric Association?

J W L Puntis

Polymerase chain reaction in the diagnosis of tuberculous meningitis

New methods of diagnosing tuberculous meningitis appear to be proliferating. Last year Lu and coworkers in Shanghai and Stockholm described the use of a nitrocellulose enzyme linked immunospot assay for detecting cells in blood or cerebrospinal fluid which are secreting antigen specific IgG or IgA antibodies (see Archivist, October 1990:1192). They mentioned the possibility of using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) as a further method aiming at early rapid diagnosis. Now researchers in New Delhi have published their experience with PCR (Shankar et al, Lancet 1991;337:5–7).

They found positive results on examining the cerebrospinal fluid in 75% (15 of 20) of cases of 'highly probable' tuberculous meningitis. Unfortunately on first testing the method gave positive results in 14% of cases of pyogenic meningitis. On repeating the tests on saved samples, however, they got negative results. They explain the initial positive results on the basis of sample contamination and claim that 100% specificity should be achievable.

The test used by Lu et al was positive in 96% of cases (24 of 25) and one of 12 controls. A direct comparison of the two tests on the same patients seems indicated. They both seem to be much superior to conventional methods of diagnosis and may save many lives by allowing earlier diagnosis and treatment.

Archivist