



Jon Garvey chews the cud

### Hit the headlines

The views expressed in *World Medicine's* editorial "Ethics will clash" (March 5, p7), defending the need for the freedom of the press, do not necessarily reflect the views of its stomach: Ruminant recently saw the other side of the coin, as presented by two elderly patients.

One frail lady reported a sudden worsening of her diverticular disease, quiescent for years. Another old patient, with osteoarthritis, had been finding walking particularly painful for a week or two. The first had discontinued her bran after hearing on television that it contained nitrites which many doctors (or at least, one doctor) believed to be a cause of cancer. The second had stopped taking paracetamol because he had read in the paper that it damaged your liver.

The popular press have quite a lot to answer for over the last year or two. The media scare over pertussis immunisation was largely responsible for the catastrophic fall in uptake, and hence the recent whooping cough epidemic, not to mention the associated sporadic diphtheria cases and the increase in measles. The message that vaccination causes brain damage became rapidly entrenched in the public mind.

Cyclical press exposés on the Pill and the IUCD have led to scared patients suddenly abandoning whichever happens to be in the magazines and increasing either the birth rate, or, more often, the termination rate. If my first two examples are typical quite a few patients are going to be suffering unnecessary pain as a result of abandoning safe treatment regimes. Nobody is likely to die of arthritis, but somebody might well

have fatal complications from diverticulitis.

It could be argued that it was press coverage which helped uncover the dangers of Opren, but hardly anybody would have been on it had the press not plugged it so brazenly in the first instance.

Nobody really criticises the media for exposing the facts about medical subjects, or any others for that matter. They object only to the fact that it seems to be the custom among journalists to expose the story rather than the facts.

But there is no law of the universe which confines reporters of news to an adversarial system of presenting the case for the prosecution alone. It is quite simply that *Doctor blames Elastoplast for mystery deaths* sells more copies than *Mass of medical opinion refutes Elastoplast doctor*. In my view, the lives of sick people are too important to be manipulated in order to boost circulation figures.

### Liquid assets

It now seems universally agreed among gastroenterologists that the treatment of choice for diarrhoea, and vomiting too, is a balanced glucose and electrolyte mixture, rather than china clay, opium, major tranquilisers and so on. By and large, it has not been hard to persuade patients of this either (though rather harder to persuade doctors), once they get used to the idea that people don't starve if they don't have grapes forced down their throats between spasms of vomiting.

However, it is a little hard to understand why such a basic regime as salt, bicarb and glucose, mixed in vaguely the right proportions, should only be available commercially as sachets costing the NHS a basic price of £1 for a litre of made-up solution. After all, with a chemical balance, a salt cellar, a box of baking powder, some Glucodin and a little chloride of potash you or I could make up an identical solution for about threepence. Who would have believed that one of those little sachets to put the powder in would be worth 19p?

I'll let you know if anyone gives me a valid justification for what seems, on the face of it, an attempt to fleece the taxpayer.

Incidentally, there are, in fact, two commercial electrolyte solutions available. The one not referred to above, though comparable in price, is interesting because its sugar content comes not as glucose, but as sucrose, to which young children with diarrhoea are not infrequently secondarily intolerant.

### Roundabouts and swings

Extract from a consultant surgeon's summary letter on one of my patients:

"He was found to have a gallbladder full of stones at cholecystectomy. Postoperatively he did well, and in the clinic today his wound was well-healed and he was full of beans."



Mark Hackett