

More therapeutic conservatism

Sir—In his latest article, (April 1993, pages 121–6) Dr Griffin attempts to panic the profession with quotes from *The Financial Times* written by a journalist asserting that doctors in the USA risk law suits if they do not use ‘the most effective drug available, even if it is only a little better than its rivals’. It is quite disgraceful that the *Journal* of the College should be prepared to repeat in print such nonsense. While many of us will appreciate that Dr Griffin is being paid by the organisation he represents to promote its views, it should also be made quite clear that prescribing doctors’ first responsibility is to their patients and to their wider interests. These interests will include the rational use of resources in the NHS. Clearly some new medications offer advantage to the patient: unfortunately the pharmaceutical industry, in its attempts to maximise its profits and market, overemphasises the theoretical advantages of new drugs at the expense of old ones. While Dr Griffin may be concerned about the economic implications of therapeutic conservatism, history suggests that there is as much research investment put into capturing parts of an existing market (eg 19 non-steroidal molecules) as to developing the innovative medicines he is so worried about.

D N BATEMAN

Director, Regional Drug and Therapeutics Centre,
Newcastle upon Tyne

Sir—As a general practitioner who daily has to make many prescribing decisions I was interested in the article on the economic implications of therapeutic conservatism by J P Griffin and T D Griffin (April 1993, pages 121–6) and the subsequent responses by Tom Walley, M McKee *et al*, and Paul Turner (July 1993, pages 337–9).

Tom Walley claims that the pharmaceutical industry spends £250 million a year on promotional activities and contrasts this with the £1.2 million that the Department of Health spends on the *Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin* and the *Medicines Resource Bulletin* which he claims are the main sources of independent advice on pharmaceutical products for most doctors. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of his estimate of pharmaceutical promotional spending but his second figure is widely inaccurate. He ignores the cost of the Scottish Medicine Resource Centre and its publications, the cost of *Prescribers's Journal* which is sent regularly to every GP in the country, the employment costs of all the independent medical advisers to the Family Health Service authorities and the medical prescribing advisers to the Scottish Health Boards, the costs of their offices, secretaries, cars and inducement packages. He ignores the employment costs of pharmacist facilitators, pharmacist advisers, their cars, secretaries and inducement packages; he ignores also the massive investment in computer technology which enables GPs

to learn the exact cost of all the drugs they have prescribed and whether they are staying on course to remain within prescribing cost targets for the year. We are already deluged with independent advice and would be totally submerged if Dr Walley's suggestion of a levy to produce a 200% increase came to pass.

Rational prescribing in general practice is the result of a creative tension between the claims made by companies for their products and the words of caution from academic clinical pharmacologists, independent medical advisers and the like. Conservative prescribing is not always for the best. I remember the horror amongst some academics when GPs started to prescribe beta blockers for their hypertensive patients rather than rely on more familiar drugs like methyl-dopa, or prescribed H₂ antagonists instead of antacids for duodenal ulcers. The suggestion by M McKee *et al* that no new medicines should be prescribed on the NHS until they have been proved to be better than existing preparations ignores the fact that it is often only after years of widespread clinical use that the true value of a medicine is established.

The danger is no longer that naive doctors will be beguiled by unscrupulous representatives into prescribing unnecessarily expensive medicines. Now that there is so much emphasis on reducing prescribing costs, and also the possibility of unpleasant sanctions against those who exceed cost targets set for them, prescribers may resist prescribing new, more effective but expensive medicines long after the time when they would have prescribed them in the past. They may salve their consciences by claiming the virtues of therapeutic conservatism, but cost will be the dominating factor.

Surely the correct way of making a rational prescribing decision is for a prescriber to ask how he or she would like to be treated in similar circumstances. For example, if a doctor would like his moderate hypertension treated with an ACE inhibitor or his shingles treated with systemic acyclovir he is in a rather weak ethical position if he withholds these treatments from his patients on the grounds that there is insufficient proof of their efficacy. Similarly a doctor should not prescribe a new drug he would be reluctant to take himself or give to his family in similar circumstances. This test is not, of course, infallible but does avoid the extremes of cost-driven conservatism and reckless experimentation.

IAN MCKEE

General Practitioner, Edinburgh

Sir—Therapeutic conservatism has been defined by Griffin and Griffin [1] as a phenomenon whereby prescribing doctors, in response to budgeting constraints, restrict their prescribing to fewer and older active substances. This means that patients do not receive the benefits of therapeutic advances.

Many premature baby units are not routinely using