

MODERN MEDICINE'S MAGIC

The Holy Grail of modern society is health and longevity. In their pursuit, we turn "dis-ease" into "disease", and we medicalise life's pleasures and problems. We feel compelled to "do something", under the illusion that we are "in control". Central to all this is medical technology.

Medicine, today, is saturated with — indeed defined by — technology. It exploits and feeds our desire to be in control, as shown by a recent media "blitz" extolling the value of whole body scans. If knowledge is indeed power, the promise of an ability to unearth the dark and silent threats to health and longevity is obviously seductive. After all, who could resist the added bonus of a virtual colonoscopy?

But why does technology beguile and enthrall us?

In a recent essay on modern medical technology, Eric J Cassel, a US public health expert, observed that, "Like the broom in 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', technologies come to have a life of their own, not only because of their own properties but also because of certain universal human traits". These include: the sense of "wonder and wonderment" at technology's capabilities; the immediacy factor ("it roots us in the immediate, the now of its presence"); its unambiguous value ("the better the piece of equipment, the clearer the values"); its ability to dissolve clinical uncertainty by reducing an illness to a disease and a disease to a lesion; and finally the power it confers on doctors and institutions.

Yet our faith is not merely mechanistic. Is there not a mystical and miraculous sense embedded in modern medical technology? For, as Arthur Clarke, the famed science-fiction author once observed, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

And technology is surely modern medicine's magic.

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LETTERS

New pharmacotherapies for alcohol dependence: are they being used and what do they cost?

Christopher M Doran, Julia E Fawcett, Anthony P Shakeshaft, Marian D Shanahan, Richard P Mattick

218

Gestational diabetes mellitus: accuracy of Midwives Data Collection

Robert G Moses, Alison J Webb, Christine D Comber
Lee K Taylor

218

219

Addressing the shortage of rural physicians in Victoria: maximising rural trainee recruitment

David Simmons, Amanda Fieldhouse, Leslie E Bolitho, Grant J Phelps, Rob Ziffer, Gary J Disher

219

The effect of female age on the likelihood of a live birth from one in-vitro fertilisation treatment

Nicholas A Tonti-Filippini
Robert P S Jansen

220

221

The effect of recalling paracetamol on hospital admissions for poisoning

Corrine R Balit, Geoffrey K Isbister, Andrew H Dawson, Frank F Daly, Ian M Whyte
Elizabeth A Hender, Jeremy Raftos
Stephen R Kisely, David Lawrence, Neil J Preston

221

222

223

Whither pathology in medical education?

Barbara M Miflin, Kevin L Forbes
Donald D Beard
H Reginald Magee

223

224

224

OBITUARY

Geoffrey Henry Moore

by Graeme G D Moore

205

SNAPSHOT

Myxoedema and a lost wedding ring

Andrei Catanchin, Peter R Ebeling

211

IN THIS ISSUE . . .

178

IN OTHER JOURNALS . . .

217



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