



## Take forward the polypill idea, concludes expert committee

Richard Smith

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### Report calls for action to improve careers in academic medicine

Urgent action is needed to make clinical academic medicine—combining teaching and research with care of patients—a more attractive career path for doctors, as the lack of people going into the field is threatening medical education and new research, warned a UK report published last month.

The report warned that the number of junior academic staff in the United Kingdom had gone down by 23% over the past three years. Universities had reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining clinical academics and less funding for academic posts over the past few years.

Professor Charles Pusey, chairman of the Forum on Academic Medicine, a group of representatives from the medical royal colleges and the Academy of Medical Sciences that developed the report, said: "This is a major problem."

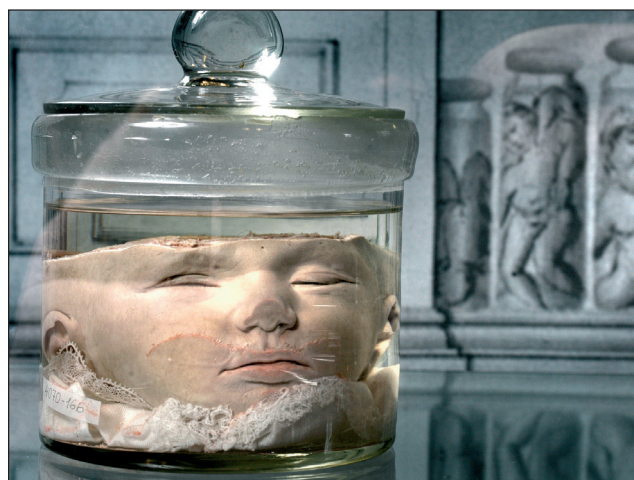
Susan Mayor *London*

*Clinical Academic Medicine: The Way Forward* is available on the Royal College of Physicians' website ([www.rcplondon.ac.uk](http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk)).

### Take forward the polypill idea, concludes expert committee

The idea that whole populations might be treated with a polypill made up of several active drugs to prevent heart disease and stroke was generally supported at a meeting of experts held before Christmas at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

They also gave general agreement that a series of trials would be needed before it would be possible to give the polypill to whole populations without any screening, as was proposed when the idea of the pill was first advanced in the *BMJ* by Nick Wald and Malcolm Law of London's Wolfson



### Seventeenth century Dutch doctor's anatomy specimens go on show

Anatomical specimens collected by a groundbreaking seventeenth century Dutch doctor, Frederik Ruysch, are going on show in Amsterdam University's library.

The exhibition includes the head of a 3 month old child and a display showing a month old fetus in the hand of a newborn baby. All were originally preserved by being pickled in alcohol, and the bottles were sealed with pig's bladders, resin, and pitch.

The specimens have been borrowed from an exhibition in St Petersburg where they have been kept since Ruysch sold 2000 specimens to Peter the Great in 1717.

Ruysch, a member of Britain's Royal Society, was an important and controversial figure in the early development of anatomy. His methods for presenting specimens, such as suspending them on a horse's hair or held in a human hand, were regarded more as art than science. But making tiny parts of anatomy visible meant that his work became an important guide to the early discovery of the human body.

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

*Only Believe Your Own Eyes* is at Amsterdam University Library exhibition hall, Singel 425, Amsterdam, until 21 January. Details are at [www.amc.nl](http://www.amc.nl)

Institute of Preventive Medicine (2003;326:1419).

The polypill proposed by Professors Wald and Law would have six ingredients: a statin, aspirin, folic acid, and three antihypertensives, all at half dose. It would be given to everybody at age 55 without any screening and to everyone with existing cardiovascular disease. The authors calculated that ischaemic heart disease events would be reduced by 88% and stroke by 80%.

Despite dissent the meeting generally thought that it would be necessary to start with a rigorous, placebo controlled trial of the polypill in people at intermediate risk of heart disease and stroke. About 6000 participants would be needed.

Richard Smith *Atlanta*

### Commission finds that trust failed to look into high death rates

The Healthcare Commission, an independent body that monitors standards in the NHS, has taken unprecedented action against a Yorkshire hospital for its poor management of gastroenterology and related surgery. It has called on the secretary of state for health, John Reid, to put the trust "under special measures."

The commission launched its investigation into Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, a recently merged group of hospitals covering Pontefract, Wakefield, and

Dewsbury, in February 2004. The investigation came after a series of allegations and counter-allegations.

In 2000 and 2001 three surgeons raised concerns about the high mortality and numbers of complications from a procedure, known as an endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography, carried out by a single handed consultant gastroenterologist. The consultant, in turn, said he had been unhappy for some time with the poor quality of equipment at the hospital, and later made allegations about the performance of his accusers.

The commission found that the trust failed to investigate properly the high death and complication rates for some procedures in gastroenterology and related surgery.

Lynn Eaton *London*

*Investigation into Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust 2004* is accessible at [www.healthcarecommission.org.uk](http://www.healthcarecommission.org.uk)

### Poorer health among disabled people to be investigated

The reasons why people with learning disabilities and mental health problems die younger than the general population and what can be done to close this health gap are to be scrutinised over the next 18 months in a formal investigation by the Disability Rights Commission.

According to the commission, people with learning disabilities and mental health problems are among the poorest and most disadvantaged in society. They die of preventable diseases at a younger age than the rest of the population and miss out on life saving screening programmes.

Evidence gathered by the commission shows that the number of preventable deaths among people with learning disabilities is four times that in the general population and that people with schizophrenia live an average nine years less than other people.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*