

shorter with propofol and an assumption has been made, drawing on studies of seizure duration, that this will inevitably lead to reduced efficacy.

Twenty patients fulfilling DSM-III-R criteria for major depressive disorder were rated using the 17-item Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HRSD; Hamilton, 1967) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, 1961). Mean length of fits (17.5 seconds) and mean total length of fits (118.9 seconds) for the propofol group were significantly different than for the methohexitone group (25.5 and 175.5 seconds respectively;  $P < 0.05$ ). We found a significant improvement on both HRSD and BDI ratings in both groups but no difference in the number of treatments needed to give a 60% improvement in ratings. Indeed, there were more treatment failures, defined as those patients who failed to show a 60% improvement over the course of ECT, in the methohexitone group than the propofol group.

ECT studies, when measuring outcome, are fraught with difficulties. It is, nevertheless, crucial that we understand the effects of changes in anaesthetic practice on the treatment we prescribe. It is not sufficient to concentrate on fit duration and current as a measure of the success of ECT. The standard by which any treatment is measured ought to be as close to the desired clinical effect as possible.

We believe our study, which is still being analysed, is the first to compare methohexitone and propofol prospectively in terms of clinical response. There is a continuing need for more research into ECT, using large samples, if we are to shed light on the mechanisms involved.

BECK, A. T., WARD, C. H., MENDELSON, M., *et al* (1961) An inventory for measuring depression. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, **4**, 561–571.

HAMILTON, M. (1967) Development of a rating scale for primary depressive illness. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, **6**, 278–296.

CHRISTOPHER F. FEAR  
CARL S. LITTLEJOHNS  
ERYL C. ROUSE

*Academic Subdepartment of Psychological Medicine  
North Wales Hospital  
Denbigh  
Clwyd LL16 5SS*

#### Suicide prevention by general practitioners

SIR: Dr MacDonald ends his letter (*Journal*, October 1992, **161**, 574) with a plea: "So please, can we now have a moratorium on this idea that practitioners can prevent suicide?" Such a view cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

Glancing through the *Oxford Textbook of Medicine* we found the following incidence rates of some common organic disorders: Crohn's disease 7.1, ulcerative colitis 10–12, multiple sclerosis 0.5–9.5 (all per 100 000 population). In 1989 the overall suicide rate throughout England and Wales was 7.4. So why the defeatist attitude about suicide prevention, particularly when we know that the majority of persons who end their lives seek help in the final week of their lives? We have never heard complaints that early detection and treatment of the organic diseases cited above is not feasible because they are so rare.

We accept that prevention of suicidal behaviour will partly depend on social changes which are more the responsibility of politicians than clinicians. There is no doubt, however, that clinicians should have a major role. This includes general practitioners (GPs) as well as members of psychiatric services. The potential preventative role of GPs is supported by the finding of a significantly decreased suicide rate on the Swedish island of Gotland following an educational programme for GPs on the assessment and management of depression and suicidal potential (Rutz *et al*, 1989).

By focusing on suicide prevention we open up crucial aspects of clinical care. The assessment and management of severe mental illness (especially depressive disorder), and of suicide risk itself (both in hospital as well as in the community), are perhaps the most important of these. Effective prevention of suicide is a goal which surely will be achieved as the end result of improvements in clinical techniques relevant to the whole of psychiatric experience. Why not accept that these are in urgent need of attention?

RUTZ, W., VON KNORRING, L. & WALINDER, J. (1989) Frequency of suicide on Gotland after systematic postgraduate education of general practitioners. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, **80**, 151–154.

K. HAWTON

*Department of Psychiatry  
Warneford Hospital  
Oxford OX3 7JX*

H. G. MORGAN

*Department of Mental Health  
University of Bristol*

#### Psychosis and multiple sclerosis

SIR: The application of sophisticated neuro-imaging technology to the detailed evaluation of patients such as those described by Feinstein *et al* (*Journal*, November 1992, **161**, 680–685) may yield potentially important clues to the aetiology of 'functional' psychoses, and we have recently employed this strategy in the study of schizophrenia (Buckley *et al*,