

A study recently presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Anesthesiologists found that white women with red hair required 20% more anesthetic to block limb movement in response to a painful stimulus than women with dark hair. The investigating team says this has something to do with the genetic mutation in a receptor for hair pigment that only redheads have.

Tans to die for. It's not awareness of the dangers of sun lamps that's missing, but a profound belief that tans are attractive and healthy. At one American university, 47% of students interviewed admitted they had used a tanning lamp during the preceding 12 months. Over 90% were aware that premature aging and skin cancers were possible complications. A change in behavior will require a fundamental change in societal belief about what is aesthetically admirable (*Arch Derm* 2002;138:1311-1315).

Humans may have two nostrils, but these don't necessarily share the same sense of smell. Elusive scents may be detected by one nostril but not the other. According to a brief communication in *Nature* (2002;419:802) individual nostrils that are initially nondetectors can be trained through repeated exposure to pick up unusual odors. This implies that although separate nerve supplies connect the nostrils to the brain, there must be some exchange of information going on in the brain's olfactory center.

Enthusiastic claims are often made for glucosamine sulfate as an over the counter treatment for osteoarthritis, and it's good to see that it stands up to scientific scrutiny. The results of a three year, randomized, placebo controlled double blind study of glucosamine in knee osteoarthritis confirm a significant improvement in symptoms, and also that it retards disease progression (*Arch Intern Med* 2002;162:2113-2123).

Asked to "draw a picture of a family physician," each of 20 second year family practice residents produced a picture of a doctor who was the same sex and similar age to themselves. Most included a stethoscope; some wore white coats, and one doctor appeared to be wearing open toe sandals. Some illustrations included multiple arms and more than one head, which presumably represents the multitasking and the wearing of many hats needed to

practice family medicine (*Fam Med* 2002; 34:696-698).

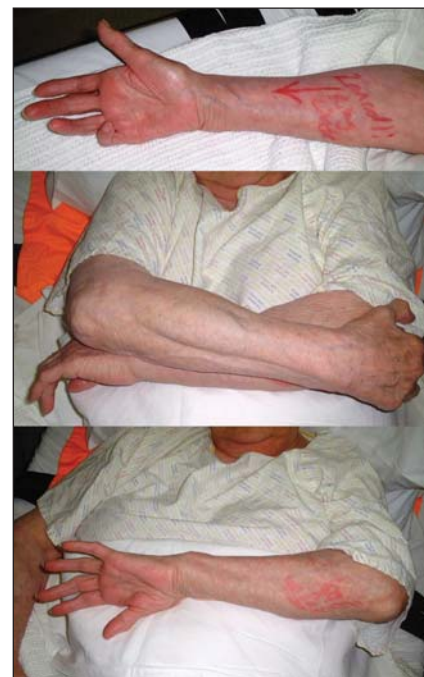
Minerva's memory is an erratic animal. Babies', on the other hand, seem to come on in leaps and bounds as each month passes. Scientists report in the latest issue of *Nature* (2002;419:896) that 6 month olds can only recall a vivid event for 24 hours, whereas 9 month olds can recall an event up to a month after it happens. By the age of 21 months, toddlers can recall things that happened four months earlier. Frontal lobe function therefore seems to start maturing towards the end of the first year but isn't fully developed until the end of the second.

Spiders inspire legendary levels of fear and anxiety, but an Australian prospective follow up study of 750 people who attended emergency departments with definite spider bites found only 6% had important clinical effects. Of these 6% of bites, most caused persistent pain, but no early allergic reactions or necrotic ulcers were recorded, and secondary infection occurred in just seven bites. Widow spiders were the worst culprits, and rapid identification of the type of spider would increase the opportunity of giving antivenom (*QJ Med* 2002;95:723-731).

Much attention has been focused on "care in the community" for people with mental health problems, and acute inpatient care has been somewhat neglected. Writing in *Psychiatric Bulletin* (2002;26:428-433), one medical director painfully notes that "as mental health professionals, we like to think we are good at communication; service users told us otherwise and pointed out that, in hospital, we tend to communicate with them at times and in ways that suit us, not them." The same arguably applies across the entire medical spectrum.

And it's not just verbal communication that could be improved. Illegible handwriting in medical notes puts patients at risk, and it makes research and audit very difficult. A Spanish survey found that 15% of all the notes examined were so poorly written as to make them impossible to interpret. Surgical departments were the worst culprits. The authors say it's time to bid farewell to handwriting in medical notes, whether legible or not (*J R Soc Med* 2002; 95:545-546).

A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials that look at acupuncture as a way of improving motor recovery after stroke



An 85 year old woman was admitted to the hospital for surgery on her right hand. She was marked preoperatively with a red dry wipe, water soluble marker, but then waited three hours for her operation, sitting with her arms crossed. In the anesthetic room, it was noticed that the mark had been transferred to the left arm. Consent was rechecked with her, and she underwent surgery on the correct limb. In patients who are awake, marking should be done with a permanent marker by one of the operating surgeons. M Butler, senior house officer in plastic surgery, H J C R Belcher, consultant plastic and hand surgeon, Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead RH19 3DZ, UK

found that acupuncture offers no additional effect on this, but has a small positive effect on disability. The placebo effect may be one reason; another possibility is the variable quality of the studies. The efficacy of acupuncture without stroke rehabilitation remains unclear—the studies that look at this are generally poor (*Stroke* 2002;33:2604-2619).

Considerable controversy remains as to whether all the effort put into achieving a laparoscopic approach is worthwhile. A small controlled study comparing laparoscopic against abdominal hysterectomy for benign pathology found that laparoscopic surgery took 50% longer to complete—but these patients had significantly fewer complications, needed less pain relief, and were able to resume full domestic function and sexual activity earlier. Patients' satisfaction was also greater (*Singapore Med J* 2002;43:403-407).