In this Issue

Boundless controversy
Earlier this year there was much excitement in the lay press when two Australian trials of RU486 were announced. The trials have now come under fire because of speculation about the adequacy of informed consent. For the history of the cautious development of this controversial drug, read Healy and Evans (page 403).

Prozac attack
Prozac, the designer drug of the 1990s, has also attracted media attention. Prozac has been accused of having many side effects, some good (such as increasing confidence and optimism) and some bad (such as suicidal and violent behaviour). Burrows and Norman (page 404) dispel some of the myths.

Better care for liver cancer
Hepatocellular carcinoma is on the increase. In 1972, 42 new cases were reported to the NSW Cancer Registry. In 1990 there were 100 new cases. It is a major cause of death in patients with cirrhosis, and risk factors include hepatitis B or C virus infection and alcoholic liver disease. Brotdihardjo et al. (page 433) found that most patients presented too late for treatment. Screening and primary or secondary prevention measures could have improved their outcomes.

Homeless shouldn’t be helpless
Homeless people are a vulnerable group when it comes to health, with psychiatric disorders and substance abuse being of particular concern. Homeless adolescents are 10 times more likely to have a psychiatric disorder than their sheltered friends. Reilly et al. (page 429) interviewed young people with experience of homelessness and found that, despite these health problems, few made use of the available health services.

Diabetes on the rise
The incidence of insulin dependent diabetes mellitus in Australia, previously less than 20 per 100,000 per year, seems to be increasing. Kelly et al. (page 426) report a dramatic increase in Western Australia in 1992. As the population studied was relatively stable, this finding supports the hypothesis that IDDM is a disease triggered or modulated by environmental antigens.

Atopy in Asians
Asthma is another disease in which environmental factors play an important part. This is convincingly demonstrated by Leung et al. (page 418) who looked at asthma, hay fever and atopy in Asian immigrants. Many Asians developed these diseases for the first time after migration and the prevalence was significantly associated with length of stay in Australia.

The cost of indulgence
Smoking tobacco and drinking too much alcohol both cause sickness, which for businesses can mean absenteeism, sick leave and premature retirement. But what does this cost the Australian economy? More than two billion dollars a year say Hocking et al., extrapolating from their study of over 70,000 employees of Telecom Australia (page 407).

Expensive scare
Economics and ethics are frequent topics of debate in intensive care medicine. Intensivists must always keep these in mind, but the many advances and sophisticated techniques outlined in What’s New by Hillman and Bishop (page 444) may make some of their difficult decisions easier.

Australia’s health
Health expenditure in the financial year 1992–93 was $34 billion and drug expenditure was $2.5 billion. What did we get for our money? What remains to be done? The answers are detailed in Australia’s health 1994, the latest biennial report from the Australian Institute of Health, introduced by Donovan on page 406.