Editorial

What a perplexing subject medical science sometimes seems to be! Having gradually come to terms with using margarine instead of butter, in line with the exhortation to eat more polyunsaturated fats, the scientists now warn us that polyunsaturated fats can be bad for our health and damage our arteries. That, at least, is the message according to the media. It is a sad reflection of the general state of scientific illiteracy that this episode should have caused so much commotion. There are, after all, two sides to everything. One of Newton's laws states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction; and the Thespian wears the masks of comedy and tragedy at one and the same time. So no one should be surprised that a reactive group of compounds like the polyunsaturated fatty acids, which can help to mobilise cholesterol, can also produce a cascade of powerful radicals, described so lucidly by Tom Dormandy in this issue of the Journal, with the potential to cause local damage. Life is a continuing balance of risks and everyone has to make his own judgements in the best way he can. This does require some understanding of natural processes and, sadly, the standard of that is abysmally low as shown by recent newspaper surveys.

The fact that a warning has been voiced that runs counter to what has become received dogma shows that someone is prepared to audit (to use that current buzz word) opinions and recommendations made even by the great and the good with the evidence that was available to them at the time. This should bring a sense of assurance rather than of irritated bewilderment and it is a pity that the media did not treat these observations in this light.

It also shows that further research is needed and the real worry is that this may not be able to continue in the present climate of uncertainty about the future of medical research. 'Transactional medicine,' as described by Harry Keen and Jeremy Bending in this issue's second editorial, is unlikely to be a patron of long-term medical research programmes and the arbitrary, even despotic, intervention that brought to a halt an important and well-designed investigation to learn more about the factors responsible for the spread of AIDS does not augur well for a continuing surveillance of the nation's health.

The health of the nation is too important to be left solely in the hands of the doctors; nor is it safe in the hands of politicians. It can only be safe when all concerned are willing to co-operate and trust one another. It is the art of the possible.