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appealing hypothesis that early postoperative luminal nutrition might have a beneficial effect on the function of the intestinal barrier in respect of permeability, bacterial translocation, and the subsequent development of septic complications has no supporting evidence at present.

What impact could the findings of this systematic review have on daily surgical practice? The review shows that there is no clinical benefit to starving patients in the early postoperative period after gastrointestinal resection. Further, the finding that postoperative infections can be reduced and hospital stay shortened by starting early postoperative enteral nutrition should challenge clinicians to consider this treatment. The findings pave the way for an appropriately multicentre trial to assess early enteral feeding in patients undergoing elective gastrointestinal resection. The patients recruited to such a trial should be stratified by nutritional status and type of surgical procedure. The outcome measures should include not just effects on wound infection, other infectious complications, and dehiscence of the anastomosis but also surgical fatigue, muscle function, quality of life after discharge from hospital, and cost effectiveness.

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Equity versus efficiency: a dilemma for the NHS
If the NHS is serious about equity it must offer guidance when principles conflict

Concerns about equitable provision and financing of health care have characterised the NHS since its foundation. Evidence of persisting and, in some cases, widening health inequalities, gathered since the publication of the Black report,1 has progressively raised equity to a high rank among health policy objectives.2 Though the general aim of reducing health inequalities appears uncontroversial, the practical notions of equity that should inform policy and the ways in which these should be implemented are far from clear. Even more importantly, there is no consensus on how to deal with policies that may cause a conflict between the goals of equity and efficiency—that is, those that may improve efficiency while increasing health inequalities or improve fairness while decreasing efficiency. The equity versus efficiency dilemma3 has been virtually ignored in the political debate, often leading to inconsistent judgments in the development of health policies.

In a report recently published by the NHS Health Technology Assessment programme4 we examined examples of the equity-efficiency dilemma that the NHS is facing. The analysis of three case studies—cervical cancer screening, renal transplantation, and neonatal screening for sickle cell disease—shows inconsistencies between NHS policies and a lack of guiding principles to support the pursuit of equity in health care.

The NHS policy on cervical cancer screening has been primarily aimed at maximising coverage by using powerful economic incentives to general practitioners. The issue of low participation by women at high risk5 (particularly those in disadvantaged socioeconomic groups6) has been less of a concern. The programme could have achieved the same cost effectiveness with less extensive but more even coverage. The number of cases of invasive cancer avoided in 1997 is likely to be 60-85% of the number of cases that might have been avoided if screening rates had increased uniformly in different social groups after the introduction of target payments to general practitioners.7 The equity principle underlying this NHS policy is one of equal access (rather than outcome) for all women, where access is defined purely from the perspective of the healthcare provider.

Renal transplantation consistently generates health improvements and economic savings, but kidneys are in short supply and priorities for access to this service must be set. The UK Donor Kidney Allocation Scheme8 provides an allocation algorithm in which the recipient’s age plays an important part. Priority is given to recipients aged 0-17 over those 18 and older, and within the older group a decreasing priority is attached to recipients aged 0-17 over those 18 and older, and within the older group a decreasing priority is associated with increasing age. Younger recipients are favoured in the allocation of younger donors’ kidneys, with greater survival benefits. These age priorities are not fully supported by evidence on effectiveness9 and

7 Keele AM, Bray MJ, Emery PW, Duncan HD, Silk DB. Two phase randomised controlled clinical trial of postoperative oral dietary supple-

BMJ 2001;323:762-3
Screening for prostate cancer in the UK

Seems to be creeping in by the back door

Screening for prostate cancer is controversial. Findings from systematic and other reviews consistently conclude that there is insufficient evidence to recommend its introduction because of concerns that it may not improve survival or quality of life and may thus cause more harm than good.1-3 Current government policy in the United Kingdom, expressed in the NHS prostate cancer programme, confirms this view, but adds that “any man considering a PSA [prostate specific antigen] test will be given detailed information to enable him to make an informed choice about whether to proceed with a test or not.”4 This implies that asymptomatic men may have the test if they want, so there is now ambiguity about whether screening is supported and confusion about what this policy means in practice.

The assumption may be that most men will not want to be tested once they are informed of the uncertainties. In the United States several studies have shown that informed choice can reduce prostate specific antigen testing in some groups by up to one half.5-7 But this may not apply in the United Kingdom. A systematic review of the use of decision aids has shown that though such aids result in higher levels of knowledge, they have variable effects on the decisions themselves, though such aids result in higher levels of knowledge, they have variable effects on the decisions themselves, further, close inspection of the landmark study5 shows that though prostate specific antigen testing was reduced by half among scheduled clinic attendees who viewed a video, a parallel (rarely quoted) trial found that only 3 out of 206 men attending free prostate spe-

11 Lewis PA, Charny M. Which of two individuals do you treat when only their ages are different and you can’t treat both? J Med Ethics 1993;19:29-32.