

Fancy drugs for worried folks

When Mrs. Boronowski, aged 67, went to Dr Jingle for her nervous indigestion and multiple allergies, she left his office with a bunch of prescriptions. She was given omeprazole (\$4 (£2.50) a tablet), even though belladonna or a bottle of amphojel would have done as well. To calm her shattered nerves she received buspirone (\$1.30 a tablet), because diazepam is too common to be effective. For her allergies Dr Jingle prescribed loratidine (\$2.20 a tablet), because chlorpheniramine at two cents would have made her too sleepy to tolerate her tranquilizer; and he also gave her the newest hypnotic, zolpidem (\$1.70 a tablet). She also takes atorvastatin (\$3.60 a tablet), because dieting is so difficult, a multivitamin B tablet, yeast, ascorbic acid, vitamin E, and, for her systolic hypertension, losartan (\$1.30 a tablet).

When Mrs. Boronowski returned home she looked at the pharmacist's bill. She sent it to her insurance company and immediately felt better.

In future, if President Clinton has his way she will send her bill to Medicare, for being over 65 she is entitled to such coverage. At present one third of Medicare recipients are reported to have no drug coverage. Mr. Clinton would like to remedy this by providing full coverage for everybody. This will probably become an election issue and a political football. The pharmacy industry fears that price controls will follow and argues that they will kill the golden research goose that has revolutionized modern therapeutics. Mrs. Boronowski's bill may drop by 20%, but Dr Jingle will continue to prescribe the newest and dearest drugs.

Meanwhile, down at the petrol station, Mr. Suggs, who pumps gas for small wages, has a painful duodenal ulcer relieved only by omeprazole (\$4 a tablet), which he has to buy himself because he has no insurance. His neighbor has had a kidney transplant and cannot afford to buy his antirejection drugs. But another neighbor has a "nervous condition" and a limp, takes cocaine, gets a bagful of free medicine from Medicaid (public aid) each month, and watches soap operas most of the day.

I do not know offhand if there ever was an ancient goddess of reason. But if there was she assuredly remains perched high on Mount Olympus and has not yet descended among the mortals.