



This summer heavy rains in the Midwest caused extensive flooding as the mighty Father of Rivers overflowed its banks, tearing down levees and bridges, submerging cities and demolishing thousands of houses, washing away crops, and leaving towns without drinking

water for several weeks. In Washington, Congress unleashed a flood of new taxes but a mere trickle of spending cuts, thus neither stimulating the economy nor balancing the budget. In Pittsburgh, surgeons separated conjoined twins who shared a common heart and liver, thereby killing one twin to save the other. A flood of articles on ethics and difficult choices ensued, while the parents reportedly used the funds raised from the public to buy a new car and illicit drugs.

Water was also the culprit in a Chicago hospital, where three patients receiving dialysis died and six others became ill because of too much fluoride in the dialysis fluid. Scientists have found a gene predisposing to some cancers of the colon on chromosome 2,

a gene for familial breast cancer on chromosome 17, and perhaps one for homosexual behaviour on the X chromosome. Others have recovered the DNA of an extinct weevil that lived 120 million years ago, have used recombinant DNA to bring back the dinosaurs (but only in the movies), and have now determined that the dinosaurs lived 228 million years ago. Whooping cough is making a comeback because many children are not immunised, and there has been much concern about multidrug resistant tuberculosis in addicts, people with AIDS, prisoners, and the homeless. A new report favours a conservative approach in elderly men with slowly growing prostate cancer, radical treatments often being complicated by impotence and urinary incontinence.

Meanwhile public outrage is rising over the continuing tide of violence, leading 52% of people now to favour banning hand guns and raising again the issue of the effects of television violence. The experts are still trying to decide if AZT should be given early or late to people infected with HIV. Government agencies have warned on the dangers of passive smoking, have noted that each cigarette shortens one's life by seven minutes, have reported the first ever overall decline in deaths attributable to smoking, but find that smoking remains responsible for one out of every five deaths in the United States. The government has approved the

use of interferon for relapsing multiple sclerosis, has introduced its new scheme of food labelling, wants to use more women in drug trials, wants to fortify bread with folic acid to cut down on birth defects, may soon be looking at new antiviral drugs for herpes zoster, but is concerned about unproved health claims of certain dietary supplements and the dangers of Chinese herbal products.

In a Chicago hospital a 12 day old boy was fatally electrocuted while connected to an apnoea monitor. Another was mysteriously abducted from the County Hospital in an episode unrelated to the dramatic scenes filmed there in *The Fugitive*. A study again shows that moderate drinking has health benefits. Another that 30 minutes' daily exercise is as good as drudging away for hours. Another that people who have pets are happier and healthier than controls. Another that people with good education and higher income live longer than those less privileged. Another that insects, of which there are 800 000 species, have been around for 390 million years, longer than the dinosaurs, and will probably be here long after the human race has blown itself up. Meanwhile environmentalists are fighting them with garlic and pepper, to avoid contaminating the planet with noxious chemicals.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA