

## DRUGS

### FDA asks amphetamines limits

The Food and Drug Administration has asked physicians to stop prescribing amphetamines except for three disorders: obesity, with use to be limited to short-term treatment only; narcolepsy or uncontrollable sleepiness, and hyperactivity and learning difficulties in children. What FDA describes as a nonbinding order also asks manufacturers to reduce promotion and sale of the pills.

The order is intended to reduce consumption of the so-called pep pills. Last year 3.5 billion pills—more than 15 for each man, woman and child in the United States—were consumed. The Justice Department has found that some 38 percent of this massive production was distributed through “improper channels.”

By exempting the use of amphetamines to calm hyperactive school children, the FDA indicated that it is not impressed by a current view that prescribed pill-taking in elementary school leads to speedballing in high school. Not all countries share the United States' enthusiasm for a drug approach to behavior problems. The mild stimulant Ritalin (methylphenidate), widely used here for hyperactivity in children and for depression in persons past 40, is banned in Sweden because of risky side effects.

## DERMATOLOGY

### Skin diseases and the intestine

Psoriasis, a skin disease for which neither cause nor specific treatment is known, is sometimes related to chronic malabsorption in the small intestine, say two British researchers. An eczema unresponsive to local treatment including corticosteroids may also be the result of faulty absorption in the intestine.

If related to malabsorption psoriasis and eczema can be cleared by a gluten-free diet (one free of wheat and other grains), the researchers say.

Diagnosis is made by a sophisticated instrument for biopsy. The patient swallows a small capsule to which a tube is attached. When the capsule reaches a desired location in the small intestine, suction is applied to the tube. The suction activates a tiny blade that scrapes a cell sample from the intestinal mucosa and also sweeps the tissue back through the tube.

Drs. J. Marks and S. Shuster of Newcastle upon Tyne describe this work in a recent series of papers in the journal GUT, reviewed in the Aug. 1 BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL.

## ENDOCRINOLOGY

### Over-the-counter iodides

Over-the-counter drugs containing iodine should not be taken by pregnant women, the July 24 MEDICAL LETTER warns, after an evaluation of recent published evidence. When taken after the 12th week of gestation, iodides at levels in which they occur in certain common drugs are transferred across the placenta and taken up by the fetal thyroid. There they can induce goiters large enough to cause respiratory distress and even asphyxia in the newborn.

In many cases, the goiter is associated with hypothy-

roidism and its consequences—impaired growth and mental development.

Certain drugs used for relief of asthma or as expectorants in respiratory infections contain iodine in an amount from 150 to 20,000 times the safe level of daily iodine intake recommended by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council (100 to 150 micrograms according to age and sex).

Iodides in excess induce goiter by inhibiting the thyroid gland's synthesis of hormone. Reduced thyroxine in the blood causes the pituitary to release excess thyrotropic hormone, enlarging the thyroid.

## VIROLOGY

### Doubts about rubella vaccination

Rubella vaccination for children was started last year in the United States at the recommendation of researchers who saw it as a means to eventually eliminate the rubella virus in the population (SN: 6/21/69, p. 595).

Nobel laureate John Enders of Harvard, whose virus culture work paved the way for development of polio vaccine, now asks that the mass vaccination program be restudied. Dr. Enders cites recent studies showing that vaccination in some cases suppresses clinical symptoms but does not prevent infection. One such study was by Dr. Te-Wen Chang and others of Tufts University, who report rubella antibodies in 50 to 80 percent of 69 vaccinated children at levels high enough to show that infection has been present. Recovery of the virus itself from the throats of a smaller number of children indicated that they were carriers.

Another objection, Dr. Enders says, is that vaccination of all children may produce a population of adult women who lack the resistance acquired by having had the disease in childhood. An estimated 85 percent of women have such resistance, which reduces the chance that they will get the disease while pregnant. A mild disease in children, rubella can cause birth defects when a pregnant woman is infected.

The evidence is not enough, Dr. Enders says in the July 30 NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, to stop mass vaccination. But he suggests that vaccination of adolescent girls and young married women, which could give protection that would last through the child-bearing years, might be an alternative.

## MEDICARE

### Deflating the nursing home boom

Medicare has put the Federal Government in the uneasy role of referee of the cost of medical care (SN: 2/14, p. 170). Administrators must avoid subsidizing undue profits without raising the specter of socialized medicine.

The nervous task moved ahead by a small jolt last week when Social Security Commissioner Robert M. Ball somewhat belatedly noted the speculative boom in nursing homes for the aged. Noting that the inflated prices of such properties would improperly increase Medicare reimbursements for the use of such facilities, he ordered such institutions to cut back the real estate valuations they use when they compute the bills they give the aged for whom they care.