This week in the BMJ

Higher rates of breast feeding would reduce infant mortality

Getting more mothers to increase the duration of exclusive breast feeding would cut infant mortality, an international study has found. Betrán et al analysed national data on breast feeding and infant mortality from diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory infection in16 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (p 303). They estimated that if all infants aged 0-3 months were exclusively breast fed and all infants aged 4-11 months were partially breast fed, infant mortality would fall by 14% overall. The greatest effect was in the younger age group, when deaths from diarrhoeal and acute respiratory diseases could be cut by two thirds.

Heavier babies have higher IQs

The IQ of children at age 7 years is directly related to birth weight throughout the normal range, an analysis of a large US cohort study has found. Matte et al (p 310) analysed data on around 1700 families with two or more siblings of the same sex and found that the relation between IQ and birth weight remained evident after family and social factors were fully adjusted for. Although the increases in IQ with weight were too small to be relevant to individuals, they could be important at the population level.

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Efficiency of health systems could be improved

Although the effects of individual reforms to health systems have been assessed, no consistent framework or measurable indicators exist for assessing the performance of health systems. Evans et al (p 307) describe the method used by the World Health Organization to determine global comparative scores on performance of national health systems. Performance varied widely, but systems in most countries could be more efficient. Although data quality varied among countries and some controversies about methods persist, the results provide a first step towards evidence based reform of health systems.

Combined zinc and vitamin A supplementation reduces diarrhoea and dysentery

Vitamin A supplementation often fails to reduce morbidity in children in developing countries, possibly owing to coexisting deficiencies of zinc and vitamin A. Rahman et al (p 314) found that combined zinc and vitamin A supplementation in Bangladeshi children was more effective in reducing persistent diarrhoea and dysentery than either vitamin A or zinc alone. Zinc supplementation alone was associated with a significant increase in acute lower respiratory infections, but this effect was reduced by combining zinc with vitamin A.

Singlehanded general practitioners are not underperforming

Although the quality of care provided by singlehanded general practitioners has been questioned recently, there is no evidence that they are under performing. Hippisley-Cox et al (p 320) compared process and outcome measures for singlehanded and group practices. The results offer insight into the structural difference between the two types of practice and underline the importance of the effect of other practice characteristics, such as deprivation, on process and outcome measures.