Remembrance of things past
Jacques Lacan’s first presentation of a patient was made to the Société neurologique on November 4, 1926, under the direction of the great neurologist Théophile Alajouanine, a friend of Edouard Pichon and a member of Action française. The case was one of fixed gaze caused by hypernictoty, together with extraocular- ramidal syndrome and pseudobulbar disorders of the spinal cord. It was an ordinary enough story concerning an unfortunate man of 65 who was taken ill while riding his bicycle and havelike. He had “nystagmus and a fixed stare and a respiratory tic, and the furrow between the nose and the chin was deeper on the left side of the face than on the right. When the patient bent his knees to sit, he remained poised for a moment above the chair before falling down on to the seat. Lacan’s clinical comments were lengthy, detailed, strictly tech- nical, and devoid of emotion: an arid bit of ordinary hospital routine. (Elisabeth Roudn- nesko. Jacques Lacan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997:16–17.)

Does a diet of fruit and vegetables reduce the risk of breast cancer?
The association between fruit and vegetable consumption and the risk of breast cancer has been examined in at least 25 case controlled studies and a few cohort studies. A recent summary of 19 case control and three cohort studies concluded that elevated fruit and veget- able consumption probably reduces breast cancer risk. This pooled analysis of cohort study 412 participants were ran- domly assigned to eat either a controlled diet with high, intermediate, or low levels of sodium for 30 consecutive days. Thus, com- pared with a controlled diet a high sodium level diet produced an elevation of systolic blood pressure of 7 mm Hg in those patients without hypertension and 11½ mm Hg eleva- tion in participants with hypertension. This suggests that reduction in sodium intake levels below the recommendation of 100 mmol per day would result in substantial lowering of blood pressure in the general public. (New England Journal of Medicine 2001;344:3–10.)

Oestrogen replacement in post-menopausal women and the risk of myocardial infarction
For some years recommendations about the use of hormonal replacement therapy in post-menopausal women has been based pri- marily on observational studies which suggest that hormonal replacement therapy reduces the risk of coronary artery disease. In a study of 232 post-menopausal women who had a non-fatal myocardial infarction results suggest that among hypertensive women the associ- ation of hormonal replacement use and myo- cardiac infarction risk differed from those with and without the prothrombin 20210G→A vari- ant. If these findings are confirmed by addi- tional studies, screening for this prothrombin variant may provide information as to which post-menopausal patients will benefit most from hormonal therapy. (JAMA 2001;285:906–13.)

Spices: more than tasty
Recent studies suggest that adding spices to our foods does more than simply improve their taste. Antimicrobial activity has been demonstrated in most spices with the greatest activity being exhibited in onions, garlic, thyme, and allspice. In fact, these four most potent spices killed every bacterial species tested in these studies. Bacteria tested are widely distributed and frequently implicated in foodborne illnesses. Bacteria studied in- cluded Clostridium botulinum, Escherichia coli, Salmonella pullorum, Staphylococcus aureus, and Streptococcus faecalis. (American Scientist 2001;89:142–51.)

Umbilical cords give lifeline to stroke patients
Investigators in Florida have demonstrated that blood taken from umbilical cords may provide an excellent source of stem cells to treat patients who have suffered from a stroke. These stem cells can be prompted by growth factors to become immature nerve cells. When injected intravenously into rats that had suffered from strokes, results were encourag- ing. Within 2 weeks treated rats performed almost as well as rats who were entirely healthy. Although stem cells can be obtained from bone marrow cells these investigators suggest that the cells obtained from umbilical cords are less likely to provoke an immune response in the patient. (New Scientist 2001;2279:9.)

Treating HIV by making infected cells commit suicide
Investigators in Japan have shown that geneti- cally engineered HIV can be used to set a “booby trap” in the immune cells that are the target of the virus. If these immune cells are then infected by the wild virus they will com- mit suicide preventing the virus from spread- ing. The suicide gene is called HSV-TK. This cedes for an enzyme that turns an inactive prodrug ganciclovir into a highly toxic form. Researchers have shown that their technique can prevent wild HIV spreading among human immune cells grown in tissue culture. A preclinical study in mice carrying human immune cells is under way. (Human Gene Therapy 2001;12:227–31.)

Incidence of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease in two communities
Considerable variations have been reported in the prevalence and incidence of Alzheimer’s disease between countries, but most investiga- tors have concluded that these variations are mainly the result of study design. This study is the first to report an incidence difference for dementia and Alzheimer’s disease in two population studies from non-industrialised and industrialised countries using identical methods and the same group of investigators in both sites. In this study the incidence for Alzheimer’s disease among African Americans living in Indianapolis, Indiana, is 2½ to 3 times the rate of Youba people living in Ibadan, Nigeria. These results suggest that Alzheimer’s disease comes about as the result of an interplay between genetic predisposing factors and environmental ones. (JAMA 2001;285:739–47.)

Do contact allergies in coronary stent patients cause secondary restenosis?
US vice president’s Cheney’s problems with his coronary stent procedures has highlighted the high incidence of reocclusion of coronary arteries in the area of previous stent proced- ures. In this study patients with an allergic patch test reaction to nickel and molybdenum had a higher frequency of in-stent restenosis than patients without hypersensitivity. This suggests that allergic reactions to the materials that make up the stents may be one of the trig- gering mechanisms for in-stent restenosis. (Lancet 2000;356:1895–7.)