measles-vaccine-associated cases. Only three of the 11 proved abnormal (dead, or with neurological, educational, or behavioural dysfunction), for whom there were seven matched controls defined as before (RR 0.84; 95% CI 0.20-3.49). Although the number of vaccine-associated cases is small, these findings provide no evidence of a risk of long-term neurological damage associated with measles vaccine.

*David Miller, Jane Wadsworth, Judith Diamond, Euan Ross
*Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Imperial College School of Medicine at St Mary's, London W2 1PG, UK; and Department of Community Paediatrics, King's College Hospital School of Medicine and Dentistry, London

2 Wing L. Autism spectrum disorders: no evidence for or against an increase in prevalence. BMJ 1996; 313: 357-28.

Third-generation oral contraceptives and venous thrombosis

Sir—Farmer and colleagues'1 show again that third-generation contraceptives have a higher risk of venous thrombosis (VTE) (a significant relative risk of 1-7), in a non-research database without any attempt at objective diagnosis. Since clinical diagnosis of VTE are wrong more than half the time, this will very strongly dilute the findings. Whether Farmer's report deals with first thrombotic episodes is debatable. The main message is that the data are very resistant: only in sub-subgroup analyses or in an over-adjusted logistic model, does the relative risk (almost) disappear.

When the hypothesis of confounding by prescribing is proposed, the analysis should focus on risk factors for venous thrombosis that are present at the time of prescription in healthy young women: age, body mass index, and familial occurrence. Age was adjusted in 5-year age groups in the cohort analysis, but a true demonstration of the importance of age adjustment would be to show that adjustment by single year of age on the same data would make the association disappear—that demonstration is not reported, however. In fact, the adjusted rate ratio (1-7) is the same as the crude ratio (1-6). No information is presented on familial history. By contrast, unnecessary variables were entered in the model; some that are certain to be correlated with oral-contraceptive exposure, such as months of use, and others that will render the model unstable because they apply only to a few persons, such as “previous use of Schering PC4”, or because they are correlated with the type of contraceptive, such as “recent change of pills”.

The finding of the highest relative risk in users of a 20 μg ethinylestradiol third-generation pill can make perfect sense: it is a combination of a starter effect and a third-generation effect. During the period of the study the 20 μg ethinylestradiol preparation was predominantly prescribed to new users, and had not been used for long. WHO data have shown that in the first year of use, new users have the highest relative risks.2 If they use a third-generation contraceptive their risk doubles again. That the increased risk of third-generation contraceptives remains, even with a low dose of oestrogens, should not come as a surprise: even the very low doses of oestrogens as are used in hormonal replacement therapy have almost the same relative risk of venous thrombosis as oral contraceptives.3 If such a low dose of oestrogens is coupled to a third-generation progestagen that further increases its thrombogenic potential, and if this is preferentially prescribed to new users, we would expect the effect found by Farmer and co-workers.

Farmer and colleagues' report contains two gross misreadings of our previous publication. They imply that no previous studies applied sufficiently strict case-stratification criteria, and that we did not make the distinction between 20 and 30 μg ethinylestradiol preparations. In the Leiden study we adjusted by single year of age, which is as adequate as age-matching with a variable case/control ratio, and as stated explicitly in the text and in the table, there were no users of 20 μg ethinylestradiol preparations. Nevertheless, the same two-fold increase in risk was found.

*Jan P Vandenbroucke, Frans M Helmhorst, Kitty W M Bloemenkamp, Frits R Rosendaal
Departments of *Clinical Epidemiology, Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Medicine, and Thrombosis and Haemostasis Research Centre, Leiden University Hospital, PO Box 9500, 2300 RC Leiden, Netherlands