population of patients in Great Ormond Street Hospital is widely diverse in culture and language, and in hospitals serving a more localised community it will be easier for the teachers to establish links with the children's schools. The medical staff may be more supportive if they see that the schools are involved in the educational process.

Finally, the questionnaire developed in the present study could also be administered to parents and pupils before and after the child has been admitted to the hospital. Analysis of the responses should provide valuable information regarding the significance of hospital education from the point of view of those directly benefiting from it.

References


The next issue of Education and Health will include articles on:

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE TRAVEL TO SCHOOL
HOW PETS CAN HELP HEALTH EDUCATORS

This latest report from the Unit studies questions never asked before!

Young People and ALCOHOL
Its use and abuse

How much are they drinking?
What are they drinking?
Where are they drinking?
Why are they drinking?
What do they think drinking does to them?
What do they fear may happen because of drinking?
Do their parents know they are drinking?
Does drinking make them aggressive?
Does drinking make others in the family aggressive?
Plus...

Special attention to "Alcopops"
Attitudes to "sparkling" drinks
How important is the "under-age" market?

These results are based on a survey of 8315 pupils in Years 8 and 10, carried out in 1996.

This 122-page report costs £17.00 including p&p. Order your copy by telephoning 01392 284725 or faxing 01392 284761.

Mark Griffiths

Are virtual pets more demanding than the real thing?

Over the past few months I have been receiving more and more calls from various parts of the media asking me for my thoughts on Tamagotchi — or cyberpets, as the press have dubbed them — particularly about whether they are a threat to either educational or social development. At the moment it is far too early to give definitive answers to such questions, but these press enquiries have certainly stimulated my thoughts on the subject.

A threat to mental health?

Tamagotchis are currently the country's bestselling toy, and appear to be a craze sweeping the UK child population. In Japan (where they originated), Tamagotchis have been selling a million a month since their launch in November 1996. Since their launch in this country on 8 May 1997, Tamagotchis have been discussed on Esther and The Late Show, have made an appearance in The Archers, and have been written about in newspaper stories up and down the country. For instance Getch! Is this toy a threat to our mental health? which appeared in the Independent on Sunday (13 July 1997), was one such story.

Although the toys are probably a fad, they do seem to be a new breed of toy that is more interesting psychologically than many of its predecessors like Space Hoppers, Doely-Boppers, and the Rubik's Cube. Many may argue that we have always been fascinated by portable games and toys. However, unlike most toys, which people eventually get bored with, it is alleged that Tamagotchis require their owners to be the slave rather than the master. This Christmas there is likely to be a Tamagotchi bonanza, which will be fuelled by more sophisticated versions and six more colours. Many schools, both here and in South East Asia, have already banned them in an attempt to stop them interfering with children's educational development.

For those reading this who still have no idea what a Tamagotchi is or does, then let me explain. Tamagotchi means 'egg watch' or 'lovable egg', and the device looks like an egg-shaped key ring. It is about 60mm in diameter and has a small liquid crystal display screen. By pulling a small tag on the side, an 'egg' hatch to reveal a small chick, and the owner has to attend to its every need by pressing the appropriate buttons.

Constant attention

These virtual pets demand all the things you would expect of a real pet (being fed, going to the toilet, going for walks, being disciplined when it is naughty, being given injections if it is sick, etc.). They require constant attention to survive. Unhappy animals that are not fed or nurtured make noises (squawks, smarts) at their owners and will die if they are ignored. The aim of the game — if indeed it is a game — is to keep the Tamagotchi alive for as long as possible. The
A study suggests that many young people with asthma are unclear about the effect of air quality on their condition, and do not make the best use of information services.

Lesley Kendall, the project leader, is a Senior Research Officer with NEFAL, where she has worked for over 15 years. During this period she has been involved in a wide variety of projects covering many aspects of education and training, from pre-school to higher education.

### Something in the air — but what does it mean?

**Asthma** is the commonest long-term medical condition among children, and has increased in both incidence and prevalence over recent decades. One in seven children of school age in the UK is now diagnosed as having asthma.

Public perception links the increase in asthma with rising levels of air pollution, although a recent report commissioned by the Department of Health (Holgate, 1995) has concluded that other factors are much more important.

The study reported here concerned young people with asthma aged from 11 to 16, and had three main aims:
- to investigate how these young people obtain information on air quality, and how they respond to such information;
- to assess the role of parents and schools in providing this information, supporting pupils with asthma and helping them to make more informed choices;
- to consider how information could be better targeted for this group of young people.

Questionnaires were completed by over 1,800 pupils with asthma, in Years 7 to 11 in a sample of schools in England. In addition, over 80 pupils took part in group discussions to explore some of the issues in more depth. The representatives of 157 secondary schools and 55 special schools also completed questionnaires.

This report provides a brief review of some of the key findings from this study, which was funded by the Department of Health (Kendall, 1997).

### Experience of asthma

Asthma was important to the pupils returning questionnaires, with over half experiencing symptoms of asthma at least once a week. Most felt that their families understood how asthma affected them, but only half were confident that they knew enough about asthma, how it affected them individually, and about how air quality can affect asthma.

Not all the young people carried their reliever inhaler at all times, either because it was inconvenient or because it made them feel ‘different’. Information provided at times when young people are leaving home for the day may be more effective in reminding them to take their inhaler with them than would similar information provided in mid-evening. Pupils were asked whether a number of factors made their asthma worse. The ten most important factors were:
- running around or doing sports;
- colds and illnesses;
- being in places where people smoke;
- hay fever or pollen;
- house dust mites;
- hot summer days with no wind;
- smoke from factories;
- cold weather;
- being near traffic;
- anxiety.

Clearly, many of these factors are related to indoor and outdoor air quality.