



# Paths to and from poverty in late 19th century novels

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## LITERATURE AND EPIDEMIOLOGY

## Paths to and from poverty in late 19th century novels

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Late 19th century novels provide graphic descriptions of working and living conditions and their impact on population health, in particular the detrimental effects of hunger, poor housing, environmental conditions, hazardous work and poor pay, smoking and alcohol and crime, but also the transformative possibilities of social and political action. The popularity of these novels helped raise the collective conscience of citizens and illuminated the direction for 20th century welfare reforms. Yet many of these problems remain and the pathways to and from poverty are still recognisable today. Although novels are now less central in conveying social information, re-reading these novels enables us to understand how social and economic circumstances were understood at the time and what led to social and political change.

and art galleries were set up along with organisations such as trade unions, cooperative societies, workers' education associations, friendly societies and peace societies, that enabled working people to meet together to discuss their lives and issues of the day.<sup>8,9</sup> Through such social capital, collective actions could be imagined, planned, and undertaken. Novels were one way in which possibilities could be wrought and emancipatory ideas tested and shared.

For the first time, middle class people could read, in the comfort of their own homes, about "the pedestrian description of everyday reality" (p 351) and significantly, the lives of the poor. Sympathies were raised and with the common threat of infectious disease, communities were gradually mobilised to improve the structure of working lives, through reform of housing, working conditions, social insurance, and welfare. While the novelists' motivations varied, some authors wrote explicitly to add their voices, often literally in public readings that followed publication, to the need for social reform.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, we look at the pathways to and from poverty, in the words of selected 19th century novels from the second half of the 19th century. In rapidly changing industrial societies social position is precarious, both upward and downward mobility is common. We have selected popular novels from a number of countries that highlight the pathways through the changing fortunes of the characters in the novels and the impact on their health.

These novels were unrestrained by word limits—the economic incentives were for more rather than less words—so the settings in these novels reveal in-depth descriptions of the material circumstances in which the characters lived.<sup>9</sup> Lives are largely shaped by the wretched environments in the newly industrialised cities, but the plots show people's resilience and their individual (and collective) struggles to overcome these adversities.

Our classifications were informed by historical discussions about the important determinants of health inequalities.<sup>10</sup> We have classified the main pathways to poverty illustrated in the novels as: hunger; poor housing; environmental conditions, hazardous work and poor pay; smoking and alcohol; crime; and the pathways from poverty as social and political action. The communicable diseases to which people succumb are the diseases of the time, afflicting the poor more than the rich: tuberculosis, syphilis, and typhoid.<sup>3,11</sup> Depression and despair hang over many lives in these pages, but also solutions—collective action through Benthamite secular reform and Christian evangelicalism, which by

The reasons why life expectancy in Europe did not increase steadily throughout the 19th century along with increasing industrial wealth are still controversial.<sup>1</sup> Despite municipal and social reforms and advances in medical science, life expectancy decreased and social inequalities in life expectancy increased until the latter part of the 19th century. These trends reflected the growth of widespread poverty alongside greater wealth, but also that payoffs from social investments in public health come well after the investment is made, so that ways of sustaining public support for social reforms are important.

Public health theorists such as McKeown deduced that the decrease in infectious diseases that would gradually increase life expectancy was primarily the result of rising living standards and better food,<sup>2</sup> a viewpoint recently supported by historical research by the Nobel Prize winning economist Fogel.<sup>3</sup> Others have maintained that better drains<sup>4</sup> and the resultant availability of clean water was the determining factor.<sup>5</sup> But what was the popular viewpoint in the latter part of the 19th century and how did it influence public policy?

In the 19th century, new technology and better education enabled ordinary people in Europe and the USA simultaneously to have access to written materials at a price that they could afford, in part as copyright laws were not enacted in the USA until 1891.<sup>6</sup> In turn, for the first time their lives were reflected in novels written by working men and women.<sup>7</sup> It was a century of ferment; reform and revolution were both possible. New institutions such as public lending libraries, museums

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highlighting the growing administrative capacity of the secular state, prefigure the welfare state.<sup>9</sup>

## HUNGER

Every night my prayers I say,  
And get my dinner every day;  
And every day that I've been good,  
I get an orange after food.

The child that is not clean or neat,  
With lots of toys and things to eat,  
He is a naughty child, I'm sure –  
Or else his dear papa is poor.<sup>12</sup>

Escape from hunger and early death did not become a reality for most ordinary people until the 20th century. Stunted growth increased their vulnerability to both contagious and chronic diseases.<sup>3</sup> Hunger stalks the poor in many 19th century novels in many countries. The enclosure of common land in England had led to many tenants migrating to the cities. The “Clearances” of small tenant holdings in the Scottish Highlands led to famine, which earlier in Ireland had been caused by the potato blight.<sup>13</sup> Famine throughout Scandinavia led to mass migration from rural areas to the USA. Yet, in the southern states of the USA there was also hunger and, later, a rural exodus to the North caused by the problems of reconstruction after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> There were also catastrophic famines in India and China, exacerbated by the indifference or incompetence of colonial rule and western imperialism, which led to an estimated death toll of 50 million.<sup>14</sup>

Zola captures the debilitating effect of hunger in many of his novels. In *Germinal* the miners muse “When you're dead you aren't hungry” and see the labour market as “the equilibrium of empty bellies, a life sentence in the prison of hunger”<sup>15</sup> (p 146). While all suffer, it is the women and children who are most vulnerable. One of the mine owners surveys the family who, out of desperation, have come begging:

Monsieur Gregoir gazed reflectively at the mother and her pitiful children, at their wax-like flesh, colourless hair, their look of stunted degeneration, wasted by anaemia, and the miserable ugliness of the underfed. There was another silence, only broken by the spurting of gas from the burning coal. The warm room was full of that heavy feeling of well-being in which cosy bourgeois love to settle themselves down to slumber.<sup>15</sup> (p 99)

The stark differences in the relative material position of the owner and the worker's family is evident to them all and such social observations and meetings help to fan the vision of revolutionary change in the community. As Du Bois noted, for Negroes in the American context, “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.”<sup>16</sup> (p 12).

When the miners strike in protest at a cut in their pay, famine and starvation follow.

All along the rows of lifeless houses, the very doors seemed to smell of famine and resound hollowly. What was the use of knocking. It was Poverty & Co. everywhere. Nobody had had a square meal for weeks.<sup>15</sup> (p 255)

Memories were still fresh from the grinding poverty, which had underlain the French Revolution the century before:

...The darkness of it was heavy—cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance, and want were the Lords of waiting on the saintly presence—nobles of great power all of them: but, most especially the last...The mill which had worked them down, was the mill that grinds young people old; the children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger.<sup>17</sup> (p 32)

## POOR HOUSING

One of the main constraints on having money for food was having money to pay the rent. In Great Britain, unlike Europe, most of the rural working classes did not own their own homes.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the first part of the 19th century up to 20% of the English population were itinerant, homeless, and hungry.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 19th century rural unrest had accompanied agrarian reform and then industrialisation, and motivated a move to the cities or the great utopian escape—emigration.<sup>8</sup> During the second half of the 19th century rural villages continued to be depopulated. Changes in farming practices and rural industrialisation led to the enclosure of common land in England and the reduction in the stock of rural housing for agricultural labourers. Thomas Hardy was a keen observer of the changing rural economy. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard and his family are wandering the countryside in search of work.

“Then is there any house to let – a small cottage just a-built, or such like?” asked the other.

The pessimist still remained a negative. ‘Pulling down is more the nater of Wedon. There were five houses cleared away last year, and three this; and the volk nowhere to go—no, not so much as a thatched hurdle, that’s the way of Weydon-Priors.’<sup>19</sup> (p 29)

In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, after her father dies, Tess and her family are given notice to leave their cottage and become disastrously homeless.

As the long holdings fell in they were seldom again let to similar tenants, and were mostly pulled down, if not absolutely required by the farmer for his hands. Cottagers who were not directly employed on the land were looked upon with disfavour, and the banishment of some starved the trade of others, who were thus obliged to follow. These families, who had formed the backbone of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as ‘the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns, being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery.’<sup>20</sup> (p 395)

Many of the homeless were, like David Copperfield, children who travelled the roads “faint and weary”:

“Never shall I forget the lonely sensation of first lying down without a roof over my head! Sleep came upon me as it came on many other outcasts, against whom house-doors were locked, and house-dogs barked”<sup>21</sup> (p 188).

After surviving like many poor people by pawning items of clothes, David Copperfield later finds temporary respite with

a relative and prays “that I never might be houseless any more, and never might forget the houseless.”<sup>21</sup> (p 206).

As both Fredrick Engels<sup>22</sup> and Edwin Chadwick<sup>23</sup> had observed, crowded rack-rented tenement buildings were a fact of life for most of the poor who flocked to the cities for work. Many lived in cellars or in apartments, which were sub-let, with internal rooms that had no opening windows.

Every little habitation within the great foul nest of one high building—that is to say, the room or rooms within every door that opened on the general staircase—left its own heap of refuse on its own landing, besides flinging other refuse from its own windows. The uncontrollable and hopeless mass of decomposition so engendered, would have polluted the air, even if poverty and deprivation had not loaded it with their intangible impurities; the two bad sources combined made it almost insupportable. Through such an atmosphere, by a steep dark shaft of dirt and poison, the way lay.<sup>17</sup> (p 38)

In *Crime and Punishment*, the anti-hero Raskolnikov of St Petersburg meets for the first time, and “at home”, the consumptive family with whom his fate becomes intimately entwined:

She had not heard anyone enter, and did not notice them; she seemed to be in a kind of trance, hearing and seeing nothing. The room was suffocatingly hot, but she had not opened the window; a foul odour drifted up from the staircase, but the door that gave on to it was not closed; from the inner rooms, through the door that was ajar, clouds of tobacco smoke floated, but although she was coughing she did not close it, either. The very youngest child, a little girl of about six, was asleep on the floor in a sort of cowering sitting position, her head thrust on the sofa. A little boy, who must have been about a year older than her, was trembling in a corner, weeping. He looked as though he had just been given a beating.<sup>24</sup> (p 32)

Tuberculosis was epidemic even in a country like England where good food was more plentiful, but the cottages of labourers were often in a poor state of repair. One of the dairy maids in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is “flaxen Frances, consumptive from the winter-damps of the water-meeds.”<sup>20</sup> (p 162)

Company housing, linked to a job, benefited some, but perpetuated some problems. Etienne the revolutionary hero in *Germinal* is enraged by the daily misery of the miners' lives and rallies them to strike for better pay.

He had studied miners' occupational diseases and now brought them all out with horrible details: anaemia, scrofula, black bronchitis, choking asthma, paralysing rheumatism. They, poor devils, were just machine-fodder, they were penned like cattle in housing estates, the big Companies were gradually dominating their whole lives, regulating slavery<sup>15</sup> (p 279)

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Miasma, the odour from decay, was considered the main cause of disease before the germ theory overlaid it.<sup>10</sup> In *North and South* Margaret Hale is discouraged by the heavy smoky air, the thick fogs and the grime of the Midland city to which she has moved from the rural south.

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay.<sup>26</sup> (p 59)

The novel contains a discussion on “unparliamentary smoke”, so called because of largely unenforced law changes in 1847 that required all new fireplaces or furnaces “to consume the smoke arising from the combustibles used”. The reactionary mill owner Mr Thornton rebels against the idea of being treated like “good little children”, but concedes:

Mine were altered by my own will, before parliament meddled with the affair. It was an immediate outlay, but it repays me in the saving of coal...At any rate, I should have waited to be informed against and fined, and given all the trouble in yielding that I legally could. But all laws which depend for their enforcement upon informers and fines, become inert from the odiousness of the machinery.<sup>26</sup> p 82.

## HAZARDOUS OCCUPATIONS AND POOR PAY

The employment of children was common in the 19th century and being sent up dark chimneys and down mines were two of the cruellest jobs. For many, death at an early age was the most they could hope for. Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*, a tale that begins with the drowning of Tom, forced up manor house chimneys by the cruel Grimes was like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a novel written with a specific purpose—to write a social and economic wrong.

Factory work that drew the poor to the cities was full of hazards. By 1850, the harmful effects of minute fibres of cotton, while still disputed by many factory owners, were clearly evident:

They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one works in the carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they've just been poisoned by the fluff.<sup>26</sup> (p 102)

With diminished life expectancy came early sexual initiation and youthful pregnancies.

The girls developed early in the coalfields, and he called to mind the Lillie work-girls he used to wait for behind the factories, gangs of fourteen-year-olds already corrupted in the promiscuity of poverty.<sup>15</sup> (p 126)

For poor women without education, who then fell on hard times, sex work was one of the few options, but it was hard, dangerous work with a short life expectancy. Prostitutes appear frequently in 19th century novels, interestingly often as saints as in Nancy in Dickens' *David Copperfield* or Sonya, Raskolnikov's saviour, in *Crime and Punishment*. Here, Raskolnikov has just intervened to make sure that a young, intoxicated prostitute is not picked up by an older man and he muses over her chances, mulling over the determinism inherent in the then newly fashionable idea of ‘social statistics’.

“‘Poor girl!’ he said, looking at the empty corner of the bench. ‘She’ll come out of it, cry a bit, and then her mother will get to know...First she’ll box her ears, then she’ll give her a thrashing, a hard painful and ignominious one, and then she’ll probably turn her out of the house....soon my little girl will start trotting about one

port of call to another...Then it'll be straight to hospital...and then hospital again...vodka...the drinking dens...and again the hospital...and in two or three years' time she'll be a paralysed cripple, and the sum total of her years will be nineteen, or perhaps only eighteen....They say that each year a certain percentage has to go off down the road....A percentage! Nice little words they use, to be sure: they're so reassuring, so scientific. Just say: "percentage", and all your troubles are over. Now if one were to choose another word, well ...then things might look a little less reassuring."<sup>24</sup> (p 63)

Even when the work was not hazardous to health, it is clear that the work available to the working class was often dehumanising and poorly paid and led to a constant struggle against the pernicious, depressing effects of poverty. In Gissing's *New Grubb Street*, Reardon, a novelist, wonders whether he can ever afford to marry.

He knew what poverty means. The chilling of brain and heart, the unnerving of the hands, the slow gathering about one of fear and shame and impotent wrath, the dread feeling of helplessness, of the world's base indifference. Poverty! Poverty!"<sup>27</sup> (p 97)

When he does marry, his situation becomes even worse than he feared, as a friend observes to an acquaintance.

Perhaps I had better say that it's unfortunate they are poor. Poverty is the root of all social ills; its existence accounts even for the ills that arise from wealth. The poor man is labouring in fetters. I declare there is no word in our language which sounds so hideous to me as "Poverty."<sup>27</sup> (p 63)

## SMOKING AND ALCOHOL

There are many stories of the dangers as well as the pleasures of alcohol. In the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard sells his wife after drinking too much illegal rum at a fair, but when after remorsefully swearing an oath of abstinence, he later becomes mayor and soberly presides over a meeting of the town Corporation, alcohol is seen as a powerful positive force for sociability.

The Corporation, private residents, and major and minor tradesmen, had, in fact, gone in for comforting beverages to such an extent that they had quite forgotten, not only the Mayor, but all those vast political, religious, and social differences which they felt necessary to maintain in the daytime, and which separated them like iron grills.<sup>19</sup> (pp 56–57)

The solace of tobacco smoking, alcohol, and absinthe are woven through the novels, but interestingly, this being the beginning of the tobacco epidemic, smoking is often the preserve of the wealthy or the educated. Alex d'Urberville, the wealthy landowner who seduces Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and thereby precipitates a cascade of disasters for her, has as his hallmark of wickedness a cigar between his teeth.<sup>20</sup>

The detective pursuing Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* comes unannounced up to his room and lights a cigarette. Despite smoking in the streets having just been made legal, he is in no doubt that it is harming his health.

"mean, look at these cigarettes," Porfiry Petrovich said at last, having lit one, his breath recovered. "They do me harm, nothing but harm, yet I can't give them up! I cough, sir, I've begun to get a tickling in my throat, and I'm short of breath. I'm a coward, you know: I went to see B—, for a consultation the other day...he actually burst out laughing just at the sight of me: tapped my heart and asculated me. 'By the way,' he said, 'you ought to avoid tobacco; your lungs are dilated.' But I mean, how can I give it up? What am I going to use as a substitute?"<sup>24</sup> (p 535)

## CRIME

Nineteenth century novels are seething with violent crimes. But as the classic novel *Crime and Punishment* highlights, while there is often considerable moral ambiguity about the causes, the agency is clear and in the absence of capital punishment (less common in Russia than Britain), redemption and even a form of restorative justice is often possible. At his trial for the premeditated murder of the elderly pawnbroker and her sister, Raskolnikov replies with "brutal precision", but disingenuous conventionality:

that the cause of the whole thing had been his rotten social position, his poverty and helplessness, and his desire to secure the first steps of his career with the help of at least three thousand roubles, which he had counted on finding in the home of the murdered woman. As for the murder, he had embarked upon it as a result of his frivolous and cowardly nature, which had, moreover, been overwrought by deprivation and failure.<sup>24</sup> (p 39)

Tess, as a poor woman bound to support her family, is driven to a murder as a way of freeing herself from her seducer, an act of revenge for which she, unlike Raskolnikov, gets no second chance.

A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag. "Justice" was done.<sup>20</sup> (p.446)

Crime and poverty are twin afflictions in 19th century novels and there are all too few paths for redemption outlined. However, 19th century novels do highlight a collective path out of poverty that draws on both individual charity and institutional reform.

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTION

Appealing to their readers, most novels describe charitable, individual ways of helping people out of poverty. Indeed, Rumsey, a general practitioner in mid-Victorian Britain, had called for the creation of medical "missionaries of health" who would visit the poor and provide advice on housekeeping food and clothing.<sup>28</sup> There was an active group of middle class visitors, who attempted to improve the condition of the poor, but for the most part such visitors, for all their good intentions, were severely constrained by their limited

### What this paper adds

This paper explores the ways novelists portrayed how people moving to urban areas in the late 19th century were frequently reduced to living in poverty. These widely read novels increased society's understanding and helped to pave the way for welfare reforms.

horizons. In *Middlemarch*, the heiress Dorothea muses on building two workers' cottages as a charitable project to pass her time:

I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know;—unless it were building good cottages—there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time.<sup>29</sup> (p 51)

Her admirer Sir James Chettam is enthusiastic about carrying out her plans, but cautions her.

Of course it is sinking money; that is why people object to it. Labourers can never pay rent to make it answer. But, after all it is worth doing.  
"Worth doing! Yes indeed," said Dorothea, energetically, forgetting her previous small vexations. "I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in sties as we see round us. Life in cottages might be happier than ours, if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections."<sup>29</sup>(p 53–54)

She has a sentimental view of the ease of the transformation—"it would be as if the spirit of Oberlin had passed over the parishes to make the life of poverty beautiful!" and distracted by her own affairs the project comes to nothing. Likewise, the new plans for a Fever Hospital to treat cholera founder on the politics surrounding England's First Reform Bill.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* Margaret Hale, the daughter of a dissenting clergyman, begins visiting a union worker's family after a bitter strike, which illustrates the strength and costs of collective action, and indirectly leads the mill owner to take a personal interest in the conditions in which his workers live. His awareness leads him to buy wholesale provisions and set up an experimental staff canteen, where he joins his workers sometimes and begins to know them.

I've got acquainted with a strange kind of chap, and I put one or two children in whom he is interested to school. So, as I happened to be passing near his house one day, I just went there about some trifling payment to be made; and I saw such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner—a greasy cinder of meat, as first set me a-thinking.<sup>26</sup>

The lessons of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune recounted in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Les Misérables* provide a stark account of the revolutionary alternatives to more general social welfare measures. Readers were put on notice that ignoring serious problems in living and working conditions involved critical political perils.

## CONCLUSION

Nineteenth century novels can give us imaginative insights about the debilitating effect of hunger, the human suffering behind life in rack-rented tenement buildings, and horrific

workplace deaths beyond any scatter plot of life expectancy. The novels illustrate that heroic individual struggles were generally insufficient to balance the predominant economic system and that the concerted organised efforts of society were essential if most people were going to have enough to eat, were going to be able to live in healthy housing and neighbourhoods, and work without being maimed. These novels help to revitalise this shared understanding, which forms the basis of public health action then and now.<sup>11</sup>

In 19th century novels the favoured explanation for poverty was improvidence, *the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure*<sup>26</sup> (p 85). The "undeserving" poor, like the black field hands in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were condemned as "Shiftless!" by Aunt Ophelia, the northerner.<sup>30</sup> Such ignorant short shrift was rare in 19th century novels and indeed Aunt Ophelia engages in prolonged conversations and instruction that changes her initial impressions. The length of the standard three volumes of 19th century novels<sup>7</sup> encouraged most authors to explore the complex economic and social reasons for poverty and illness and the paths that led to it, even if the undeserving poor were usually paired with an example of the deserving poor, who had managed to retain the virtues of family life despite poverty. The growing literacy of the working classes, the rise of public libraries, reform churches and trade unions meant there was an avid reading public for these novels, which helped to create a general sympathy for welfare measures as well as charity. Nineteenth century novels stand as graphic reminders of the impacts of poverty and motivators of reform, and suggest pathways towards reform that helped to mobilise social and political action.

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## Policy implications

Popular literature can have an important role in creating a groundswell for welfare reform.

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- Documenting your decisions about which studies to include on an inclusion and exclusion form, which we keep on file.
- Writing the text to a highly structured template (about 1500-3000 words), using evidence from the final studies chosen, within 8-10 weeks of receiving the literature search.
- Working with *Clinical Evidence* editors to ensure that the final text meets epidemiological and style standards.
- Updating the text every 12 months using any new, sound evidence that becomes available. The *Clinical Evidence* in-house team will conduct the searches for contributors; your task is simply to filter out high quality studies and incorporate them in the existing text.

If you would like to become a contributor for *Clinical Evidence* or require more information about what this involves please send your contact details and a copy of your CV, clearly stating the clinical area you are interested in, to [CECommissioning@bmjgroup.com](mailto:CECommissioning@bmjgroup.com).

## Call for peer reviewers

*Clinical Evidence* also needs to recruit a number of new peer reviewers specifically with an interest in the clinical areas stated above, and also others related to general practice. Peer reviewers are healthcare professionals or epidemiologists with experience in evidence-based medicine. As a peer reviewer you would be asked for your views on the clinical relevance, validity, and accessibility of specific topics within the journal, and their usefulness to the intended audience (international generalists and healthcare professionals, possibly with limited statistical knowledge). Topics are usually 1500-3000 words in length and we would ask you to review between 2-5 topics per year. The peer review process takes place throughout the year, and out turnaround time for each review is ideally 10-14 days.

If you are interested in becoming a peer reviewer for *Clinical Evidence*, please complete the peer review questionnaire at [www.clinicalevidence.com/ceweb/contribute/peerreviewer.jsp](http://www.clinicalevidence.com/ceweb/contribute/peerreviewer.jsp)