Correspondence

SIR—In his excellent paper 'An appraisal of hypnosis' (*Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 47, 572–580) H. Merskey describes what does not happen in hypnosis with considerable knowledge and effect. What he does not mention is what does happen.

Certainly there is 'an implicit agreement' between subject and hypnotist. Without this, no form of psychotherapy could ever proceed and indeed, such implicit agreement exists in all treatment whatever the nature of the illness or the speciality of the therapist. This is known as rapport and is the doctor's most powerful weapon.

The treatment of phobias, tension headaches, of asthma and of pain in childbirth is dismissed in as many words and the all important area of psychoneurotic illness does not merit mention.

Dr Merskey, quoting Barber's argument, states in effect, that what happens in hypnosis is what the patient wants to happen, hysterical conversion symptoms, catalepsy, analgesia and amnesia included. We also therefore have the problem of the resistant patient but herein lies the skill of the therapist.

Be it so, there is scarcely a patient that does not open his eyes after hypnosis—applied as a therapy—and say 'I feel much better'.

It is quite obvious that canalization of attention can be achieved to such an extent in hypnosis that learned reactions of behaviour, acquired in a traumatic setting can be unlearned and a new pattern of behaviour relearned in a situa-

tion of calmness and composure as shown by the alpha-wave rhythm Dr Merskey regretfully admits.

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We have shown this letter to Dr Merskey who replies as follows:

SIR—In reply to Dr Waxman's letter I think it must rest with your readers to decide whether or not I did describe what happens during hypnosis. May I point out that I have not specifically referred to the alpha rhythm anywhere in my paper. Had I done so, and if I thought changes in the alpha rhythm demonstrated that a new pattern of behaviour could be relearned in a situation of calmness and composure, I would have had no regrets in describing such an important phenomenon. May I conclude by repeating that I still find an occasional use for hypnosis but only as a convenient form of suggestion.

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H. MERSKEY
M.A., D.M., D.P.M.