

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

At last we seem to be having a touch of summer, but this is not without controversy. The BMJ of 10th July 1999 published an article questioning whether we need to worry about exposing ourselves to the sun and quoting a recent edition of Vogue as a reference. I trust that this 17th offering will not be quite so contentious.

Lessons from a Cyclist

In my last letter, I mentioned the problems of drugs and cycling. This time I can take a much more positive attitude. Whilst we applaud the guts and determination of Lance Armstrong in overcoming disseminated testicular cancer to win Le Tour de France, we need to heed the message in a recent editorial. Regular exercise reduces the risk of cancer of the breast and colon, diabetes, CHD and many other diseases. Less than 40% of the population engage in regular physical activity and it is incumbent on us, as physicians, to encourage our patients, family and friends to increase the amount of exercise they take. One fact in the editorial caught my eye. In the Netherlands 30% of trips are by bicycle and 18% by walking. Comparable figures in the UK are 8% for cycles and 12% for walking and in the USA the figures fall to 1% and 9% respectively. (*BMJ*. 1999;**319**:334)

Good News for Walkers

Although it is well recognised that walking is good for the cardiovascular system, recent research has shown that it also improves your cognitive powers. The biggest impact is on those executive I processes controlled by the frontal and prefrontal cortex, such as planning, scheduling and working memory. (*Nature*. 1999;**400**:418-9)

Aspirin Still Rules OK

Clopidogrel has been heralded as the new wonder drug for the treatment of stroke and myocardial infarction, but it can't compete with aspirin for price. In a recent review, aspirin was found to be just as effective as clopidogrel in preventing thromboembolic events and is 45 times cheaper. The advice is, stick to aspirin unless it is badly tolerated or is contraindicated. (*Stroke*. 1999;**30**:1716-21)

Safety of Herbal Supplements

Aloe vera, ginseng, kava and milk thistle are to be examined by a coalition of the FDA, NIH and the Centers for Disease Control to see if there is any evidence that they are carcinogenic. It has already been noted that there are similarities between aloe vera and croton oil, which is a well-recognised carcinogen. A 5th substance nominated for testing is indole-3-carbinol, which is found in cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage and turnip. This is believed to have the potential to reduce the risk of cancer. (*BMJ*. 1999;**319**:336)

Instant Interpretation

In Australia, doctors can contact a telephone service, which provides "round the clock" access to interpreters in over 100 languages. A survey of UK A & E departments, recently reported, found widespread support for such a service to be introduced and suggested that NHS Direct might be a good place to start. (*Accident & Emerg.Med*. 1999;**23**:240-4)

Treatment of Addiction

The dopamine D₃ receptor is thought to be involved in reinforcing the effects of cocaine. The discovery of a new agent, BP897, which is a partial agonist at the dopamine D₃ receptor, has reduced the cravings in rats. If this work translates into humans, it could launch a new generation of treatments for this increasingly desperate problem. (*Nature*. 1999;**100**:371-5)

Buprenorphine works in a similar fashion, but at a different receptor, to attenuate heroin cravings. It is emerging as an alternative to methadone and could be a major advance in treatment. (*Prescribe Int*. 1999;**19**:102-6)

Xenotransplantation

A large international study has concluded that the use of pig organs for transplantation into humans is safe. The study examined 160 patients who had been exposed to living pig tissue through extracorporeal perfusion for liver and kidney failure, skin grafting in cases of major burns or the grafting of pancreatic islet cells for diabetes. There was no evidence of infection from porcine retroviruses, even in the 36 patients who were immunosuppressed. (*Science*. 1999;**285**:1236-41)

Ban on British Blood

People who have spent a total of 6 months in the UK between 1980 and 1997 will be banned from donating blood in the USA and Canada. This is because of worries that nvCJD could possibly be transmitted by blood transfusion. Quebec has lowered the limit to one month and the Japanese government is considering a similar ban. This flies in the face of all scientific work, which has shown no connection between blood transfusion and the incidence of nvCJD. (*BMJ*. 1999;**319**:535)

Hepatitis C in the USA

The 3rd national health and nutrition examination survey covered 40,000 people throughout the USA. It found that almost 2% of the population were infected with hepatitis C, which translates to about 3.9 million Americans overall. This compares with a prevalence of less than 1% in the UK. Is our blood all that bad? (*New Engl.J.Med*. 1999;**341**:556-62)

Malaria Prophylaxis

No chemical prophylaxis gives 100% cover, but mefloquine (Lariam) remains the drug of choice for East Africa, where its efficacy is about 90%. Serious CNS symptoms occur in between 1 in 10,000 and 1 in 20,000 users. The incidence of non-serious problems varies from 1.8% to 7.6%, females having more problems than males. About 40% of problems occur in the first week and 70% within a fortnight. (*Prescribers' Journal*. 1999;**39**:161-5)

Ice Can Burn

A 59-year-old female sustained a partial thickness burn to her calf after her gym instructor told her to rest it on an ice pack for 20 minutes. A recent article warns that ice packs can be just as damaging as hot water bottles if applied directly to the skin, especially when freezing is combined with compressing the skin. The advice is always to put a towel between the ice and the skin. (*Br.J.Sports Med*. 1999;**33**:278-9)

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