

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

I have just returned from an excellent holiday in Egypt and am really in the mood to get my 20th Newsletter to you all.

Tests for Pancreatitis

Serum amylase has been the traditional diagnostic test for acute pancreatitis, but has been found to be less than reliable. A more reliable test is contrast enhanced computed tomography, but this is frequently unavailable. The introduction of a new rapid dipstick test for trypsinogen 2 has been found to have a negative predictive value of 99% and should prove of great value in ruling out pancreatitis as a cause of acute abdominal pain. (*Brit.J.Surg.* 2000;**87**:49-52)

Immunonutrition

Immunonutrition has been found to reduce postoperative infection rates and improve gut function, especially if commenced several days prior to surgery. In a recent study of patients with gastrointestinal cancer, patients given enteral nutrition enriched with fish oils, RNA nucleotides and arginine, had fewer complications than those receiving traditional formulae. (*Arch.Surg.* 1999;**134**:1309-16)

Diphtheria

The diphtheria epidemic in Eastern Europe has raised fears as to whether travellers from Western Europe are adequately protected. Vellinga and colleagues gave 176 volunteers, aged 33 to 55 years, who had been fully immunised as children a single booster dose of diphtheria vaccine. 134 (76%) became fully protected, but 9 (5%) were only partially protected and 33 (19%) remained susceptible. The conclusion was that a single dose is inadequate. (*BMJ.* 2000;**320**:217)

Fat Free Crisps

The fat substitute olestra, which is used in fat free crisps, is not absorbed by the gut and appears in the stools, where it mimics steatorrhoea in standard tests. An experiment in healthy volunteers showed that eating 140g of fat free crisps per day was enough to produce the kind of stools usually associated with serious malabsorption. (*Ann.Int.Med.* 2000;**132**:279-82)

Arsenic Poisoning in Bangladesh

Surveys of groundwater used for drinking and cooking in Bangladesh, drawn from several thousand deep wells, have identified concentrations of arsenic over 40 times the maximum acceptable levels. More than 7,000 people have already been diagnosed as suffering from arsenic poisoning, but it is estimated that 60 million are at risk. Dr Karim, vice president of the Bangladesh Public Health Association, stated "Bangladesh faces a dilemma. Do we revert to surface water and risk cholera or rotavirus infections or allow people to continue drinking tube well water laced with arsenic? (*BMJ.* 2000;**320**:822. Full story in News Extra at www.bmj.com)

Bacterial Resistance

A recent report from the Public Health Laboratory Service shows a worrying increase in bacterial resistance to five key antibiotics. These were methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, penicillin and erythromycin resistant *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, vancomycin resistant *Enterococcus faecalis* and *faecium* and gentamicin resistant *Escherichia coli*. However, these bare facts cover up a much more worrying development. These resistant organisms are not just resistant to the stated drug, but are frequently resistant to a whole spectrum of antibiotics and in some cases, to virtually all known antibiotics. An excellent editorial accompanies the paper and further explains the problems. (*BMJ*. 2000;**320**:199-200 and 213-6)

Risks to Civil Servants

The Whitehall study, which has been running since 1967, continues to show a strong link between social class illness and death. Civil servants from the lower grades suffer more illness and die younger than their superiors even after retirement. (*J.Epidem.Comm.Hlth*. 2000;**54**:178-84)

Risks to Aircrew

Pilots have a high incidence of malignant melanoma. Whether, this is due to cosmic radiation or too much sun bathing, nobody knows. However, it is known that jet lag increases the risk even further. (*Occ.Environ.Med*. 2000;**57**:175-9)

Placebo Arms

Many researchers fail to realise that valuable information can be gleaned from the placebo arm of a trial, especially when the disease is relatively benign. One such piece of useful data came from a trial on benign prostatic hypertrophy. When untreated the gland will grow by approximately 2ml per year, depending on the age of the patient and the initial size of the gland. The best predictor of the rate of growth was found to be prostate specific antigen. (*J.Urol*. 2000;**163**:13-20)

Welsh Onions?

The Welsh have always been proud of their leeks, but Welsh onions would also appear to have a claim to fame. Taiwanese researchers have found that, when freshly squeezed raw Welsh onion juice was given to rats, it had a marked anti-hypertensive and anti-thrombotic effect. Boiled onion juice, however, was totally ineffective. Their next problem is to find a cohort of human volunteers! (*J.Nutrition*. 2000;**130**:34-7)

Another Medicine?

Recently a couple of Israeli doctors were mocked for suggesting that chicken soup should be considered as a drug. However, before you laugh too loudly, perhaps you should read an old article in *Chest*. The authors found that drinking chicken soup from a cup markedly increased the speed of nasal mucous. So what! The faster the mucous, the shorter the cold. (*Chest*. 1978;**74**:408-10)

Monday, 08 December 2003

Michael JG Thomas
MA, MB, FRCP (Edin), DTM&H
Clinical Director