

## **An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation**

Dear Member,

A few years ago alternative or complementary medicine was considered to be a form of witchcraft at best and quackery at worst. St John's Wort has recently been shown to be equally effective, in a randomised prospective double blind trial, in treating mild to moderate depression as conventional drug therapy. In some parts of Southeast Asia, the Chinese herbal remedy is the only effective treatment for malaria, which is now resistant to quinine. In this, my 26<sup>th</sup> newsletter, I report on a number of other "herbal" remedies.

### **Willow Bark**

Extract of willow bark is a traditional herbal analgesic. In a randomised trial of patients with chronic back pain, willow bark was compared with a placebo. 6% of the patients given the placebo improved, whereas 39% of patients given willow bark reported that their pain was completely relieved. The authors conclude that willow bark may be a useful alternative for patients who cannot tolerate non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs. (*Am.J.Med.* 2000;**109**:9-14)

### **Garlic**

The news about garlic is not so favourable. A meta-analysis of 13 trials found that garlic reduces serum cholesterol by just under 0.5mmol/l more than the placebo. However, the strength of the effect in any particular trial was inversely related to that trial's quality. This means that garlic probably does lower the serum concentration of cholesterol, but not enough to make it clinically useful. (*Ann.Int.Med.* 2000;**133**:420-8)

### **Encephalomyelitis and Herbal Injections**

Acute disseminated encephalomyelitis, a rare demyelinating disease, is usually triggered by infections or immunisations. A recent report from Switzerland implicates courses of herbal injections as the cause in two cases. Both patients were women. One was given the injections to "boost her immune system" and the other as an aid to weight loss. (*J.Neurol.Neurosurg.Psych.* 2000;**69**:516-8)

### **Alcohol**

Just when we thought that there could not possibly be anything new about alcohol and health, a group of Danish epidemiologists combined the results of 3 cohort studies covering over 24,000 people. They confirm that wine is better for you than either spirits or beer and has a beneficial effect over and above that, which can be attributed to alcohol alone. Regardless of how much they drank, people who drank wine were likely to live longer than people who did not. (*Ann.Int.Med.* 2000;**133**:411-9)

### **Racoons**

Racoons may appear to be cute and cuddly, but many of them carry *Balylisascaris procyonis*, the racoon roundworm. The eggs are shed in the faeces and a recent report describes an 11-month-old boy who was left severely brain damaged after racoon roundworm encephalitis. ([www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/106/4/e56](http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/106/4/e56))

## **Longer Needles are Better**

Most infants experience some local reaction to primary inoculations. These may discourage parents from further immunisations. A controlled trial in a large general practice compared using 25 gauge (orange) needles with 23 gauge (blue) needles. Using the blue needles, local reactions were cut by around 20%. (*BMJ*. 2000;**321**:931-2)

## **HIV, Infections and Pregnancy**

Recent research on a rural cohort from Uganda showed that HIV makes falciparum malaria infections more frequent and serious. Asymptomatic parasitaemia was commoner in HIV positive people and CD4 counts were inversely related to parasite density and the risk of clinical malaria. (*Lancet*. 2000;**356**:1051-6)

The cost of preventing vertical HIV transmission from mother to baby is currently around \$800. This figure is beyond the health budget of many developing countries. A recent simpler and cheaper study, costing \$174 offers the prospect of equivalent protection. 1437 non-breastfeeding HIV positive mothers in Thailand were divided into 4 groups, with those receiving the standard regime acting as the control group. Those mothers who received zidovudine from 28 weeks, but whose babies only received the drug for 3 days, had comparable transmission rates to those receiving the standard course. (*New Engl.J.Med.* 2000;**343**:982-91)

## **Declaration of Helsinki**

The World Medical Association at its meeting of the General Assembly in Edinburgh during October 2000, for the fifth time revised the Declaration of Helsinki. The new version states that research undertaken in the developing world is acceptable only if participants can benefit from the treatment after the study is finished. In other words, researchers cannot exploit cheap conditions and laxer rules to do research that will benefit only those living in the richer nations. Another revision states that new treatments should be tested against the best currently available treatment rather than a placebo. The full text of the revised Declaration can be found at [www.wma.net](http://www.wma.net)

## **Travel Advice**

An excellent review article, "Health Advice and Immunization for Travelers", recently appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine. I would suggest that it should be compulsory reading for anyone who is involved with advising staff travelling abroad. If you do not have ready access to the New England Journal, reprints can be requested from Dr Edward T Ryan M.D. at [etryan@partners.org](mailto:etryan@partners.org). (*New Engl.J.Med.* 2000;**342**(23):1716-25)

## **Designer Crash Hats**

Italy has, at last, introduced legislation to make the wearing of motorcycle helmets compulsory. The immediate reaction was the appearance of a number of designer helmets so that the wearers could retain their "street cred". In addition, most of the major newspapers carried articles by hairdressers explaining how to preserve the stylish wind-tossed hair without laying oneself open to arrest. (*Inj.Prevent.* 2000;**6**:231)

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