

An Occasional Medical *Newsletter* from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

Occasionally one comes across a piece of information, which you consider so valuable, that you have to share it as widely as possible. Yesterday was such an occasion when I found that the charity “Contact a Family”, which helps families affected by any one of 800+ rare disorders, had produced a CD-ROM version of their directory giving details of support groups, regional genetic centres and other helpful organisations. Further information from info@cafamily.org.uk.

New Drugs.

Doctors are warned about starting patients on drugs that have been newly approved because of the high rate of adverse side-effects that go undetected until late in post-marketing surveillance. More than 10% of drugs approved by the FDA have serious side-effects that are not discovered on initial testing. 3% of approved drugs have to be withdrawn because of deaths or serious injury. (*JAMA*. 2002;**287**:2215-20)

Salmeterol and High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema.

A recent double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled study has shown that the beta-adrenergic agonist salmeterol, when used as a prophylactic inhalation, significantly reduces the risk of high-altitude pulmonary oedema in patients who are susceptible to altitude sickness. *New Engl.J.Med.* 2002;**346**:1631-6)

Getting Ahead of the Curve.

In January the Chief Medical Officer issued “Getting Ahead of the Curve: A strategy for combating infectious diseases”. This is the first time that such a strategy has been produced and one of the key proposals is the establishment of a Health Protection Agency, which will take on the functions currently provided by the Public Health laboratory Service, the National Radiological Protection Board, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research and the National Focus for Chemical Incidents. Consultation on the exact structure of the new body will take place this summer. More information is available from Michael.Kerin@doh.gsi.gov.uk or by visiting www.doh.gov.uk/cmo/hpa/index.htm. Copies of Getting Ahead of the Curve can be obtained by calling the NHS Response Line on +44-(0)8701-555-455.

Soy Bean Milk.

The use of soy based baby formulas is steadily increasing. Soy formulas contain high levels of compounds, which mimic oestrogen, which is known to suppress the immune system. Recent work on mice, fed soy formula at levels similar to those, which would be received by a baby, found that the number of immune cells dropped significantly and the thymus gland shrunk in size. The authors postulate that soy formulas may weaken a baby’s immune system. (*Proc.Nat.Ac.Sci.* 2002;**99**:7617-21)

Does Reading Cause Myopia?

The incidence of myopia is increasing and is now the leading cause of visual loss throughout the world. Although refractive status is known to be genetically determined, recent evidence suggests that early visual experience affects eye growth and eventual refraction. It seems that it could be true that too much close reading damages your eyes. Is this a worry when young children now spend so much time in front of a computer screen? (*BMJ.* 2002;**324**:1192-9)

HIV in China.

The official figures for the incidence of HIV in China are 28,133 people infected, of whom 1208 have developed AIDs. However Professor Kong-lai Zhang, from the Peking Union Medical College estimates that there are actually more than 600,000 current cases of HIV and that by 2010 there could be as many as 10,000,000 cases. In 2001 there was a 67.4% increase in the incidence of HIV. One of the main problems has been the uncontrolled illegal collection of blood and plasma, which was first identified in 1994. (*BMJ.* 2002;**324**:803-4)

Myocardial Infarction and Air Travel.

People who have a heart attack whilst abroad, naturally wish to return home as soon as possible. A recent single blind controlled trial concludes that if immediate pre and post flight care is given to ensure the patient does not overexert him or herself, neither supplemental oxygen nor medical escorts are required when transporting patients who fly home two weeks after an acute infarction. (*Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine.* 2002;**73**:91-6)

The Malignant Melanoma Gene.

Scientists funded by the Wellcome Trust have discovered a mutant gene responsible for 70% of malignant melanomas. The researchers predict that, as this finding occurred much sooner than expected, the vast majority of genes involved in the most common cancers will be identified in the next five years. (*Nature on line @ www.nature.com*)

Hyperactivity in Children.

High levels of anxiety in late pregnancy tend to lead to hyperactivity and inattention if the subsequent child is a boy. (*Brit.J.Psych.* 2002;**180**:502-8)

Writer's Cramp.

It appears that most of us hold our pens in an improper manner, making us liable to Writer's Cramp. The Chair of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators illustrates the correct way to hold a pen, but admits this will not necessarily improve a doctor's handwriting. (*BMJ.* 2002;**324**:1457)

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