

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

Dear Member,

In February 2003, at the end of a performance in a Johannesburg theatre, the South African playwright, Gibson Kente, announced that he was HIV positive. He told the audience that he wanted to encourage people to have an open discussion about the AIDS problem in South Africa, where there are thought to be over 5 million people infected with HIV, the highest number in any country. He said that he was attempting to dispel the taboo, which has stigmatised the disease, and has caused many people to go to the grave without admitting to being infected. I congratulate Mr Kente in this brave act and hope that his efforts may lead to a better control of this scourge in such a beautiful country.

### **Bacterial Infections and Death.**

A recent Danish study has shown that people who suffer food borne bacterial infections have an increased risk of dying for up to one year after the time of illness. The main culprits are *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Yersinia enterocolitica* and *Shigella* spp. After adjustment for coexisting illnesses, all four bacteria were associated with increased mortality at 30 days, *Yersinia* for up to six months and *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* for up to one year. The authors conclude that the effects of gastrointestinal infections on public health in industrialised countries is underestimated. (*Brit.Med.J.* 2003;**326**:357-60)

### **Diet and Cancer Incidence.**

Just before the World War II, the Boyd Orr cohort study on the health, diet and living conditions of working class British families was initiated. Since its inception, a careful track has been kept of all the original participants and any children born later into the families. This has allowed epidemiologists to link childhood diet to the incidence of disease in later life. The latest analysis, which includes most of the original children, conclusively shows that the more fruit that was eaten in childhood, the lower the risk of developing cancer as an adult. (*J.Epidem.Comm.Hlth.* 2003;**57**:218-25)

### **The Cost of a Cold.**

Recent estimates have postulated that a cure for the common cold would save the US economy about \$40 billion a year. Absence from work, due to colds, costs about \$20 billion and the rest is accounted for by visits to the doctor, over the counter drugs and antibiotics, which, surprisingly, account for \$1.1 billion. This total of \$40 billion makes colds far more expensive than high profile chronic diseases such as asthma, heart failure and emphysema. (*Arch.Int.Med.* 2003;**163**:487-94)

### **Vitamin D and Bone Fractures.**

Trivedi and colleagues have recently reported on their randomised double blind controlled trial of the effect of Vitamin D<sub>3</sub> (cholecalciferol) on the incidence of bone fractures in men and women over the age of 65. They found that giving as little 100,000IU orally every four months reduced the fracture rate by up to 22%, the greatest effect being in first fractures of the hip, wrist, forearm and vertebrae. (*Brit.Med.J.* 2003;**326**:469-72)

### **Ibuprofen/Aspirin Interference.**

A Scottish cohort study has found that ibuprofen interferes with the protective effect that aspirin has on platelet aggregation. Patients with cardiovascular disease, who were discharged from hospital with prescriptions for both aspirin and ibuprofen died, on average, sooner than those discharged on aspirin alone. This interference seems to be limited to ibuprofen and has not been found with any of the NSAIDs. (*Lancet*. 2003;**361**:573-4)

### **Old Drugs for New Bugs.**

A recent copy of the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* noted that two isolates from the United States of vancomycin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* were found to be sensitive to co-trimoxazole as well as other older antibiotics. A number of other institutions have recently reported finding MRSA to be increasing susceptible to co-trimoxazole. A recent paper from India describes the re-emergence of susceptibility to chloramphenicol in *Salmonella typhi* isolates that are resistant to quinolones and  $\beta$ -lactams. As it is becoming increasingly difficult to discover new antibiotics, the important question is whether there might be a real chance for the strategic use of forgotten drugs on a large enough scale to affect clinical management. (*BMJ*. 2003;**326**:235-6)

### **Are You Living Longer or Does It Just Seem So.**

If you like to stay up late to go partying, or even just to work, you may be increasing your risk of developing heart disease. Data from a cohort study of American nurses showed that going to bed late was associated with a 39% increase in the incidence of cardiovascular problems. It seems that between seven and nine hours sleep per night is about right. (*Arch.Int.Med*. 2003;**163**:205-9)

### **Chips are Safe.**

Acrylamide, which is found in high levels in foods such as chips and crisps, was classified as a probable human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer based on evidence from animal models. A recent Swedish study in which the diets of 987 patients, suffering from various cancers, were compared with 538 healthy controls, found no evidence of increased risk of cancer in those who had eaten foods with a high or moderate acrylamide content. (*Brit.J.Cancer*. 2003;**88**:84-9)

### **Aspirin and Cancer.**

Three recently published studies indicate that aspirin, not only has a beneficial effect in preventing heart disease, but may also have a major role in preventing cancer. Two prospective placebo controlled trials in patients, who had an increased risk of developing rectal cancer, found a significant decrease in the number of new polyps in the groups taking aspirin. The most benefit was found in the low dose group, who were taking 81mg aspirin daily. It is suggested that the benefit is derived from the inhibition of the inflammatory enzyme cyclo-oxygenase-2, which is implicated in cancer of the stomach, breast and colon. An Italian study found a reduction in the incidence of tumours of the mouth throat and oesophagus in long-term aspirin takers. (*New Engl.J.Med*. 2002;**348**:883-90 & 891-9 and *Brit.J.Cancer*. 2003;**88**:672-4)

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