

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

It looks as though SARS is going to be with us for some time, but that a vaccine is unlikely to be available within the next 5 – 10 years. With the advent of a more discriminative test, it now appears that the mortality is about 10% and is higher in older people and in those who are immunocompromised. One area of hope is that the animal reservoir has now been identified as the pangolin, which is eaten in many parts of China. However, it is not yet known how the virus jumped the species barrier. If it is simply a question of eating infected meat, then the answer is simple enough. If, on the other hand, an insect vector is involved, the process of control will be more complicated.

Spices are Good for You – Official.

Herbs, both culinary and medicinal are important sources of antioxidants. However, there is a 1,000-fold difference in the antioxidant concentration between certain herbs. Those with the highest concentrations, including oregano, sage, thyme, lemon balm, clove, allspice and cinnamon proved to be a better source than many foods such as fruit, cereals and vegetables. (*J.Nutrition.* 2003;**133**:1286)

Children Returning from the Tropics.

Patients returning from the tropics can present a diagnostic problem to even the most experienced clinician. A prospective observational study of febrile children admitted to hospital, who had visited the tropics in the preceding year, found that they often had a treatable infection. The most helpful investigations were a full blood count, films for malarial parasites, blood and stool cultures and a chest x-ray. (*Arch.Dis.Child.* 2003;**88**:432-4)

Fatigued Females.

Verdon and colleagues conducted a double blind, placebo controlled prospective trial on 144 women, who were not anaemic but complained of undue fatigue. In those, who took iron supplementation, 30% reported a marked decrease in fatigue after one month, compared with only 13% in the control group. Sub-group analysis indicated that those most likely to benefit are women with low or borderline serum ferritin levels. (*Brit.Med.J.* 2003;**326**:1124-6)

Only Children.

There has been concern in China that the rule, restricting families to one child, might be creating generations of fat, egocentric, maladjusted children. However, a recent survey has found that being an only child conferred no detrimental effects, but, on the contrary, might offer some social advantages. (*Arch.Dis.Child.* 2003;**88**:467-71)

Breast Feeding and Hospitalisation.

Bachrach and colleagues performed a meta-analysis of 9 randomised controlled trials and explored numerous databases to attempt to establish whether breast-feeding had any protective effect with regard to respiratory infections. They found that healthy babies, who were breast fed for at least two months had significantly fewer hospitalisations for lower respiratory tract infections than those who were not. (*Arch.Pediatr.Adolesc.Med.* 2003;**157**:237-43)

The Polypill.

Three articles discuss possible methods of drastically reducing the incidence of cardiovascular and cerebral disease, especially in the elderly. The first suggests that, if everybody, over the age of 55, daily took a tablet, termed the polypill, consisting of 6 ingredients, a statin, a thiazide diuretic, a β -blocker, an ACE inhibitor, folic acid and aspirin, cardiovascular disease could be reduced by over 80%. In the second article, Wilson and colleagues propose that measuring the serum cholesterol level in everybody over the age of 50 would reduce the incidence heart disease by 20%. Finally, in a well-balanced editorial, Rodgers puts these theories into perspective and points out that all such measures are of little effect if you do not couple this with healthy life-style changes. (*BMJ*. 2003;**326**: 1407-8, 1419-35, 1436-40)

Exercise and Heart Disease.

A survey of over 90% of the middle aged men living in Caerphilly, conducted over 11 years has shown that, whilst heavy intensity exercise, such as jogging or swimming, significantly reduced the risk of coronary heart and cardiovascular disease, light or moderate intensity exercise, such as walking, golf or dancing, conferred no protection. (*Heart*. 2003;**89**:502-6)

Infected Blood.

In a recent review, Goodnough and colleagues estimate that every year over 13 million units of blood, donated worldwide, are not tested for HIV, hepatitis B or hepatitis C. They conclude that it would be unsafe to receive a transfusion in such areas.

Junk Food Tax.

A spokesperson for the Centre for Science in the Public Interest argues that, as the consumption of junk food places an increased burden on the Canadian healthcare system, all Canadians should pay additional taxes on these items, as they already do on cigarettes and alcohol. The Centre wants these "sin taxes" to apply to food bought both in restaurants and in grocery shops. (*Canadian Med.Assoc.J.* 2003;**168**:1697)

Transforming Moles.

What is the risk that any given mole will transform into a malignant melanoma? This is an interesting question, which is frequently asked of doctors. Tsao and colleagues constructed a decision model to analyse data from a variety of different sources, stratifying the results by age. They estimate that the lifetime risk that a mole will become a melanoma in a 50 year old man is 1:2,000 and in a 50 year old woman 1:9,000. (*Arch.Dermatol.* 2003;**139**:282-8)

HIV in India.

The 2002 estimates from the Indian National AIDS Control Organisation show a sharp increase in the number of HIV positive individuals. There could be as many as 4.58 million people who are infected, an increase of 0.61 million over the previous year. However, this still represents less than 1% of the total population. Transmission by blood transfusion represented 2.99% and in drug users 2.87%. The prevalence amongst women attending antenatal clinics in some areas had risen to 1%, described as a turning point for spread among the general population.

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