

**An Occasional Medical Newsletter**  
**from The Blood Care Foundation**  
**Number 55**

Dear Member,

At a time when the Foundation has just introduced a new benefit in the form of delivery of rabies immunoglobulin and vaccine and the provision of advice on immunisation, it is helpful to note a recent review article on the management of bites from humans and other mammals. In the UK alone, the treatment of bites results in over 200,000 visits to Accident and Emergency Departments annually. A copy of this excellent article should be readily available in every works medical centre and on the desk of everybody who gives travel advice. (*Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin*. 2004;**42(9)**:67-71). As I am no longer in the first flush of youth, I found two other articles very reassuring, as I had just returned from my visit to the gym. These American studies showed that frequent walking, and other forms of exercise, protects elderly men and women from dementia and cognitive decline. The difference between the upper and lower quartiles was approximately 40%. Perhaps the GMC should include exercise in the new revalidation process. (*JAMA*. 2004;**292**: 1447 and 1454)

### **Hormone Replacement Therapy.**

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been constantly in the news of late. Various papers have been published suggesting that HRT protects against stroke and cardiovascular disease while others have reported the opposite. It is, therefore, timely that the Committee on Safety of Medicines has published a review of the current knowledge. The main conclusions are that HRT should not be the treatment of choice for preventing osteoporosis in women over the age of 50, there is a small increase in the risk of stroke, cardiovascular disease, DVT and of developing breast cancer or of having a recurrence, and there is no evidence that HRT prevents the development of dementia. (*Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance*. 2004;**30**:4-7)

### **Salt Intake.**

Doctors have long puzzled over the links between dietary intake of salt and cardiovascular disease. A recent study from the Netherlands showed that the higher the intake of salt the greater the amount of albumin in the urine. This holds true for both adults and children. As albuminuria is a known risk factor for heart disease and hypertension another piece of the jigsaw has been put in place. (*J.Int.Med*. 2004;**256**:324-30)

### **HIV Incidence in South Africa.**

The HIV incidence figures for South Africa for 2003 are available at [www.doh.gov.za](http://www.doh.gov.za). It was calculated that 5.6 million people had contracted HIV and that of the 1,149,701 babies born in 2003, 96,228 (8.37%) were HIV positive, whilst Dr Shisana's survey pegs the overall HIV prevalence in the general population at 11.4%. These figures not only have grave portends for the future economic position of the country but also raise worries as to the safety of the blood supply. In addition the increasing number of patients suffering from AIDS is threatening to undermine the country's capacity to provide comprehensive health care for the rest of the population. An additional threat, which has hardly received any attention in the medical literature, is the possible impact of illness and death among healthcare professionals. A recent small survey among this population showed a seroprevalence of 15.7%, which compares with the finding of a 30% mortality over a 20 year period among a cohort of Ugandan doctors. A recent article in the Washington Post stated "Today's biggest limiting factor for AIDS treatment is the paucity of trained health workers. We're going to run out of people before we run out of money." (*Brit.Med.J.* 2004;**329**:585-6 and 600-1)

### **Don't Waste a Precious Gift.**

The Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Liam Donaldson, has stressed the value of blood transfusion in his annual report for 2003, "On the State of the Public Health". However he also cautions "the gift of blood is too often squandered by its unnecessary and inappropriate use." He points out the importance of having proper procedures in place to prevent errors and the value of having experienced advice available to ensure that transfusions are given for the correct clinical reasons and at the appropriate time.

His report is available at [www.publications.doh.gov.uk/cmo/annualreport2003/index.htm](http://www.publications.doh.gov.uk/cmo/annualreport2003/index.htm)

### **Soy Proteins and Postmenopausal Symptoms.**

It was postulated postmenopausal symptoms could be alleviated by eating soy protein, which contains isoflavones. A recent randomised double blind controlled trial of soy protein against placebo showed no significant differences in the outcomes between the two groups. These outcomes were cognitive function, bone mineral density and plasma lipids. Another study on the efficacy of soy protein showed that it was associated with a higher occurrence of endometrial hyperplasia. (*JAMA*. 2004;**292**:65-74) (*Fertility and Sterility*. 2004;**82**:145-8)

### **Food Fortification and Spina Bifida.**

The addition of folic acid to flour, pasta and cornmeal has long been postulated as a method of reducing the incidence of spina bifida. However many doctors have been worried that such addition could mask the symptoms of vitamin B-12 deficiency until the most serious effects of pernicious anaemia appeared. A study in Canada investigated the impact of adding folic acid at a level of 0.15mg per 100g of flour since 1998. The study looked at women aged 19 – 44 years and people aged over 65 years from November 1997 to March 1998 and November 2000 to March 2001. The incidence of neural tube defects fell from 4.36 per 1,000 births prior to fortification to 0.96 afterward. No evidence of masking the haematological manifestations of vitamin B-12 deficiency in the elderly was observed. (*BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*. 2004;**4**:20)

### **Alcohol and Cognitive Impairment.**

The Finish group led by Viitanen and Winblad have reported on their study on the level of alcohol consumption in middle age and the subsequent risk of developing mild cognitive impairment and dementia in old age. There were nearly 1,500 participants and they were followed for an average of 23 years. They found that those who drank moderate amounts of alcohol were less than half as likely to develop problems as those who were either abstainers or heavy drinkers. A further interesting finding was the presence of the apolipoprotein e4 allele had an increased risk whatever their alcohol consumption. (*Brit.Med.J.* 2004;**329**:539-42)

### **A Matter of Perspective.**

It often amuses me to notice the difference in perspective between the patient and the doctor. This is illustrated by a recent report on a conversation overheard between a surgeon and a patient who was undergoing a rectal examination. "That's where it hurts doctor," said the patient "just inside the entrance". To which the A&E surgeon swiftly replied "In medical circles, Sir, we prefer to regard that as an exit!" (*Emerg.Med.J.* 2004;Sep (suppl:2))

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