

## "DC" On-Line

Editorial Staff

### Bad Baby Milk

British scientists analyzing samples of baby formula have discovered surprisingly high levels of a chemical that is known to interfere with the development and function of reproductive organs. Pthalates, which shrink the testes of laboratory rats, tested out at the government's maximum allowable levels in certain unnamed brands of baby food. Because government officials consider the levels still to be reasonably safe, the products are still permitted on the market. Manufacturers have been asked to look into the source of the contamination. Pthalates are chemicals that add flexibility to plastics such as PVC. They have been blamed by many researchers for the declining sperm counts found in many European studies.<sup>1</sup>

1. Reuter, May 26, 1996.

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### More about Smoking Moms

A new study of pregnant women who smoke has found a high risk of respiratory problems in their babies when the mothers-to-be smoke up to the delivery date. This study of 14,000 women found a 50 percent increase in wheezing and breathlessness in the child's first six months. The effect seems to be less pronounced if the mother stops smoking earlier in the pregnancy. The study was done by Professor Jean Golding of pediatric epidemiology at Bristol University.<sup>2</sup>

2. Reuter, May 21, 1996.

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### Hot Clots

Researchers trying to find a way to better judge a person's risk of a heart attack have found that many atherosclerotic plaques, thought to break off and obstruct cardiac vessels, are in a state of inflammation. They found a significant increase in temperature in about one third of the plaques they studied, and cells involved in inflammatory processes at the same location. These deposits were also judged to be the most unstable and likely to cause problems. The study is published in *The Lancet*.<sup>3</sup>

3. *The Lancet*, May 25, 1996.

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### Ecstasy and Brain Damage

The popular amphetamine-like drug, Ecstasy, causes measurable long-term brain damage after just

one dose, according to a rodent study in England.<sup>4</sup> The drug destroys connections between brain cells by damaging the serotonin-releasing structures of nervous tissue. Researchers fear that the effects are insidious, with major depression (one of the side effects) arising a few years after use begins.

4. British Medical Journal, June 15, 1996.

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#### Experts Fear "Organic" Label Becoming Meaningless

An international food standards committee has delayed a decision on standardization of the "organic" label until 1997 because of pressure from the United States and Canada to lower requirements. The Codex Alimentarius Commission, a U.N. agency that sets international standards for food labeling, met in Ottawa in May to consider the question, however no action will be taken until next spring. Many experts worry that the term "organic" will soon become as meaningless as "light" and "pure" have to label-conscious consumers. The European Union currently requires a minimum of 70 percent organic composition before a food can be called "organic," but the Western countries find that requirement too restrictive.

One of the biggest reasons people purchase organic food is because of concerns about pesticides. However, most organic certification programs do not directly measure chemical elements in the foods, including Codex's proposal. Rather, they concentrate on "environmentally sound" farming practices that include crop rotation and composting as well as non-use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Chemicals from air pollution, run-off, and other sources may not be considered.<sup>5</sup>

5. OTC News wire, May 21, 1996.

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#### Obesity Now Epidemic

The chairman of a World Health Organization task force on obesity<sup>6</sup> is warning that medical care systems will soon be devastated by the rapidly increasing rate of overweight people throughout the world. He says that according to a study last year, the year 2230 will see every person in the United States obese if current trends continue. His group calculates that from 5 to 10 percent of the total health budgets of Western countries are spent as a result of obesity, but being fat still isn't considered epidemic by most people because statistics become compartmentalized into conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, or high blood pressure.<sup>7</sup>

6. Dr. Philip James, Scotland.

7. Reuter, May 16, 1996.

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#### Medical Schools Should Teach Alternatives

A government panel suggested in June that medical and nursing schools should begin teaching their students about alternative health techniques. Experts from the National Institutes of Health said that traditional doctors need to know more about vitamins and other non-mainstream health care treatments. This group included members of NIH's Office of Alternative Medicine, military and

academic educators. At a conference in Bethesda, Maryland, they recognized the difficulty in making such changes in a medical school's curriculum, but according to one speaker, with "\$10 billion to \$14 billion dollars being spent on alternative medicine, our students -- all of medicine -- need to know about it."<sup>8</sup>

8. United Press, June 7, 1996 quoting the president of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda.

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#### Testosterone Levels Related to Learning

A study at John Hopkins University<sup>9</sup> finds that a male's learning abilities vary according to his blood testosterone levels. They found that men with low testosterone have trouble remembering shapes, but perform much better on things like sentence construction tests. The finding, presented at the annual meeting of the International Congress of Endocrinology in June, supports other studies that relate hormonal influences to learning and development differences between the sexes. The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health.

9. Adrian Dobbs, et. al.

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#### Fetus Gets Lead from Mom

Early results from Australian research suggest that lead deposits stored in a women's body may surge into her bloodstream during the second and third trimester of pregnancy to affect her unborn baby. The study used highly specialized techniques of tracing lead isotopes from various geographical locations. The subjects of this study had moved quite some time previous from areas that could be specifically identified by their lead isotopes. Thus, when these elements appeared in the bloodstream, the researchers knew they came from a past exposure. It is thought that the lead comes out of the mother's bones as calcium is being mobilized for the baby's benefit.<sup>10</sup>

10. Research is currently underway by Brian Gulson and others at Macquarie University in Sydney.

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#### Babies Having Babies

According to New York's Robin Hood Foundation, America's epidemic of teenage pregnancies is costing billions of dollars and a severe hardship for the children. Kids born to moms 17 years old and less, they say, are twice as likely to be abused or neglected, 50 percent more likely to repeat a year in school, nearly three times as likely to do jail time, and much less likely to be healthy. The financial costs to society as a whole, calculated at nearly \$7 billion each year, include direct public assistance, extra medical care, foster care, and prison costs. The United States is by far the leader of industrialized countries in teenage pregnancies at 60 per 1000 girls. England is second with half the rate, while most other countries trail far behind.<sup>11</sup>

11. United Press, June 13, 1996.

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## Fish Oil for Crohn's Disease

An Italian study of slow-release fish oil supplements finds a very significant benefit of these supplements to Crohn's disease patients. The study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine,<sup>12</sup> compared relapse rates to a control group over a one year period of time. In the 78 patients studied, 59 percent of the subjects taking the oil remained symptom free compared to only 26 percent of the placebo group. The authors caution against experimenting with high doses of the substance, since side effects are possible. They also called for additional studies comparing the nutrient to standard medical treatment for the disease.

12. Reuter, June 12, 1996

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## Tai Chi for the Heart

Sheffield University researchers, writing in the British Medical Association's Postgraduate Medical Journal, tested heart attack survivors' responses to three types of therapy: aerobic exercise, tai chi exercises, and no exercise. While both exercise groups showed improvement, the tai chi group demonstrated significantly better blood pressure reductions, which the researchers suppose will translate to better health. For many patients, the martial art form was the only type of exercise they could tolerate.<sup>13</sup>

13. Reuter, June 12, 1996.

Brian Sutton, DC  
Manitou Springs, Colorado  
E-mail: [BSuttonDC@aol.com](mailto:BSuttonDC@aol.com)  
[73160.676@compuserve.com](mailto:73160.676@compuserve.com)

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