

## "DC" On-Line

Brian Sutton, DC

### Australian Hospital Error Study

A study of patient records in Australian hospitals has concluded that approximately 12,000 patients died in 1992 because of treatment mistakes. Errors included wrong medication, failure to notice a bad test result, and perforation of organs or severing of nerves during surgery. More than twice that number are thought to have suffered some form of permanent disability.

The above two groups comprise about 1.5 percent of all hospital admissions in Australia. While not disputing the figures for the death rate due to medical errors, a spokesman for the Australian Medical Association said that many of the patients were elderly and in poor health, so they might have suffered a relapse of their condition and died anyway.<sup>1</sup>

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### Tryptophan Linked to Sexual Orientation

Researchers at the National Institutes of Health working with "fruit" flies report that they have induced homosexual behavior in the male flies.<sup>2</sup> They did this by activating a gene that causes tryptophan utilization in cells that normally do not use it. This caused a drop in the blood tryptophan levels, decreasing serotonin production in the brain. The affected flies formed "courtship chains" of five or more individuals, with no signs of rivalry. Females that were added to the group were ignored. Also, the researchers found that the same procedure had no effect on female fruit flies.

Lowered serotonin levels have previously been shown to trigger male sexual activity in rats and rabbits, and induce homosexual behavior in cats.

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### Smoking Aggravates Back Pain

Heavy smokers who are injured on the job appear to suffer more often with residual back pain, according to a study at the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte.<sup>3</sup> The smokers also seemed to suffer more from leg cramps and pain. This follows one study that showed a near doubling of the healing time needed for fractures in smokers and another that found slower surgical wound healing because of nicotine's constrictive effects on blood vessels.

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### Epson Salts for Eclampsia

United Kingdom researchers have found that Epsom salts, which has been used by some to treat eclampsia for as many as the past 60 years, is more than twice as effective as two of the most

popular newer drugs, diazepam and phenytoin. The study involved 1,680 women in nine countries.<sup>4</sup> It makes you wonder how such new drugs come to be so popular in the first place.

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### New Method to Predict Cardiovascular Troubles

A group of doctors in New York, dissatisfied with using risk factors such as cholesterol levels to predict cardiovascular problems, have developed a method they say is more effective.<sup>5</sup> They use two tests: the first is a comparison of blood pressures taken at the arm to that at the ankle. The higher the ratio, the more the likelihood of clogged arteries since the blood travels so much farther to reach the ankles. The second test is ultrasound measurement of the blood flow speed. Constriction and hardening of the blood vessels causes the blood to flow faster since the heart is trying to pump the same volume of blood with each beat as it would if the arteries were wide open.

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### Vitamin C Reduces Strokes

A study by the Epidemiology Unit of Britain's Medical Research Council in Southampton correlates vitamin C intake to risk of death from stroke. Researchers say that the vitamin C equivalent of one half an orange per day will reduce the risks of stroke by 50 percent. They examined the death records of 643 people who participated in a 20 year health survey.

The study was to have been published in the June 10th edition of the British Medical Journal, but apparently pre-publication press releases about the research caused the editors to remove it from the journal. According to the Associated Press, scientific journals do not like to be "scooped" by the lay press.<sup>6</sup>

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### Breastfeeding for the Brain

An Australian study finds that breastfed babies have improved brain development during the first eight months of life. Those babies, researchers found, exhibit twice the brain activity during a standard test that measures electrical activity in the neural pathways. The same finding was also evident in babies bottle-fed but supplemented with docosahexonoic acid (DHA), not included in formulas in the United States or Australia. Many formulas contain a substance that is supposed to be converted to DHA in the body, but a prominent breast milk researcher<sup>7</sup> says that babies cannot make DHA until they are four months old.

DHA, you may remember from my June 5th article, has also been shown to improve intellectual function in Alzheimer's patients.

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### Rocket Fuel Toxicity

An accident at NASA last year exposed about 200 people to a cloud of nitrogen tetroxide, immediately sending a large number of them to local hospitals and clinics for treatment of mucous membrane irritations. But the long-term effects seem to have been much more severe. After

excluding persons with a history of previous exposure to toxic chemicals, family histories of neurological disorders, and exposures to lead and pesticide fumigants, physicians found that following percentage of subjects had certain lingering effects six months later:

- 32 percent had completely lost their sense of smell.
- 90 percent tested positive for brain dysfunctions (e.g., memory loss, learning disabilities, and inability to concentrate).
- 25 percent had autonomic nervous system damage resulting in symptoms such as fainting and impotence.
- 39 percent displayed visual problems and optic nerve damage.
- 12 percent had equilibrium trouble.
- 70 percent suffered from headaches since the incident. The effects are expected to be progressive.<sup>8</sup>

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### Vitamins Found to be Good for You

A year-long Canadian study of senior citizens found that those who took specially fortified vitamin and mineral supplements got half as many infections, used half the antibiotics, and had higher cellular immunity than those who took placebos. The associate director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging<sup>9</sup> calls the study a "landmark" in diet and immunity research.<sup>10</sup> The Associated Press says that studies like these "could revolutionize the prevention and treatment of illness, from colds to cancer."<sup>11</sup> The study was led by Dr. Ranjit Chandra, an immunologist at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Another study by a professor at New Jersey Medical School in Newark<sup>12</sup> found a significantly higher skin immunity response in elderly people who took ordinary nutritional supplements over a period of time.

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### Low Salt Diet May Not Be So Healthy

One of the first steps many medical doctors take when confronted with a patient with high blood pressure is to prescribe a low-salt diet. However, a study published in the American Heart Association's June issue of the journal *Hypertension* now questions the wisdom of that action. The work found a higher risk of heart attacks, more than four times so, in hypertensive men that had low urinary levels of sodium. The study was done over a period of four years and involved 1900 men. A co-author of the study called the results "biologically plausible," citing previous studies linking high levels of renin with increased frequency of heart attacks.

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## Dangerous Drug for Head Lice

Lindane, a drug commonly used to treat lice and scabies, is under attack by the consumer group Public Citizen. It is said to cause neurological damage and is blamed for the deaths of six people, including three children. The World Health Organization recommends against using lindane to treat these conditions.<sup>13</sup>

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## Hot Bath for Heart Failure

Dr. Chuwa Tei at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, led a study examining the effects of 15 minute warm baths and sauna treatment for congestive heart failure. He found that cardiac efficiency increased, probably due to blood vessel dilation. He hopes further studies will examine the potential benefits and any dangers of this type of treatment, once thought to be harmful. He says that the warm soaking "may represent a novel nonpharmacological therapy."<sup>14</sup>

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## Chewing Gum for Heartburn

According to doctors at the University of Alabama, chewing gum improves heartburn in seven out of 10 patients. Findings were presented by Dr. Swarnjit Singh to the Digestive Disease Week 1995 medical convention in San Diego in May. The research was only done on sugarless gum because of fears that carbohydrates would increase acidity, but the main benefit seems to come from increased salivary flow neutralizing the acid in the esophagus.

The conventional medical treatment is to swallow an antacid to neutralize all the acid in the stomach, a remedy that can cause its own set of problems.

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## Scuba Divers and CNS Lesions

Dr. Jurgen Reul of the Technical University in Aachen, Germany has compared scans of the central nervous systems of divers to those of other amateur athletes. He found brain lesions in the divers at two times the rate of other athletes. Also, spinal abnormalities (not described) were detected in over three times as many divers. An earlier postmortem of professional divers noted an undiagnosed degeneration of the spinal cord.

## *References*

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