

"DC" On-Line

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FDA Considers Relaxing Drug Ad Restrictions

The FDA is trying to decide if it should allow pharmaceutical companies more freedom in advertising their prescription drugs. In 1994 manufacturers spent \$250 million advertising prescription- only drugs; many of those ads were aimed directly at potential patients. Analysts say that amount could increase \$1 billion a year if current restrictions (such as requirements to reveal side effects) are relaxed. It has been contended that an increase in such advertising will increase the pressure doctors are under to prescribe "trendy" medications at the expense of more conservative measures such as diet and exercise. It has already been established that doctors give in to such pressures rather easily, as evidenced by the widespread prescription of antibiotics for colds and flu to placate patients even though the doctors know better.¹

Youth Gets Poor Health Report Card

The American Health Foundation, in its annual report card on children's health, gives American children a "D" for 1994. This is down from a "C-minus" the year before. Increases in drug, alcohol, and tobacco usage were largely responsible for the lower grade.

Among high school seniors, over 19 percent smoke cigarettes, almost a third smoke marijuana daily, and 1.9 percent use crack cocaine daily. Juvenile obesity is also becoming a major health concern.²

White Birch and Melanoma

Betulinic acid, an extract from the common white birch tree, appears to inhibit growth of melanoma tumors in mice. Researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago and the National Cancer Institute found that, in some cases, tumors actually shrank. The effect seems to be specific for melanoma; other cancer cells were unaffected.³

Low Fat Diet Slows Prostate Cancer

According to a study published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute,⁴ prostatic tumors in mice grow much slower when fat ingestion is restricted. Mice on a very low fat diet slowed their tumors to about 40 percent the rate of those on a diet with a fat content analogous to the typical American male. Commenting on the results, one researcher said that for treating prostatic carcinoma in the future, "... many men wouldn't need anything more than dietary manipulation."⁵

Even now, many authorities are saying that no treatment is often as good or better than current medical offerings.

Electromagnetic Fields

According to a report⁶ from the U.S. National Council on Radiation Protection, there is now a "powerful body of impressive evidence" that people's health can be affected by low intensities of electromagnetic radiation.⁷ It is now thought that melatonin production is affected by low power electromagnetic fields, contributing to disrupted sleep patterns and making the body less resistant to degenerative disorders such as heart, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. The report recommends a 0.2 microtesla safety limit for long-term exposure. Common household appliances generate fields much in excess of that amount.

Senility Not Necessarily Due to Aging

Researchers writing in The Lancet⁸ report that something other than the aging process is probably the cause of senility. They found that the disorder is diagnosed less frequently as elderly populations pass their early eighties, and new cases are seldom seen after age 95. The writers reason that if senility was merely a consequence of aging, older persons should show a much higher incidence rate.

Folic Acid for Heart Disease

Research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association⁹ suggests that many heart attacks might be averted if people consumed more folic acid. Folic acid helps keep down the levels of homocysteine, implicated in cardiovascular plaquing. Researchers estimate that 35,000 deaths could be prevented each year in American men if the folacin intake was increased. They add their voices to those already calling for mandatory addition of the nutrient to America's food supply. Hypothetically, simple dietary changes would probably produce similar results if someone could figure out a way to persuade people to make them.

Beware: Tylenol Toxicity

An appeals court in October upheld a jury's \$8 million award to a man whose liver was destroyed by five days of extra-strength Tylenol at normal doses. Apparently, the man's habit of drinking 3-4 glasses of wine each evening amplified the toxicity of the acetaminophen. The court decided that the manufacturer, knowing that a number of medical studies suggested a danger, did not adequately warn the public.¹⁰

NSAID Deaths

Advisors to the FDA are expressing concern over signs that many popular nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are more dangerous than doctors and the public think. Most NSAIDs are believed to contribute to gastrointestinal problems. Forty-one thousand hospitalizations and 3,300 deaths each year are blamed on such side effects.¹¹ The consumer group Public Citizen is asking the FDA to ban piroxicam (sold as Feldene), a more potent form of this class of drugs used to treat arthritis. According to FDA records, 299 Americans deaths have been linked to this one drug since 1982.

Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs

Researchers analyzing studies for the effects of cholesterol-lowering drugs on women with high cholesterol but no other heart disease risk factors have concluded that the drug therapy is useless.¹² The regimen, which can cost as much as \$1,000 per year, can produce many side effects (such as heart arrhythmias) without reducing deaths from heart disease related to elevated cholesterol levels. The long-term effects of the drug therapy are not known. The lead author even goes so far as to say that it may be pointless to even test the cholesterol levels of otherwise healthy women.¹³

Dieting Affects Mental Performance

According to England's Institute of Food Research, dieters are likely to score lower on tests of concentration, memory, reaction time, vigilance, and mental processing capabilities. Researchers compare the deficits to those seen in persons after consuming a few alcoholic beverages. Interestingly, the problem doesn't seem to stem from lack of nutrition. The effect was only seen in persons eating less in an attempt to lose weight, not those eating less for health or other reasons. The most pronounced impairments were seen in those likely to be anxious about their inability to shed pounds.¹⁴

Another study published in the British Medical Journal¹⁵ found that obese persons, when surveyed about food intake, are more likely to fail to mention (they either forget or lie about) some of the fattier foods they consume.

Nutrition Labels Increase Food Consumption

A nutrition researcher at Purdue University¹⁶ says that a label indicating a given food is low-fat tends to encourage people to eat more. He found that among adults eating the same lunch, those that were told it had been a low-fat meal ate more the rest of the day. Another study¹⁷ found that when people believe they are eating a low-fat meal, they eat more of it.

Develop Your Brain by Age 12

Scientists writing in Science,¹⁸ the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of

Science, say that there is a marked difference in brain development in violinists starting training before and after their 12-13 year birthdays. Magnetic resonance imaging shows larger and more complex brain circuitry if studies start before that age. Initiating training after that time produces much less cerebral development. The study compared sensory input locations in the cerebral cortex correlating to the left and right hands. It concluded that the brain organizes itself to develop the areas most used during growth.

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