



News In Brief

“The good things that men do can be made complete only by the things they refuse to do.”

- *Ethicist Paul Ramsay*

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Worried about products that promise 53 times the recommended daily consumption of certain nutrients, specialists convened by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are calling for strengthened federal oversight of the US\$23 billion dietary supplement industry.

Although over half of the adult population in the United States uses vitamins, for the average healthy American, there is insufficient evidence to tell whether taking these supplements is a good or bad idea.

Only a few have proven beneficial – for instance, folic acid’s role in preventing spina bifida and related birth defects, bone-protecting effects of calcium and Vitamin D, and possible slowing of age-related macular degeneration by anti-oxidants and zinc.

Ironically, those most likely to have nutrient deficiencies are also the least likely to use multivitamins. Yet among the healthy and affluent, use of supplements and fortified foods has skyrocketed in recent years as a result of various scientific speculations.

However, concern arises mainly with superdoses that exceed the government’s “recommended daily amount” (RDA), with nutritionists estimating that between one to 11% of supplement users may be exceeding the upper limits set for certain nutrients. They caution that too much niacin can damage the

liver, while too much Vitamin A and E cause birth defects and bleeding problems respectively. Other vitamins can also interact dangerously with medications.

Consumers are advised to purchase products labelled with 100% of the RDA or “daily value”, while doctors should ask their patients about their pill-popping habits.

Congress limited the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) oversight of vitamins and other dietary supplements in 1994. The NIH panel marks the fourth scientific report urging more FDA authority to, among other things, mandate that manufacturers report customer side effects the same way pharmaceutical companies do.

(Source: *CNN Health*)

THE ADVANTAGES OF STRESS

Women who bring home the bacon – as well as cook it – are likely to be thinner and healthier than their stay-at-home counterparts, researchers at University College London reported in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

Even at age 26, women characterised as stay-at-home mothers were larger than women who worked outside the home, and for the next 27 years, they consistently gained more weight than women who occupied multiple roles over the long term.

Pregnant women juggling jobs and family responsibilities should not worry that normal life stresses or anxiety will harm their developing children. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University note that women who reported more stress and anxiety during pregnancy tended to have children more advanced in their mental and motor development at age two.

However, they stopped short of suggesting that women seek out additional stress to give their kids an added boost.

(Source: CNN Health)

DUH

When a clinical trial of a new cardiovascular treatment is paid for by the therapy's maker, the reported outcome is likely to reveal good news. But when funding comes from non-profit sources, outcomes are less likely to favour the new treatments.

This emerged from an analysis by Harvard Medical School researchers of 324 consecutive trials of cardiovascular medicine published over nearly five years in three major journals and was itself published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

(Source: CNN Health)

PICTURE OF ILL HEALTH

Columbia University researchers in New York estimate that more than 80 million US adults are either obese or smoke, with about nine million being obese smokers. The report in the *British Medical Journal* was extrapolated from 29,305 adults who took part in the 2002 national health interview survey.

Obesity and smoking are major risk factors for early death from several chronic conditions – including heart disease and diabetes – and the overlap of both probably carries an increased risk.

(Source: CNN Health)

FLU CHOICES

The sick and elderly should be last in line for scarce flu vaccines in a pandemic, rather than near the front of the queue – according to a review article in *Science* by ethicists with the NIH. Current plans call for healthcare providers and vaccine workers to get the first doses, followed by the sick and elderly, with healthy adults last on the list.

Ethically, researchers argue that this is wrong,

because older people have already lived much of their lives. However, it may be bad medicine as well, because there is a good chance a flu outbreak will mimic the 1918 pandemic, which mainly attacked healthy young adults.

(Source: CNN Health)

PLAN B

Screening for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) will soon become part of the routine battery of medical tests recommended for all Americans aged between 13 and 64, under guidelines that the Atlanta-based Centres for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention plans to unveil soon.

HIV screening will be offered as a standard test and patients will have the option of declining. Current recommendations for counselling will be eliminated, as will special HIV test consent forms.

The goal, CDC officials explained, is to remove the stigma from HIV testing and make it easier for an estimated 250,000 people who do not know they are infected to get effective treatment and be counselled on how not to spread the virus which causes AIDS.

The new guidelines, due to be released in June or July, are not legally binding, but may influence what doctors do and what health insurance programmes cover.

The American Medical Association (AMA) has expressed strong support for the move, stating that “HIV is an infectious disease and... should be treated like any other infectious disease. The fact that it has been treated so differently... in some ways has contributed to the stigma”.

Dr Tim Mastro – Acting Director of the CDC's division of HIV / AIDS prevention – also stresses that “doctors should be explicit” and inform their patients that “you're going to be tested”.

(Source: The Straits Times)

DEATH OF WHO DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Dr Lee Jong-Wook, Director of the World Health Organisation (WHO), died on 22 May 2006 after suffering a sudden subdural hematoma during an official function in Geneva. He underwent surgery to evacuate the clot but subsequently perished. Dr Lee, a national of the Republic of Korea, had been Director-General of the WHO since July 2003. He was a world leader in efforts against tuberculosis and vaccine-preventable diseases of children. At the time of his death,

◀ Page 41 – News In Brief

he had worked for the WHO for 23 years. He is survived by his wife and son.

(Source: WHO website Media Centre)

BROKEN HEARTS GO ON STEM CELL TRIAL

Scientists at the University of Pittsburgh have begun a trial to establish how stem cell injection might heal damaged myocardium. They are injecting stem cells into the hearts of individuals scheduled for heart transplantation, and then examining the removed hearts to examine how the injected stem cells behave.

Previous animal studies had shown improved myocardial contractility after injecting stem cells into mice which had suffered artificially induced myocardial infarction. Some encouraging results in humans have been obtained from small-scale trials in Argentina and Mexico [*J Thoracic Cardiovasc Surg* (2005) 130:1631, and *Life Sci* (2006) 78:279]. A German research group has been working on a larger sample of patients.

However the mechanism of repair is still unclear and critics of the procedure say it is

inappropriate for large-scale deployment until the precise mechanism is known – hence the current study.

(Source: *Nature Medicine* (2006) 12:483)

INDONESIAN BIRD-FLU CLUSTER

There was a cluster of avian flu cases in Indonesia. The first case in the cluster fell ill on 24 April 2006 and died on 4 May 2006. As of late May 2006, eight members of an extended family in the village of Kubu Sembelang in northern Sumatra had become infected with H5N1, and six more had since died. There has been suspicion of possible human-to-human transmission in this present cluster.

Some critics have alleged that the response to the virus could have been better – the first WHO official did not reach the village until 12 May 2006. Previously published modelling studies have predicted that if a pandemic virus emerges, there might only be a three week window for the affected country to quarantine all carriers and treat the infected with antivirals. [*Nature* (2005) 436:614]

(Source: *Nature* (2006) 441:554) ■