



NEWS IN BRIEF

OBESE CHILDREN: EYES A WINDOW INTO THE FUTURE?

Researchers in Singapore have found that heavier children tend to have larger veins in their eyes. In a project led by Dr Wong Tien Yin of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, the researchers studied 768 children taken from an ongoing study – the Singapore Cohort Study of Risk Factors for Myopia (SCORM). SCORM is a cohort study led by Professor Saw Seang Mei, which is following the eyesight of some 2,000 pupils recruited from primary school as they grow into adulthood.

In the secondary study, digital retinal photos were taken of the 768 children. A computer programme measured the size of their retinal blood vessels. The researchers found a correlation between greater BMI and weight, and significantly larger retinal blood vessels.

The significance of this finding is that it corresponds to similar findings previously discovered among adults – and such changes in adults has previously been associated with heart disease and stroke.

Speaking to *The Straits Times*, Professor Saw notes that the next step in the study will be to monitor the size of retinal vessels in these children, to see if these changes (and their rates of progression) can predict subsequent development of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and stroke in adulthood.

(Source: *The Straits Times*)

GONORRHOEA LINK WITH BLADDER CANCER

A research team led by Dr Dominique Michaud at the Harvard School of Public Health has found a correlation between gonorrhoea and bladder cancer. Previous studies had suggested a link, but these were retrospective. The work by Michaud and colleagues was a prospective study of 51,529 American men, all of who had full gonorrhoea histories available from the beginning of the study. There was a close to two-fold elevated risk among men who had reported a history

of gonorrhoea (relative risk 1.92, with 95% confidence interval of 1.10 to 3.33).

The mechanism by which gonorrhoea is associated with bladder cancer is not yet known. Some hypothesise that chronic inflammation might be the cause. Other observers are more cautious, as gonorrhoea might merely be a marker for the actual causative agent, such as another sexually transmitted disease.

(Source: *BBC News Online* and *Br J Cancer* (2006) *Epub*)

TAIWANESE SCIENTISTS RESEARCH INSULIN PILL

Scientists at the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan are working on a method to deliver insulin orally. Many diabetics require insulin, but this has historically required injections, as insulin is a peptide hormone and is digested by stomach enzymes and acids. More recently an inhalable form of insulin has been developed, but is not in general use yet.

The researchers were able to prevent insulin's degradation in the stomach by developing a "nanoparticle" shell. Made from chitosan, a natural carbohydrate derived from shrimp shells, the nanoparticle resists stomach acids and digestive enzymes, but is small enough to pass through the small intestinal lining and release its cargo into the bloodstream.

However there is still some distance to go before this invention is ready for patients – the nanoshell-coated insulin has only been tested on rats, at a time when they had not eaten for 12 hours. The effect of food, drink and differing dietary habits on the nanoshell route of oral administration remains unclear.

(Source: *BBC News Online*)

HOSPITAL BILLS – ECONOMY THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

Information asymmetry in healthcare has been cited by economists as a reason for high healthcare costs. In 2003, the Ministry of Health

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implemented the online publication of hospital bill statistics, in a joint initiative with the Consumers Association of Singapore. Initially the 28 most common illnesses were tabulated; the list has grown since then.

The impact of this initiative has been studied by the team of Dr Wong CY, Dr Wu E, and Professor Wong TY. Writing in the *Singapore Medical Journal*, they describe an analysis of inpatient hospital bill sizes over a 16-month period.

The authors found that mean prices fell by 4.14% and 9.64% for B2 and C classes respectively. At the 50th percentile, the reduction was by 7.95% and 10.12% respectively. At the 90th percentile, the reduction was more substantial – by 8.01% and 11.4% for these two ward classes.

(Source: *Singapore Medical Journal* (2007) 48(1):16-24)

BIRD FLU IN CHINA – AGAIN

China reported on 10 January 2007 its first human case of bird flu in six months. The 37-year-old man from the eastern province of Anhui showed symptoms of H5N1 influenza infection on 10 December 2006, but successfully

made a recovery and was released on 6 January 2007. The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention only confirmed the diagnosis of bird flu on 8 January 2007.

The previous victim was a 62-year-old farmer in northwest Xinjiang region who died of the disease.

The latest case raised the number of Chinese human H5N1 cases to 22. Bird flu has killed over 150 people worldwide to date.

The lack of a reported poultry outbreak before the current patient's illness was cited by the WHO as evidence that stronger poultry monitoring is needed in China.

(Source: *Channel NewsAsia*)

BIRD FLU IN INDONESIA – AGAIN

Two women died of bird flu in Indonesia, reported Channel NewsAsia on 13 January 2007. This takes the Indonesian death toll to 61, the highest in the world. Aged 22 and 27, the women were admitted to hospital on 12 January and later confirmed as suffering from bird flu by health officials. Both died shortly after admission to hospital. ■

(Source: *Channel NewsAsia*)