This week in BMJ

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Development of cirrhosis linked to alcohol dehydrogenase gene in alcohol misusers

Only a small proportion of long term alcohol misusers develop cirrhosis. Susceptibility to liver damage is thought to have a genetic component, with genes determining ethanol metabolism being the most likely candidates for this role. Sherman *et al* studied the allele frequencies of a polymorphism in the gene for alcohol dehydrogenase 2 in controls and alcohol misusers, most of whom had severe liver disease (p 1388). They found that one allele was strongly associated with liver disease and alcohol dependency. This provides further evidence that inherited variations in enzymes that metabolise alcohol can influence development of alcohol related problems.

Antibiotics do not cause fatigue

To test their assumption that antibiotics do not induce fatigue, and also to assess the psychological characteristics linked with side effects in clinical trials, Bergmann and colleagues compared placebo with amoxycillin in a double blind randomised cross over trial in healthy volunteers (p 1397). They administered Bortner's rating scale (to measure type A/type B behaviour) and Levenson's locus of control scale (to measure how in control of events subjects felt themselves to be) to 79 subjects before giving them amoxycillin 500 mg or placebo three times a day for one week. The subjects were asked to score their fatigue (on a scale of 0-5) at the end of each treatment period. Six recorded fatigue after amoxycillin and five after placebo; the fatigue score was associated with type B behaviour and an external locus of control. The authors conclude that antibiotics do not make patients feel tired but that patients' psychological profile may influence the incidence of side effects: in this study those who felt less in control of events reported more fatigue.

Dutch success in midwife led obstetric care based on nationally agreed risk criteria

The demand among women in Britain for more home based care in pregnancy and among midwives for more autonomy in managing women in pregnancy prompted Christina Oppenheimer to see how the Dutch organise their maternity care (p 1400). Of the 200 000 deliveries a year in the Netherlands, 43% are conducted independently by midwives, 14% by general practitioners, and 43% by obstetricians. Women with low risk pregnancies are referred to the sole care of midwives or general practitioners. Though they remain entirely responsible for the care of these women, midwives often consult obstetricians, and cooperation between providers of primary and secondary care underpins the system. Oppenheimer argues that Britain could learn from the main features of the Dutch system, notably its agreed risk criteria and the good communications between primary and secondary care.

Prostatic cancer in nuclear industry workers linked to exposure to five radionuclides

Previous studies of employees of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority found that mortality from prostatic cancer was increased in workers who had accumulated high exposures from external radiation and who had been investigated for internal contamination with radionuclides. Rooney *et al* made a detailed case-control study of contamination with specific radionuclides and other potentially hazardous exposures, and they report their results on page 1391. Increased risk of prostatic cancer was consistently associated with exposure to a group of radionuclides—tritium, chromium-51, iron-59, cobalt-60, and zinc-65. These radionuclides tend to be found together in the environment of heavy water reactors. The separate effects of each radionuclide could not be evaluated. Exposure to these radionuclides was uncommon in the workforce and did not affect its overall health.

Predictive value of risk factors for cardiovascular disease in women is different from that in men

It is often assumed that the risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease are the same in women as in men. In particular, all types of obesity and increased serum cholesterol concentrations are assumed to increase cardiovascular risk. However, the results from a prospective study of women in Gothenburg, Sweden, described by Bengtsson *et al* (p 1385) suggest that women have an essentially different risk profile. Increased serum triglyceride concentration and the ratio of waist circumference to hip circumference were associated with a sharply increased risk of death from all causes and from myocardial infarction. Increased serum cholesterol concentration and increased body mass index (an indicator of general obesity) were much weaker risk factors. These observations are consistent with previously reported results and should be taken into consideration when recommending preventive measures for women.

Smokers' poor diets exacerbate damage caused by smoking

Tobacco smoke contains high concentrations of free radicals, which places extra demands on a smoker's antioxidant systems that protect cells from damage by free radicals. However, such systems depend on the dietary intake of antioxidants. On page 1381 Margetts and Jackson describe their study of the diets of a representative sample of British people. Smokers tended to eat more processed foods, sugar, and butter than non-smokers and less fibre, polyunsaturated fats, protein, fruits, and vegetables. In particular, smokers had lower intakes of antioxidants such as carotene and ascorbic acid. The authors conclude that the poor diets of smokers probably exacerbate the damage caused by their smoking.