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*Instructions to authors appeared in the issue of 4 January 1992*

### Risks and benefits of raising vitamin D and lowering cholesterol

Doctors who work primarily with individual people may forget that small changes in populations can have large consequences, as two papers in this week's journal illustrate. A group from Cambridge has been testing the hypothesis that serum vitamin D concentrations in middle aged women may be important in determining bone density (p 273). The researchers have found a positive relation right across the range of vitamin D concentrations and speculate that a small increase in exposure to sunlight or in dietary intake might lead to a 5% increase in mean bone density—and hence a 20% fall in fractures. But there is, of course, the possibility that increases in exposure to sunlight or dietary intake of vitamin D might have adverse consequences, and this anxiety has arisen in the context of lowering serum cholesterol concentration in populations.

Various studies have shown excess mortality from injuries and "causes not related to illness" in those who have participated in trials in which their serum cholesterol concentration is lowered by either diet or drugs. A Swedish group has now investigated the possibility that low cholesterol concentration may be

linked to death from injuries or suicide by studying a cohort of over 50 000 men and women followed up for 20 years since testing in 1964-5 (p 277). Deaths from injuries, particularly suicide, were indeed commoner in men with low serum cholesterol in the first seven years after testing. Whether there is a direct causative link is not known, but this evidence supports calls for a moratorium on the use of cholesterol lowering drugs in those with mild increases in serum cholesterol until more evidence is available. Those who propose changes in whole populations must be even more sure of their ground than those who seek changes in individual people, as an editorial on the ethics of screening discusses (p 267).

Finally, nobody will be surprised to read in this week's journal that "The financial position of the London general hospitals has long been a cause of anxiety to those entrusted with the care of those institutions" (p 284). Nor, sadly, will many people be greatly surprised to learn that the sentence first appeared in the journal exactly a century ago.

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## Editor's Choice