

# MINERVA

Several studies have reported that raised blood pressure has a stronger effect on risk of cardiovascular disease in lean people than it does in obese people. A large study from Sweden, though, has just found the opposite (*Circulation* 2008;118:1637-42). The strongest associations between blood pressure, stroke, and myocardial infarction occurred in overweight and obese people. The reasons for the discrepancy aren't clear, but with over a million people in the cohort the Swedish study wins on size.

In sports medicine, concussion means a brief period of unconsciousness caused by head trauma. Although recovery is usually rapid, there's evidence that cerebral dysfunction persists for much longer. How soon should an athlete who has experienced concussion be allowed to return to sporting activities? A review in *Archives of Neurology* (2008;65:1158-61) reckons that they should wait at least a month.

$\gamma$ glutamyltransferase is the enzyme responsible for the extracellular catabolism of glutathione. Raised plasma concentrations are widely used as an indicator of liver disease and as a marker of excessive alcohol intake. A large longitudinal study from Austria (*Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology* 2008;28:1857-65) finds that increasing levels over time are also associated with risk of fatal cardiovascular disease, particularly in younger people. The authors suggest that longitudinal monitoring may be useful in primary prevention of cardiovascular disease.

An analysis of world records in nine track and field athletic events shows striking improvements over the past century (*British Medical Bulletin* 2008;87:7-15). The rate of improvement has been faster in women than men and greater in field events and long distance running than in sprints. The curves flatten out in the 1970s, at the time that antidoping testing was introduced by the International Olympic Committee. Further improvements in athletic performance will be determined less by an athlete's innate physiology and more by technological advances in equipment and by where the line is drawn between what is deemed natural and what is artificially enhanced.

Age of onset of diabetes is an independent determinant of risk of retinopathy, according to data from a clinic in Sydney, Australia (*Diabetes Care* 2008;31:1985-90). Among people with



A 48 year old woman presented with breathlessness and a rash across the area of the right C4-5 dermatomes. Her chest x ray showed a raised right hemidiaphragm and linear atelectasis. An ultrasound "sniff" test showed phrenic nerve paralysis, and a swab from the rash showed varicella zoster virus. The patient was known to be HIV positive. Phrenic nerve palsy is an unusual complication of shingles; varicella virus rarely enters the anterior horn of affected ganglions to cause motor symptoms. HIV testing should be considered in young patients presenting with shingles, particularly when the presentation is atypical.

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Patient consent obtained.

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type 2 diabetes of long duration, those whose condition was diagnosed when they were aged under 45 had a higher prevalence and more severe grades of diabetic retinopathy than those diagnosed later, even after duration of diabetes, glycaemic control, and hypertension were taken into account. One implication is that metabolic targets for younger people with diabetes may need to be especially stringent.

Observational studies have shown that the amount of fish eaten is inversely related to the likelihood of having symptoms of depression. The association is biologically plausible because fish are rich in eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids (EPA and DHA), which are important components of neural membranes and precursors of compounds involved in immune and inflammatory responses. However, a six month trial of fish oil supplements in an elderly Dutch population (*American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2008;88:706-13) found that, although plasma concentrations of these polyunsaturated fatty acids increased substantially, mental wellbeing was not affected.

Discussions about patient safety often draw on parallels with aviation, but other industries also provide useful lessons. The whole culture of safety changed in the mining company Rio Tinto after 10 people died in 1998 while trying to rescue a trapped miner. Safety became the barometer of performance at every level of the company, and all meetings began with a five minute "Safety Share" in which anyone could contribute their observations on safety or health (*Quality and Safety in Health Care* 2008;17:314).

Splinting affected joints has been widely used to treat inflammatory arthritis in the UK for the past 40 years. It has many things in its favour, including non-invasiveness, reversibility, and ease and cheapness of application. Unfortunately, however, it's probably ineffective. A 12 month trial of static hand and wrist splints in people with rheumatoid arthritis failed to show an improvement in grip strength, deformity, hand function, pain, or stiffness (*Rheumatology* 2008;47:1548-53).

Everybody knows that alcohol consumption is a risk factor for pancreatitis—but the evidence is limited to a few case-control studies that found an increased risk only in men. Fortunately, a longitudinal study from Denmark puts things on a firmer footing (*American Journal of Epidemiology* 2008;168:932-7). Risk gradually increased with rising alcohol intake in both men and women, with a threefold increase at more than 48 drinks per week. Drinking beer seemed more likely to provoke pancreatitis than consuming wine or spirits.

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