

MINERVA

At the moment, Alzheimer's disease is a clinical diagnosis—unless the patient has died and the results of neuropathological examination are available. A biomarker would be an important step forward. Perhaps visinin-like protein 1 is the answer. A study in *Clinical Chemistry* (2008;54:1617-23) reports that this marker of neuronal injury is raised in the cerebrospinal fluid of patients with Alzheimer's disease and that concentrations correlate with scores on the mini-mental state examination. The next step will be to determine whether concentrations of this protein in patients with Alzheimer's disease differ from those in patients with other causes of dementia.

In a trial of liability in the case of a 10 month old girl in whom the diagnosis of meningococcal disease was delayed, a doctor was found not to have done an adequate examination because he had not assessed level of consciousness. The lesson is that a child should not be assumed to be innocently asleep unless you have checked—it is always necessary to try to wake up an unresponsive child to be sure that consciousness is not impaired (*Clinical Risk* 2008;14:172-3).

The rapid development of the central nervous system during childhood and adolescence means that young brains may be especially vulnerable to neuroglycopenia—a concern for doctors trying to achieve tight glycaemic control in young people with type 1 diabetes. An analysis of data from the Diabetes Control and Complications Trial is reassuring. Despite fairly high rates of severe hypoglycaemia, cognitive function in young patients did not decline during 18 years of follow-up (*Diabetes Care* 2008;31:1933-8).

Guadeloupe, in the French Caribbean, has a high prevalence of an unusual form of atypical parkinsonism that responds poorly to treatment with levodopa. Some patients had abnormalities of eye movement, suggesting that the disease might be a form of progressive supranuclear palsy. However, a detailed analysis showed the eye movement disorder to be largely cortical in origin—in contrast to classical progressive supranuclear palsy, in which brainstem and cerebellar dysfunction are prominent (*Brain* 2008;131:2701-9).

Quite apart from its visual function, the eye determines the many circadian rhythms of human physiology. As we get older, pupils constrict and



A 66 year old man developed acute severe peripheral oedema two days after a triple coronary artery bypass graft. Subsequently, a cluster of blisters erupted on the top of his left foot, rapidly enlarged, and merged. Blisters of the legs secondary to oedema are not rare but are scarcely documented. Acute oedema blisters occur when oedema accumulates rapidly, and they reflect the speed of accumulation, rather than the degree of oedema. Blisters usually resolve spontaneously with the oedema. In this case, the blister was lanced to preserve the patient's mobility.

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lenses lose transparency, and by age 45 we have lost half the photoreceptor sensitivity that we had in early life. A review in the *British Journal of Ophthalmology* (2008;92:1439-44) reckons that declining photoreceptor function contributes to sleep disorders and depression in elderly people. One idea is to develop intraocular lenses that transmit short wavelength blue light (to which retinal circadian photoreceptors are most sensitive) for patients undergoing cataract surgery, to maximise non-visual as well as visual benefits.

Unless they're unusually savage, dog bites don't make the headlines. Even so, they are a substantial health problem, leading to infections, psychological trauma, and disfiguring injuries, and are more common in children than in adults. A survey from the United States finds that of the more than 4 million people who are bitten each year, a fifth need medical attention (*Injury Prevention* 2008;14:296-301). Dog lovers might be surprised to learn that people living in a household that keeps a dog are at greatest risk.

Combining data from a population based cohort in southern Norway and a registry of water quality showed that inflammatory bowel disease, including ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, was associated with high iron content of drinking water. Risk of developing these diseases rose by about 20% for each 0.1 mg/l increase in iron. The investigators suggest two explanations: either high iron concentrations work as a catalyst for oxidative stress and cause inflammation, or they facilitate the growth of gut bacteria (*American Journal of Epidemiology* 2008;168:1065-72).

Skeletal muscle has recently been identified as an endocrine organ that secretes cytokines. Circulating levels of interleukin 6, for example, increase 100-fold during physical exercise. A decade ago, adipose tissue was discovered to have an important secretory function; perhaps we should prepare ourselves for an avalanche of new regulatory peptides and their receptors (*Physiological Reviews* 2008;88:1379-406).

Preauricular skin tags and pits are quite common in newborn babies. Although they are classed as minor craniofacial abnormalities, they are usually isolated and considered of little clinical importance. A large study from Israel, however, finds an association with permanent hearing impairment. The observation will be of particular importance in countries without a universal screening programme for neonatal hearing defects (*Pediatrics* 2008;122:e884-90).

Discussions about the current epidemic of obesity invariably point out that it's a global phenomenon, but patterns may vary between different parts of the world. An exhaustive review of the relation between socioeconomic status and obesity (*Epidemiologic Reviews* 2007;29:29-48) reports that "The overall pattern of results, for both men and women, was of an increasing proportion of positive associations and a decreasing proportion of negative associations as one moved from countries with high levels of socioeconomic development to countries with medium and low levels of development." Put simply, obesity tends to affect rich people living in poor countries and poor people living in rich countries.

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