Do lights at pedestrian crossings give older people enough time to cross safely? After measuring the walking speed of patients attending a geriatric assessment centre, investigators calculated that with current timings many 80 year olds would be unable to make it across a road more than 22 metres wide. Although matching crossing times to the walking speeds of older people may seem unrealistic, in the European Union nearly 40% of pedestrians killed are aged 65 and older (Age and Ageing 2010;39:80-6, doi:10.1093/ageing/afp206).

Neurodevelopmental impairment is common in children with severe congenital heart disease. It tends to be blamed on inadequate cerebral perfusion and brain anoxia that occurred intraoperatively while the cardiac defects were being repaired. Magnetic resonance imaging and spectroscopy, which can be used to measure brain growth in fetal life, suggest that the problem starts much earlier. A North American study found that third trimester fetuses with some forms of congenital heart disease had smaller brain volumes than normal fetuses with evidence of impaired neuroaxonal development and metabolism (Circulation 2010;121:26-33, doi:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.109.865568).

People who are obese or overweight are more likely to suffer from low back pain, particularly if they are women, according to a meta-analysis in the American Journal of Epidemiology (2010;171:135-54; doi:10.1093/aje/kwp356). But the odds ratios are only just above unity and most of the studies are cross sectional, so it’s far from certain that the association is causal. There are many good reasons to encourage patients to lose weight but Minerva is doubtful that reducing the risk of low back pain is one of them.

A 64 year old man holidaying on an island near Stockholm was bitten on his leg by a tick. He had no local reaction or febrile illness at the time, but over the next few months he developed worsening oedema and proteinuria. Renal biopsy showed membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis and immunoblotting was positive for Borrelia burgdorferi IgG antibody. Infection with this spirochaete is well described as a cause of glomerulonephritis in animals, particularly dogs, but it’s a rare complication in people (NDT Plus 2010;3:105-6, doi:10.1093/ndtplus/sfp160).

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