

MINERVA

Do surgical patients want to know about their life expectancy or probability of survival? Urologists from one British centre investigated this question by presenting a series of hypothetical case scenarios to 120 patients. After the presentation, 58% of patients wanted to know both their life expectancy and survival probability and 36% wished to know neither. They preferred a combination of numerical and pictorial formats, rather than either format alone or a verbal format only. The use of “survival curves” was popular. The results were not significantly affected by sex or educational background (*BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making* 2008;8:24).

A three year longitudinal study of Alzheimer’s disease found that an imaging technique known as voxel based morphometry (VBM) can predict the rate of progression of the condition. A comparison of baseline cognitive function and imaging data showed that patients who had declined faster at three years initially had more extensive cortical atrophy than “slow decliners,” and that this atrophy could not be detected by clinical and neuropsychological assessment (*Neurology* 2008;70:2201-11).

Mathematical modelling shows that vaginal microbicides being developed to prevent HIV infection in women could increase antiviral resistance and may actually offer more protection to men (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 2008;105:9835-40). The speed that resistance develops seems to be related to when the drugs are introduced on a large scale. The authors note that because women are more commonly infected with HIV than men, the increased drug resistance would lead to women being disproportionately affected by new infections.

Despite a dearth of evidence that antibiotic prophylaxis should be given before invasive dental procedures in patients with hip and knee arthroplasties, it remains common practice. Interestingly, the number of arthroplasties increases each year, but one review reports that infections of total hip or knee replacements caused by haematogenous seeding after dental intervention are rare, and that the rationale for systemic or even local antimicrobial prophylaxis is weak. It seems that fear is stronger than science (*Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (Br)* 2008;90-B.833-8).



Five per cent fluorouracil is an effective and commonly prescribed treatment for actinic keratoses. An inflammatory reaction, which can occasionally be haemorrhagic, is part of the treatment response. This man used fluorouracil cream on his face and ears for five days before developing an inferoposterior myocardial infarction, which was thrombolysed. Within 24 hours he developed severe haemorrhagic crusting in the inflammatory areas. This case highlights the severity of the inflammatory reaction that this cream can elicit, which can be even more intense when concomitant thrombolysis occurs. Subsequently the skin healed completely and the actinic keratoses resolved.

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In an investigation into the role television plays in depression in older people, participants cited television as a way of identifying depression in themselves or others—through overuse or lack of interest—but they also said that watching television helped them cope with the symptoms of depression (*The Gerontologist* 2008;48:300-10). People with a previous history of depression identified television viewing as more harmful than helpful.

An erythropoiesis stimulating agent called darbopoetin alfa has finished its final round of efficacy and safety testing for the treatment of the anaemia of cancer. A phase II randomised double blind placebo controlled study in *The Oncologist* (2008;13:715-24) reports that in patients with cancer and anaemia who are not receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy, the drug significantly increased haematopoiesis compared with placebo—85% of patients taking the drug achieved the target haemoglobin concentration compared with 50% of those taking placebo.

A Canadian study that examined changes in bone mineral density as a function of age in men and women has identified a period of accelerated loss of density in the hip bones that occurs in both sexes after the age of 65. This probably contributes to the increased incidence of hip fracture in older patients. Because of the extent of the observed bone loss, the authors suggest that in the absence of other risk factors or treatment, repeat testing to diagnose osteoporosis could be done at intervals of as long as five years (*CMAJ* 2008;178:1660-8).

The “working classes” made up about 75% of the population of Victorian England, and popular belief is that their diet was seriously lacking in nutritional benefits. However, a report suggests that many women managed their families on limited incomes without exposing them to malnutrition. Although the Victorian “poverty diet” might seem unappetising, a detailed analysis of typical menus shows that it had high nutritional value (*Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 2008;101:350-7).

Both “clinical inertia” and poor adherence contribute to inadequate control of blood pressure. However, intensifying treatment in the presence of poor adherence achieves little, according to a paper in *Circulation* (2008;117:2884-92). This retrospective cohort analysis also found that previous adherence patterns had little effect on doctors’ decisions to intensify drug regimens, even when adherence was poor. Adherence and clinical inertia should be tackled in parallel to improve blood pressure control.

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