

MINERVA

Send comments or suggest ideas to Minerva: minerva@bmj.com

Minerva thinks that statins are wonderful drugs. Not only have they saved the lives of millions of people at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, but they may also reduce all cause and cancer specific mortality in men with prostate cancer. A study of four large UK databases in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* (2013, doi:10.1200/JCO.2013.49.4757) found that men who were taking statins at the time of diagnosis had a 34% reduction in adjusted all cause mortality after a mean follow-up of 4.4 years. Men who started statins after the diagnosis of prostate cancer had a smaller but still significant 18% reduction in all cause mortality, with a cumulative dose related effect. Observed reductions in prostate cancer related mortality in both statin groups were even larger, pointing to a cancer specific effect.

Statin users were older and had more comorbidities, the incidence rate for recurrent venous thromboembolism was 24.4 (95% CI 22.8 to 26.2) per 1000 person years in statin users and 48.5 (47.4 to 49.7) per 1000 person years in non-users.

Might fish oil help treat rheumatoid arthritis? As steroid sparing agents go, eel, salmon and turbot have more culinary attraction than most. In a trial of 139 patients with recent onset rheumatoid arthritis (*Annals of Rheumatic Diseases* 2013, doi:10.1136/annrheumdis-2013-204145), omega-3 fatty acids were delivered in their least palatable form, a capsule. Even deprived of their proper accompaniments of fish protein, buttery sauces, and Chardonnay derived wines, these fish oils greatly reduced the failure rate of triple disease modifying therapy for these patients.

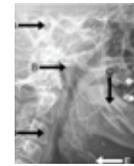
Daniel Alcides Carrión García (1857-85) was a medical student who suspected that the warty skin lesions called verruga peruana might be a late sequel of Oroya fever. He had a couple of friends inoculate him with pus from a verruga lesion, whereupon he contracted the fever and died. In his honour, Oroya fever is sometimes



A 78 year old woman was admitted to the emergency department owing to recurrent syncope after lumbosacral vertebroplasty and cement screw augmentation for low back pain. Her D dimer concentration was raised (4143 ng/mL; reference value <500), and computed tomography showed radiopaque material in the pulmonary arteries. She denied previous central venous catheterisation. Transthoracic echocardiography indicated severe mitral stenosis and increased pulmonary arterial pressure (47 mm Hg; reference range 8-20). During cardiac catheterisation, an attempt to extract the material failed because of fragmentation. Cement injected into the paravertebral veins had entered the systemic circulation, resulting in pulmonary embolism.

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called Carrión's disease, and the young martyr was declared a hero of Peru in 1991. Almost all cases are caused by *Bartonella bacilliformis*, but rarely other species of *Bartonella* turn up in verruga peruana lesions. The latest, from the remote region of Ancash in the Andes, is so new that it is still called "*Candidatus Bartonella ancashii*" while it waits in line to be christened by the high priests of bacteriology. But its discoverers have delved into its new genome and they are quite sure that it is a newcomer (*Journal of Clinical Microbiology* 2013;51:3865-8, doi:10.1128/JCM.01226-13).



Diagnostic parotid sialogram

Try the anatomy quiz in ENDGAMES, p 36

"Silicosis, pneumoconiosis. . ." purrs Trevor Howard in *Brief Encounter*, while the enchanted Celia Johnson responds mistily with "I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, but please go on." But now that the great age of coal mining is over, can handsome young doctors still use these diseases when chatting up women in station cafes? Alas, the answer is yes, according to a survey of respiratory mortality in US coal miners (*Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 2013, doi:10.1136/oemed-2013-101597). The underlying cause of death for 9033 underground coal miners from 31 US mines enrolled between 1969 and 1971 was evaluated with life table analysis. Exposure to coal mine dust and silica increased the risk of death from chronic obstructive airways disease and lung cancer even in the absence of smoking, and miners still die from pneumoconiosis.

Do seat belts and air bags cause drivers to drive more dangerously? The notion is often invoked to explain why such increased safety measures often fail to correlate with increased safety. In a paper in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* (2013;13:1021-8, doi:10.1016/S1473-3099(13)70226-3), a related hypothesis is explored in relation to HIV. If you provide daily pre-exposure prophylaxis to HIV negative partners of those who are HIV positive, does the frequency of unprotected sex between them rise? Not at all, finds this paper, although it notes a small rise in the amount of unprotected sex engaged in with partners from outside the study.

Minerva's eye was caught by the title of a paper in *Heart* (2013, doi:10.1136/heartjnl-2013-304769): "Effects of intravenous and oral β -blockade in persistent asthmatics controlled on inhaled corticosteroids." Sounds a bit dangerous, doesn't it? Dundee researchers report on the results from 12 subjects: "Intravenous esmolol was administered without any adverse effects on pulmonary function in selected, stable, mild-to-moderate asthmatics controlled on inhaled corticosteroids. Tiotropium prevented propranolol induced bronchoconstriction after acute dosing during up-titration to 80 mg with no adverse impact on asthma control." So it seems that some patients with asthma who would benefit from β blockers might in the future be able to take them—under close supervision.

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