The sight of someone enjoying a deep drag on a tubular object that emits what looks like smoke is enough to send some public health physicians into reflex horror, especially when these products come from the tobacco industry. But evidence is increasing that e-cigarettes are the most effective aid to smoking cessation. In an online survey of 3538 current and 579 recent ex-smokers across Britain conducted in the last two months of 2012, a fifth were currently using e-cigarettes (Addictive Behaviors 2014;39:1120-5, doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.03.009). Surprisingly, a quarter of the respondents were unaware that e-cigarettes are less harmful than ordinary cigarettes. Public health physicians, here’s a way you can save lives. You have a message to get across to people with nicotine addiction.

A few years ago, a review article about vitamin D in the New England Journal of Medicine pointed out that most of our vital organs have vitamin D receptors and that a large proportion of Americans and north Europeans have vitamin D insufficiency. Since then, Minerva has accumulated a tottering pile of mostly negative vitamin D studies. Nearly all of them have a placebo comparator, but one of the latest (BMC Infectious Diseases 2014;4:273, doi:10.1186/1471-2334-14-273) is remarkable for comparing vitamin D with twice daily gargling with 30 mL of tap water. At McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, 600 students were enrolled in a 2x2 factorial randomised controlled trial of weekly vitamin D, versus placebo and gargling versus non-gargling. The vitamin D group showed a small reduction in laboratory confirmed upper respiratory viral infections over a period of a few weeks.

You are not what you eat, or you would look decidedly odd. As omnivorous mammals, we digest many different things and turn them into ourselves so effectively that it is difficult to keep track of anything. The Mediterranean diet of medical legend is rich in fruits and vegetables, olive oil, nuts, legumes, whole wheat bread, and fish, with wine being consumed in moderate amounts during meals. The PREDIMED study was a feeding trial conducted in Spain in 7447 older adults with raised cardiovascular risk, which was stopped at 4.8 years because those on the Mediterranean diet had significantly fewer bad events. A re-analysis of the dietary factors that led to longevity in this trial (BMC Medicine 2014;12:77, doi:10.1186/1741-7015-12-77) identifies a high polyphenol intake, especially of stilbenes and lignans. Probably. Try the gazpacho, it’s delicious.

Treatment for amblyopia consists of spotting the condition before the age of 7 years and then putting the strong eye out of action so that the lazy eye is made to do most of the work. This is usually done by patching or the use of atropine drops. In 1999, the Pediatric Eye Disease Investigator Group initiated a randomised clinical trial to compare the two methods. Now that the children have reached 15 years of age, the group has reported the results (JAMA Ophthalmology 2014, doi:10.1001/jamaophthalmol.2014.392). It’s good to know that almost all of the 419 children now have good acuity, whichever method was used, although mild residual amblyopia is common.

In Australia, as in other countries, 80% of the palliative care caseload consists of patients with cancer, and despite decades of advocacy, it is still uncommon for palliative care to be offered to people dying from heart failure or respiratory disease. A pilot study in Queensland (BMC Palliative Care 2014;13:24, doi:10.1186/1472-684X-13-24) shows that simply holding a single case conference with the patient’s GP, a specialist community nurse, and a palliative care consultant can have measurable benefits in service utilisation. Minerva looks forward to the randomised trial that this team now plans but meanwhile suggests that no one should delay involving palliative care services in the care of all patients who might die within a year, whatever the diagnosis.