High gluten cereals are the result of intense hybridisation dating back only about 4000 years, so they are not part of the diet that humans evolved to eat. More than one Briton in 10 avoids eating wheat. Many people who do not have the defining antibodies for coeliac disease find that eating gluten rich food can produce a wide variety of symptoms, often within a few hours. The Italian Celiac Disease Association together with the Italian Coeliac Foundation have started to explore the epidemiology and possible causes of non-coeliac gluten sensitivity (NCGS). Looking at 38 Italian centres, they identified 486 patients with suspected NCGS within a one year period (BMC Medicine 2014;12:85, doi:10.1186/1741-7015- 12-85). The female: male ratio was 5.4 to 1, and the mean age was 38 years (range 3-81 years). Symptoms ranged across every bodily function, from numb legs and mouth ulcers to a rumbling belly and a foggy mind.

The season has begun for numerous Britons to head for the sunshine of Spain. Most will be heading for hotels by the sea with swimming pools, but those intending to brave the heat of the interior would do well to read a new study titled “Effect of high summer temperatures on mortality in 50 Spanish cities” (Environmental Health 2014;13:48, doi:10.1186/1476-069X-13-48). The overall average increase in mortality when temperatures rise from the 90th to the 99th centile is 14.6%. Barcelona is a high risk city, even though it is by the sea. Mad dogs and Englishmen, avoid the midday sun. Do not detest-a-siesta, as Noel Coward warned.

Among all the luscious fruits of summer, Minerva has a special fondness for the gooseberry. Globular, hairy, and full of seed, this berry splatters on the palate with a burst of sweet deliciousness. But only when fully ripe, and of a dessert variety: otherwise you are likely to get a mouthful of eye watering sourness. With commercially grown gooseberries, it can be hard to judge, and Minerva advises growing your own from a trusted old variety such as Hedgehog. But she is delighted to note from a recent paper from Poland (Journal of the American Society for Horticultural Science 2014;139:325-35) that gooseberry science does not stand still. “Combining ability analysis for selected plant traits in gooseberry” promises bigger sweeter crops with greater mildew resistance. Onwards and upwards.

After the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967, the availability of legal abortion in the United Kingdom varied widely according to the willingness of general practitioners to refer patients and of gynaecologists to perform the procedure. This continues to apply in Italy, where 70% of gynaecologists express a conscientious objection to carrying out abortions. The resulting restriction of availability forms the subject of a discussion paper in the Journal of Medical Ethics (2014, doi:10.1136/medethics-2013-101656). Minerva must confess that she was attracted to this article not only by its interesting subject matter but also by the name of the author, Francesca Minerva.

Bronchiolitis is a condition that can make infants alarmingly ill and breathless, and it tends to recur each time a child gets an upper respiratory virus in the first two years of life. When faced with a wheezy sounding baby or toddler breathing 60 times a minute, many doctors cannot resist the temptation to try a β adrenergic inhaler. But resist they should. The latest Cochrane review of bronchodilators for bronchiolitis concludes: “Bronchodilators such as albuterol or salbutamol do not improve oxygen saturation, do not reduce hospital admission after outpatient treatment, do not shorten the duration of hospitalization and do not reduce the time to resolution of illness at home.” (Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2014;6:CD001266.)

An 82 year old woman with cold haemagglutinin disease was seen at the haematology outpatient clinic. Routine blood tests were taken but there was a four hour delay in laboratory analysis, with samples stored at room temperature. Full blood count (FBC) showed 1450 × 10^9 platelets/L. The blood film showed marked agglutination and haemolysis, with multiple red cell fragments. These fragments were falsely interpreted by the laboratory as platelets. The picture shows the macroscopic appearance of cold haemagglutination in an EDTA tube left to cool. Note also hyperbilirubinaemia secondary to haemolysis. A second sample kept warm and processed immediately showed a normal FBC. There were no adverse outcomes for the patient.

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Patient consent obtained.

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“Shock horror: flesh-eating germ eats eye socket.” Fortunately this is an uncommon headline, because periorbital necrotising fasciitis is very rare, according to the first study of its incidence (British Journal of Ophthalmology 2014, doi:10.1136/bjophthalmol-2013-304735). The investigators sent questionnaires to ophthalmologists within the British Ophthalmological Surveillance Unit reporting system and identified 30 cases over two years. They estimated an incidence of 0.24 per 1 000 000 per annum in the United Kingdom, with most cases being caused by β haemolytic streptococcus A. It is a devastating condition—all patients were permanently damaged, and some died. A warning to take all suspected orbital cellulitis in adults as well as children very seriously.

The fastest growing age sector of the UK population is from 85 years upwards, although they still only account for 2.1% of the total. But which 85 year olds can look forward to living longer and to having a remaining life free of disability? It seems from a study in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (2014, doi:10.1136/jech-2014-204083) that age is a great equaliser. For the very old, the northwest southeast divide is much less apparent than for younger age groups, and the relation with deprivation disappears for life expectancy, though is still present for disability free life expectancy.

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