

# Minerva

Young people from Alabama, Illinois, Minnesota, and California who were recruited into a national cohort in 1985 had put on between seven and 12 kg in weight by 1996 (*American Journal of Epidemiology* 2000; 151:1172-81). The largest weight gains occurred in people who were already obese in 1985. Trends are set to continue, say the researchers, whose figures show a relentless rise in weight across the whole cohort.

Eating less and exercising more is the quickest way to lose weight. People who can't face doing both, however, often choose the diet option and skip the exercise. They would do better if they skipped the diet and started exercising, says a study in *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2000;133:92-103). In a randomised trial, obese men who ran off 700 kilocalories (2926 kJ) a day lost 1.3 kg more weight than men who restricted their diet by 2926 kJ a day. The exercise group also got fitter.

Fitness instructors may be better qualified than general practitioners to advise older people about exercise. In one Australian trial, however, advice from a fitness instructor with a master's degree in exercise physiology produced the usual increase in activity levels but had no impact on cardiovascular risk factors (*Medical Journal of Australia* 2000;173:88-90). Worse, the participants' quality of life fell during the trial. The disappointed authors suggest that enthusiasm for the trial made participants exaggerate their quality of life during the first interview.

There have been plenty of studies looking at patients' chances of surviving a cardiac arrest in hospital. On average, 15% live long enough to go home. A hospital in Wisconsin reports higher survival rates than this—a third of their patients survive to hospital discharge—but the authors admit that they are increasingly selective about who to resuscitate (*Archives of Internal Medicine* 2000;160:1969-73). In this study, age was unrelated to outcome.

Age seems to be more important in cardiac arrests occurring outside hospital (*Academic Emergency Medicine* 2000;7:762-8). In another study from Wisconsin the chances of survival went down steadily with advancing age, falling to 1% in people aged over 90. Survival rates in people over 80 were less than half those in a middle aged reference group. Resuscitating older people in the community is not futile, say the researchers, just less likely to succeed.

It took infection control specialists two and a half years to find the source of an outbreak

of *Klebsiella oxytoca* infection in one paediatric intensive care unit. By then, two babies had died of sepsis and a third was severely disabled (*Lancet* 2000;356:310). Twenty four other babies and a teenager survived the outbreak, which was eventually traced to contaminated disinfectant kept in plastic buckets. There have been no other cases since the unit started using autoclavable metal buckets and twice the concentration of disinfectant.

Patients with colds still pester their doctors for antibiotics, although a survey in *Archives of Family Medicine* suggests that the message that they don't work is getting through (2000;9:589-5). Less than a third of parents attending primary care clinics in Minneapolis wanted antibiotics for their children with colds. Half the adults wanted antibiotics, but a leader comments that they could be (and should be) persuaded to change their minds.

Holidaymakers travelling to exotic destinations need clear, accurate advice about health, and travel agents are ideally placed to provide it. Researchers masquerading as tourists tested staff in five leading travel agents on their knowledge of travel medicine (*British Journal of General Practice* 2000; 50:567-8). The responses were patchy, particularly on questions of sexual health. Most of the agents laughed when asked to advise a 22 year old man organising a stag weekend for 12 friends in Amsterdam.

Over 600 women had bilateral prophylactic mastectomies at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota between 1960 and 1993. Most (70%) said they were satisfied with the outcome in a recent questionnaire survey (*JAMA* 2000; 284:319-24). Two thirds of respondents said they would have the procedure again, and three quarters said the operation had made them worry less about breast cancer. Ninety five per cent of the respondents had reconstructive surgery.

Almost all colorectal cancers start life as premalignant polyps that can be removed before they cause trouble. The asymptomatic ones are detected only by screening and will be missed if the screening tool is a sigmoidoscope and the polyp is in the proximal colon beyond its reach. Two papers and a leader in last week's *New England Journal of Medicine* agree that colonoscopy or some other way of imaging the whole large bowel is a better option for screening (2000;343:162-8, 169-74, 207-8).

A systematic review of 34 randomised trials comparing laparoscopic with open repair of



A 29 year old man was shot from two metres away with a blank loaded rifle during a war game. Nineteen non-metallic fragments were removed from his face. He was lucky to escape serious injury to the eyes. A solitary foreign body deep in one cornea was removed easily. This case is a reminder of the importance of eye protection during high risk sports and hobbies.

Andrew Elliot, consultant ophthalmologist, Stephen Poor, senior house officer in ophthalmology, Frimley Park Hospital, Surrey GU16 5UJ.

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inguinal hernia confirms that laparoscopic surgery takes longer but is followed by a faster recovery than open repair (*British Journal of Surgery* 2000;87:860-7). The downside is a higher rate of rare but serious complications: risk of injury to blood vessels or viscera was 1.1 per 1000 for open repair but 4.7 per 1000 for laparoscopy. Type of surgery had no measurable impact on rates of recurrence.

Intelligence is a controversial concept, made more so by the discovery last week of its anatomical correlate in the lateral frontal cortex (*Science* 2000;289:457-60). In experiments with volunteers and a positron emission tomography scanner, blood flowed preferentially to the lateral frontal cortex during difficult spatial and verbal problems. Could this be a neural basis for general intelligence? Scientists and behavioural psychologists are now sparring over the answer.