

Minerva

Up to 1500 homeless and vulnerable people are expected to visit the 35th Crisis Open Christmas at one of seven London venues between 23 and 30 December. Medical services are now an integral part of what's on offer. Apart from volunteer nurses, doctors, and health promotion experts, Crisis is also on the lookout for practice managers and medical receptionists. To find out more call 020 7426 3872, apply online at www.crisis.org.uk/volunteering, or email volunteering@crisis.org.uk.

Researchers found that medical students performed 8% better on a word learning task after they had taken an electrically enhanced snooze. The enhancement was achieved by applying a gentle current to the brain during the non-rapid eye movement phase of sleep, five times over half an hour. The effect wasn't found with any other current frequency or during any other phase of sleep (*Nature* online 5 Nov 2006 doi: 10.1038/nature05278).

A study of 33 mothers with eating disorders and 23 control mothers looked at their eating patterns in the postnatal year to see if they influenced their children. The results showed a clear association between maternal eating disorder and children scoring highly on three out of four domains of eating disorder at the age of 10, and also a link between children's eating disturbances at 10 with conflicts at mealtimes at 5 (*British Journal of Psychiatry* 2006;189:324-9).

The traditional Mediterranean diet—rich in fruits, vegetables, cereals, and olive oil—seems to offer protection against obesity. Among initially overweight people 7.9% of women and 6.9% of men became obese over three years eating various types of food and 23% of normal weight women and 13.8% of men became overweight. But overweight people who stuck to a Mediterranean diet had a significantly lower likelihood of becoming obese, and people of normal weight were not likely to become overweight (*Journal of Nutrition* 2006;136:2934-8).

It's how you sell an idea that's important. Telling elderly patients that you'd like to refer them to a falls prevention service doesn't go down nearly as well as being referred for a strength and balance training programme (*Gerontologist* 2006;46:650-60). Older people in six European countries were motivated to participate in such programmes when the perceived benefits of wellbeing, interest, enjoyment, better mood, and independence were flagged up, rather than the reduction in the risk of falling.

Patients admitted to hospital through emergency departments who experience a single episode of non-traumatic hypotension (a systolic blood pressure of less than 100 mm Hg) have a higher risk of dying in hospital than those who don't. Of a sample of nearly 5000 patients enrolled in a prospective cohort study, 19% were "exposed" to hypotension. The risk of a sudden and unexpected death was 2% in the exposed group compared with 0.2% in the non-exposed group, showing that hypotension is an independent predictor of in-hospital mortality (*Chest* 2006;130:941-6).

High blood pressure, on the other hand, features in a randomised controlled trial of acupuncture SHARP (Stop Hypertension with the Acupuncture Research Program). Despite the promise suggested by case reports and small observational studies, active acupuncture was no better than invasive sham acupuncture at reducing systolic or diastolic blood pressure in 192 patients with untreated blood pressure (*Hypertension* 2006;48:838-45).

To avoid the risk of pushing a large bore needle in too far to a quinsy (peritonsillar abscess) and causing vascular injury, surgeons in Derby have a suggestion: mark the plastic sheath of the needle 20 mm from the tip with the needle still sheathed, then remove the sheath and cut it across at the mark. The still-sterile needle can be resheathed and inserted with the sheath around it, to aspirate no more than 20 mm into the abscess. Both doctors and patients seem to prefer this technique (*Journal of Laryngology and Otology* 2006;129:870-1).

Are computer generated, three dimensional anatomical models any more effective as teaching aids than old fashioned, two dimensional textbooks? The answer is yes, according to a study in *Medical Education* (2006;40:1081-7). A randomised controlled study of using an interactive model of an ear reports that the mean score on a 15 question anatomical quiz in the intervention group was 83%. Students who took the same web based tutorial without using the model scored significantly lower—just 65%.

Patients with irritable bowel syndrome often fear cancer, and their symptoms can play havoc with their sense of wellbeing and impair their functioning. But a single session of reassurance at the first consultation can make a huge difference. Mexican researchers found that a thorough explanation of the disorder and lots of reassurance brought about a significant reduction in fear of cancer and patients' perception of



A 76 year old woman presented with a six week history of presumed erysipelas which didn't respond to several courses of oral and intravenous antibiotics. Examination showed an eczematous rash affecting the right cheek, right forehead, and right forearm areas which had been in contact with her pillow when she was asleep. She always slept on her right side and had been placing drops of lavender oil on her pillow for several months to help her sleep. Patch testing confirmed allergic contact dermatitis to lavender oil. Her eczema quickly cleared with topical steroids and avoiding the oil. Manjunatha Kalavatha, specialist registrar (Manjuk04@yahoo.com), Thomas M Hughes, hospital practitioner, Natalie M Stone, consultant, department of dermatology, Royal Gwent Hospital, Cardiff Road, Newport NP20 2UP

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impaired daily functioning, making a big impact on quality of life measures (*Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 2006;61:461-7).

Cops, a reality TV show that is popular in the United States, could do a lot more for injury prevention. Although high speed driving scenes showed higher use of safety belts than low speed scenes, and more recent episodes had higher belt usage, overall the use of belts by police officers was pitifully low. There were no significant differences by sex or race (*Journal of Trauma* 2006;61:1001-4).

Military personnel, like doctors, often work the night shift, and the quality of their afternoon nap can have a great effect on performance and alertness. A comparison of 20 mg temazepam, 10 mg zaleplon, and placebo taken before napping found that temazepam was the clear winner in terms of length and quality of afternoon sleep. Better sleep correlated with less night time sleepiness, but both preparations resulted in sleepiness and fatigue during the night shift (*Military Medicine* 2006;171: 998-1001).