

MINERVA

Fatigue in lupus and other stories . . .

By a nice irony, systemic lupus erythematosus first became widely known to the public when Dr Greg House, the curmudgeonly hero of the television series *House*, kept declaring that “it’s never lupus.” For the editors of the journal *Lupus*, the opposite is true—and sadly, this also goes for patients whose lives are completely dominated by the condition. As with most severe chronic conditions, fatigue is a prominent feature in systemic lupus erythematosus, and a paper in *Lupus* (2013, doi:10.1177/0961203313486948) shows that levels of fatigue are closely related to levels of pain and depression, and not to markers of disease activity. The authors suggest that by treating these symptoms more effectively we should also be able to alleviate fatigue in systemic lupus erythematosus.

The commonest reason for healthy people to see doctors regularly is because they have been found on two or three occasions to have blood pressure above a certain arbitrary level. Most of these individuals then take two or more drugs for the rest of their lives, while others fail to respond to three or even four and are deemed to have resistant hypertension. A lifetime cure and a drug free existence now seem tantalisingly close for some of these asymptomatic “patients.” Renal nerve ablation and long term carotid baroreflex activation are two options under investigation. In a study in *Hypertension* (2013, doi:10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.113.01159), researchers looked at the effect of carotid baroreflex activation on renal function at 12 months. They observed a slight fall in the glomerular filtration rate, in keeping with a sustained fall in blood pressure. For important outcomes in the long term, we will just have to wait.

Taking aim at the ventricular septum with a syringe full of alcohol sounds a bit of a heart-stopping procedure, but apparently it is done with great success in many patients with hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy. Results from an eight year follow-up of 470 patients with hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy treated with alcohol septal ablation are reported in *Heart* (2013, doi:10.1136/heartjnl-2012-303339). Survival of these patients was actually slightly better than that of the matched general population, and there was a marked reduction in their symptoms.

Emollients! Children with eczema need lots of them, and parents need to be encouraged to use them and be given generous supplies. This is the message—not new, but so important—from a trial of a multifaceted support programme for parents in *BMC Dermatology* (2013;13:7, doi:10.1186/1471-5945-13-7).

Unguents! Minerva prefers that word with its lovely cool slithery sound. Call them what you will, but they made kids feel better, sleep better, and use less steroid cream. And the whole programme turned out to be cost neutral to the NHS.

Minerva takes a rather dim view of nature, considering it to be the enemy of doctors and gardeners alike. A naturopath, by contrast, is “a health practitioner who applies natural therapies,” according to the College of Naturopathic Medicine. These therapies can range from herbal mixtures to colonic irrigation, which is actually a phenomenon rare in nature. In a Canadian trial published in *CMAJ* (2013, doi:10.1503/cmaj.120567), naturopaths subjected some of the more orthodox facets of their treatment regimens to a randomised trial to see if they reduced cardiovascular risk factors and body mass index more than usual care: and they did. The natural therapies’ methodological failings were not any worse than those of many similar trials using orthodox treatments, but these findings have given rise to lively debate in the fraternity of evidence based medicine and beyond.

Fish, molluscs, and crustaceans are foods for the gods, as Minerva can testify. For mortals, too, there can be few better pleasures than consuming sea creatures in abundance. Now pleasure and health do not always consort together, but in this case they do, especially if a suitable wine is at hand. I am not referring to the well known cardiovascular benefits of oily fish and alcohol, but to a recent study in the *Annals of Oncology* (2013, doi:10.1093/annonc/mdt168). An analysis of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition shows that fish consumption is associated with a reduction in the risk of hepatocellular carcinoma. Molluscs and crustaceans come top, with a 14% reduction. The authors don’t talk about wine. Never mind—fruits de mer for two please, and a bottle of your best Chablis.

“One day in July 1954 Robert Lowell opened a window, dropped his spectacles outside, and waited for them to shatter on the stones of the courtyard below.” So begins an essay by Stephen James on Lowell’s “afflicted vision” in *Essays in Criticism* (2013;63:177-202, doi:10.1093/escrit/cgt003)—the scene here being set in a psychiatric unit as the poet wrestles with his overwhelming wish to die. The fog of myopia comes as a blessed relief at this moment in his life, but in his poetry the eye forms a constantly changing metaphor—as indeed it does in all poetry, for every poet knows that “the eye altering alters all” (William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*).

Let Minerva know what you think of this week’s offerings at minerva@bmj.com.

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