



Sudden infant death syndrome . . . and other stories

Back to sleep

Rates of sudden infant death syndrome have fallen to nearly a tenth of what they were in the late 1980s. This is a tribute to the epidemiologists who identified causes of the condition, and to campaigns such as “Back to Sleep” that successfully changed parental behaviour. A consequence of the increasing rarity of the condition is that people have become less aware of its risk factors. A survey of mothers in Bristol, UK, found that only half knew that the baby’s sleeping position was important (*Arch Dis Child* doi:10.1136/archdischild-2017-312927).

Emergency corneal grafting

A small proportion of corneal grafts are carried out as an emergency—most commonly in an attempt to save an eye that has perforated, or is about to do so. A registry study from the UK reports that the commonest causes are infection and non-infectious ulcerative keratitis. Perforation by traumatic injury is rare (*Br J Ophthalmol* doi:10.1136/bjophthalmol-2016-309870). The outcomes of emergency corneal grafting are good, with most patients keeping their sight and avoiding immediate rejection of the graft.

Preventing shingles

A large study of US adults in California given live attenuated zoster vaccine finds that it’s about 50% effective in preventing shingles (*Am J Epidemiol* doi:10.1093/aje/kwx245). The benefit was greatest in the first year after vaccination and then gradually waned. An unexpected finding was that vaccine was as effective in people over 80 as in younger people. Current practice in the UK is not to give zoster vaccine to anyone over 80.

Long term effects of sport

Nine hundred male athletes who had represented Finland in international competitions between 1920 and 1965 were followed until 2015 (*Br J Sports Med* doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098206). Compared with their brothers, they smoked less, took more exercise, and reported better health. They also lived longer, although not by very much. Among athletes competing in endurance sports, median age at death was 80 years, while for their brothers it was 77.5 years.

Healthy diets

The UK Food Standards Agency uses a scoring system to determine whether a food should be considered unhealthy. Fruit, vegetables, fibre, and protein are balanced against saturated fat, sugar, and sodium. High scores indicate that the second group predominates and such foods are subject to Ofcom’s controls on the advertising to children on TV. An analysis of data from the European Prospective Investigation of Cancer cohort study prompts questions about the validity of this approach. Among more than 25 000 participants who completed a seven day diet diary at baseline, there was no relation between consumption of less healthy food (judged by the same scoring system) and incidence of cardiovascular disease over the next 16 years (*PLOS Med* doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1002484).

Food additives and *Clostridium difficile*

Trehalose was approved as a food additive in 2000. It’s a disaccharide with water retaining properties and is used in products such as ice cream, chewing gum, and cakes. It might be more than coincidence that virulent strains of *Clostridium difficile* emerged soon after trehalose entered the food supply. A paper in *Nature* reveals that two strains of *C difficile* commonly associated with epidemics have acquired mechanisms that allow them to metabolise low concentrations of trehalose and produce increased quantities of toxin (*Nature* doi:10.1038/nature25178).

Prescribing for the elderly

Because of the likelihood of interactions, adverse effects, and mistakes in taking medication, almost everyone agrees that elderly people would be better off taking fewer rather than more drugs. In fact, multiple prescribing is becoming more common. Comparison of two population based studies of ageing carried out 20 years apart found that the number of people taking five or more items quadrupled, while the proportion of people taking no medication fell from 1 in 5 to 1 in 13 (*Age Ageing* doi:10.1093/ageing/afx158). Lipid lowering drugs, angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitors, and antiplatelet drugs were responsible for most of the increase.