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Poor nutrition in childhood . . . and other stories

Early childhood undernutrition

Undernutrition in early childhood, identified by wasting, stunting, or being underweight, affected more than half the children surveyed in the first wave of the India Human Development Survey. A second wave, roughly six years later, found that early undernutrition was associated with short stature and thinness and with poorer skills in reading and arithmetic. Girls were more severely affected than boys (*PLoS Med* doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1003838).

Peppermint oil for irritable bowel syndrome

Because peppermint oil is believed to have antispasmodic properties, it is sometimes recommended for the treatment of symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. A small randomised trial from the US reports substantial improvement in symptom scores over six weeks (*Am J Gastroenterol* doi:10.14309/ajg.0000000000001395). Mind you, improvements among those in the placebo arm were as great as those in people allocated to peppermint oil.

Asymptomatic mitral stenosis

Last week, *Minerva* noted a trial showing that early surgical treatment of asymptomatic aortic stenosis gave better outcomes than conservative management. Surprisingly, the same isn't true for mitral stenosis. A randomised controlled trial from South Korea reports that early percutaneous mitral commissurotomy failed to reduce the incidence of cardiovascular events among asymptomatic patients with severe mitral stenosis over six years of follow-up (*Heart* doi:10.1136/heartjnl-2021-319857).

DNA replication is more prone to error in microgravity

Plans for interplanetary travel may founder not on the technical problems of rocketry but on the limits of biological adaptation to microgravity and ionising radiation. A recent experiment reports that copying errors by DNA polymerase were doubled during simulated weightlessness (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcell.2021.702849/full>). The combination of DNA damage from space radiation and inaccuracy of DNA replication does not bode well for the health of astronauts on long missions.

Fraudulent research

Fraud in science isn't confined to a few corrupt investigators. Surveys report that 2% of scientists are prepared to admit that they fabricated or falsified data on at least one occasion, so the true prevalence is probably much higher. Institutions have responded by creating departments of research integrity. A smarter answer might be to help individual researchers raise their standards. If the quality of every scientist's work could be improved a little, then

the aggregate impact on research integrity might be huge (*Nature* doi:10.1038/d41586-021-03493-4).

Colchicine in people with acute coronary syndrome

At one year, the results of a trial of colchicine for secondary prevention after an acute coronary event showed no differences between active and placebo arms. However, after two years' follow-up, the group that had taken colchicine experienced a reduction in the occurrence of the primary outcome—a composite of mortality, acute coronary syndrome, need for revascularisation, and stroke (*Circulation* doi:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.121.054610). The delayed effect may be attributable to the anti-inflammatory and plaque modulating properties of colchicine.

Positioning of endotracheal tubes

The most common mishap during intubation is inadvertently placing the endotracheal tube in the right main bronchus. Why the right rather than the left? The traditional explanation is that the right main bronchus subtends a straighter angle with the trachea and has a larger diameter than the left. A more convincing reason is that endotracheal tubes have a left facing bevel and are usually inserted right handed with the tube curving slightly to the right (*Postgrad Med J* doi:10.1136/postgradmedj-2020-139401).