

## Letter from . . . Chicago

### Good and bad news

GEORGE DUNEA

Many workaholics sighed with relief at the news that they were no more likely to die from heart disease than their less ambitious fellow men. They celebrated by putting in a few more hours at the office; taking home an extra load of paperwork in the evening; moving forward a few deadlines; and saying yes when otherwise they might have said no to an invitation to a planning weekend at Key Largo in Florida.

Responsible for this flurry of activity were Drs Ragland and Brand from the University of California at Berkeley. Writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, they reported on 257 survivors of the earlier studies showing that people exhibiting type A behaviour (aggressive, ambitious, competitive, hard driving, with a chronic sense of urgency) had two to four times more coronary heart disease than their more relaxed type B counterparts. Unexpectedly, they now found among the survivors of a previous coronary event that type A patients had a better chance of surviving than type B. Arguing that these findings were unlikely to be caused by chance, they speculated that the types A might have better coping ability, changing their lifestyle more compulsively or seeking medical advice more frequently.

Whatever the cause, these findings add more fuel for debate to a controversy in which A has been said to stand for "acrimony." Commenting in an accompanying editorial, Dr Joel Dimsdale noted several points. (1) Many studies have failed to confirm the claimed association between type A behaviour and coronary heart disease. (2) Diagnostic criteria for diagnosing type A behaviour are controversial. (3) Within the past 25 years changes may have occurred in how people behave and live. (4) Perhaps only certain type A subgroups are at risk—a particular suspect characteristic being hostility. (5) Other less apparent factors may influence coronary artery reactivity. "Which leaves us with smoking, hypertension, and cholesterol," commented a business executive as she rushed on to meet a deadline, answer the telephone, reschedule a meeting, call her dentist, and complain about her account.

But the news, arriving in the middle of January, could not have come at a better time. At least not for Chicago, where  $-15^{\circ}\text{F}$  temperatures impeded most type A pursuits (other than taking care of frostbitten toes) or type B pursuits (other than staring at a warm fire). Yet there was other good news here, such as a decline in murders to 622 in 1987 (307 committed with guns)—a lower rate than in any other year since 1967. In the rest of the nation crime was also on the decline, by 20% since 1981, down to some 34 million incidents a year, perhaps because the post second world war baby boom generation was growing older and settling down. For the first time this year youngsters also took less cocaine, in fact 20% less, possibly because they are heeding warnings about its dangers, "Just say No" campaigns, and the highly publicised deaths of prominent basketball and football players. But concerns remain about

"crack," a cheap and potent form of smokable cocaine, more dangerous and addictive than the regular material. Still on the subject of drugs, two legislators have recently introduced in Congress a compassion Pain Relief Act that would allow doctors to prescribe heroin for the dying, thus reviving an ancient controversy.

#### Slim in Utah and overweight in West Virginia

Other good news, according to a cancer society study, was that the number of people smoking in Illinois has gone down from 24% in 1982 to 18%. Some 42% of people have taken steps to improve their diet, eating less beef and pork and more chicken and fish. They also eat more so called anticancer foods, such as brown rice, whole wheat bread and bran muffins, cabbage, brussels sprouts, broccoli, and cauliflower. They are also becoming more weight conscious, but this varies from state to state. People are slimmest in Utah, where Mormons are very health conscious, and in Hawaii, with its large Asian population that tends not to put on weight. According to a telephone survey, West Virginia has the highest percentage of overweight people, apparently because it has areas of severe poverty and because in America poverty and obesity often go hand in hand. It is perhaps in this spirit that we should view a report claiming that 20 million Americans go hungry and blaming the Reagan administration for it. The report, produced by the Physician Task Force on Hunger in America, found hunger in West Virginia and adjoining states where steel and mining jobs have disappeared, in states where farming has declined (Minnesota and Iowa), or oil and gas exploration is lagging (Texas and Louisiana), also in California's Silicone Valley. According to the task force, the infants, elderly, and unemployed are the most severely affected.

There is good news, however, for the claustrophobic, who need no longer wait for the day of final judgment in a wooden box. Instead, they may have their ashes taken up in a helicopter and scattered over mountains, lakes, or oceans, for a down payment of \$750 plus \$2 for every extra mile of air travel. Time does indeed heal all wounds, according to a psychologist's investigations, in that most people will adapt even to the most shattering events. So that after two years a group of widows in America and Germany had the same incidence of depression as age matched controls. The widows who thought that they had little control over their lives, according to another psychologist, had the hardest time recovering; but the others are doing quite well, at least in West Germany and in the United States. Which is good news, because in the industrialised world women outlive men by four to ten years, for reasons possibly related to their genes, their hormones, their immune system, or environmental factors. The gender gap remains widest among the working classes, perhaps because of more smoking and other unhealthy habits. Women have also made great strides in their ability to perform in mathematics, thus narrowing another gap that has long puzzled educators. Of particular interest is a reported decline in "maths anxiety," once a popular explanation for why boys were performing better in mathematics than girls. On the other hand, girls suffer from more computer shyness, and this may put them at a disadvantage in a technologically oriented job market.

Cook County Hospital, Chicago, Illinois

GEORGE DUNEA, FRCP, FRCPED, attending physician

In Israel a study of 150 000 schoolchildren has found that myopic children scored better in intelligence (IQ) tests, thus confirming the stereotype of the brainy boy with thick glasses. There may be a direct link between myopia and intelligence, but perhaps short-sighted people score better because they have a preference for near tasks such as reading. For obese people a procedure called liposuction can remove large amounts of fats, but complications include bleeding, infection, shock from major fluid shifts, and tissue calcification. There are also issues of turf between dermatologists, plastic surgeons, ophthalmologists, and other specialists, because large fees may be earned for a relatively small investment in training and equipment. Some controversy also arises from the growing use of massage, applied in Chicago by some 200 therapists, to relieve pain, encourage healing, or induce relaxation. Though relief may be only temporary from a \$40 hour's session, the treatment is popular, safe and possibly useful, and convenient in that some clients don't even need to undress but merely loosen their ties as the therapist massages their neck and shoulders. Good news for the deaf is that the implantation of a small magnetic disc behind the ear may give dramatic relief from certain conductive hearing problems.

### Reagan administration blamed

Turning to bad news, we find Chicago having the second highest infant mortality among America's cities, 16 per 1000 live births, and even higher among blacks (23 per 1000). This is due to a lack of public health nurses but also perhaps to other factors such as low birth weight, genetics, infection, lifestyles, and attitudes towards seeking prenatal care. The incidence of syphilis is rising, though overshadowed by AIDS, in that there were 35% more cases in this than in the previous year. Particularly dramatic rises occurred in New York (100%), Los Angeles (97%), and Florida (86%). Indeed, these three areas accounted for three fourths of the total increase, and again epidemiologists blamed the Reagan administration. Also troublesome is infection with *Chlamydia trachomatis*, occurring at a rate of some four million cases a year, alone or with gonorrhoea. Estimated to cost more than £1.4 billion yearly, it exacts a considerable toll in pelvic inflammatory disease, sterility, and conjunctivitis or pneumonia in the newborn; and it responds to a combination of tetracycline and ampicillin. Even more intractable are salmonella infestations of chicken, which account for some two million cases of food poisoning in man each year. Being "coprophagous," the chicken constantly reinfest one another, defying attempts to stamp out a problem that has been termed as

elusive as the common cold. At present chlorine remains the most efficacious remedy, superior to vinegar, succinic acid, hydrogen peroxide, gamma ray irradiation, vaccination, genetic manipulation, ultrasound, and making the birds wear napkins.

Another troublesome organism is *Clostridium difficile*, a normal gut inhabitant of some 3% of people but this winter causing antibiotic induced pseudomembranous colitis in several people, including one death. Presenting with fever, abdominal pain, and diarrhoea, the infection caused several hospital wards to be closed and required for its elimination a temporary ban on the use of clindamycin and cefoxitin. Then there was *Aeromonas hydrophilia*, a Gram negative organism causing skin infection, sepsis in alcoholics, and diarrhoea but easily mistaken for *Escherichia* or *Enterobacter* species unless identified by the oxidase test.  $\beta$  Lactamase resistant staphylococcal endocarditis remains a serious problem, especially in addicts and patients with mitral valve prolapse or bicuspid aortic valves. Particularly dangerous on the valves of the left side of the heart, and somewhat less so on the tricuspid, it requires treatment with vancomycin, with sulfamethoxazole-trimethoprim as a second choice, often supplemented by gentamicin or rifampin. Leprosy also remains in the news, perhaps more so because of its unmerited bad reputation, as shown by the inhabitants of a small Californian township objecting violently to the establishment of an outpatient treatment facility in their neighbourhood. Yet it is one of the least infectious of diseases, responsive to drugs and non-infectious within a week of treatment. Leprosy in the United States affects some 6000 people, mainly refugees from the Far East or immigrants from Mexico. About 1600 cases are to be found in California. The disease, which in the Middle Ages resulted in patients being declared legally dead, is now easily treated but causes considerable stigma despite efforts to dispel ancient prejudices.

Then there is a Swedish study showing that people whose mothers (but not fathers) had suffered from strokes had an increased chance (20% *v* 7%) of developing a stroke themselves. For patients with polio "a disease reemerges from the past" 30 to 40 years after the initial infection. Apparently related to the wear and tear of overworked muscles, this postpolio syndrome may present either with joint and muscle pain, weakness, and fatigue or with additional wasting of muscles. The syndrome is not well understood but may respond to resting the affected muscles. The final bad news comes from the soothsayers and astrologers. In the East they have downgraded the traditionally propitious year of the dragon and expect dreadful catastrophes. In America they are repeating their awful predictions in the hope that nobody would remember what they said last year. All this suggests that so far the outlook for 1988 remains favourable.

## ANY QUESTIONS

*A man of 70 has had 50 miscellaneous x ray examinations over the past 50 years. Does this increase the likelihood of his developing malignancy?*

For radiological protection the simplifying assumption is made that for stochastic effects there is no threshold. This is not a proved scientific fact but is a sensible assumption, and if that logic is pursued it follows that each x ray examination carries a risk, however small, of increasing subsequent malignancy. For this patient it is not possible to put an accurate hypothetical figure on that possibility because the nature of the x ray examinations is not specified and so his presumed dose is not known. Nevertheless, the extra risk of malignancy over and above the "natural" risk will be small. Even given a lifetime accumulation of 5 mSv (a very high estimate) the additional risk of cancer would be less than 0.1%.—K P DUNCAN, assistant director (medical), National Radiological Protection Board, Chilton, Oxfordshire.

*Should a woman with no contraindications to the contraceptive pill who has been taking it for several years be advised to stop for a period every few years?*

Various reasons have been advanced for advising women to take "breaks" from the combined oral contraceptive. It has been suggested that this will

reduce the risk of postpill amenorrhoea, but there is no evidence for this and there are no grounds for advising regular breaks to preserve future fertility.<sup>1</sup> Another possible reason for stopping is to reduce the risk of side effects related to the duration of combined oral contraceptive use: it may be argued that taking regular breaks will reduce total exposure and thus reduce the risk of, for example, some cardiovascular diseases. This may be an oversimplification, however, because for some diseases a slightly increased risk persists for months or years after stopping combined oral contraceptives.<sup>1</sup> A third reason is to reassure a woman that her menstrual cycle is still normal, but this benefit is outweighed by the risk of unwanted pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> Combined oral contraceptives are more effective than other forms of reversible contraception, and a couple used to intercourse without condoms or the diaphragm may become careless about the use of barrier methods during "pill free" months. Furthermore, because most metabolic changes are more marked in the first few months of use repeated restarting of combined oral contraceptives may be more harmful than sustained use.<sup>3</sup>—JAMES OWEN DRIFE, senior lecturer in obstetrics and gynaecology, Leicester.

1 Guillebaud J. Combined oral contraceptive pills. In: Loudon N, Newton J, eds. *Handbook of family planning*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1985.

2 Hawkins DF, Elder MG. *Human fertility control: theory and practice*. London: Butterworths, 1979.

3 Guillebaud J. *Contraception: your questions answered*. London: Pitman, 1985.