

Princely visit

In June Princess Diana took Chicago by storm, as huge crowds turned out to see her during her three day visit. She came to Cook County Hospital, where she kissed sick babies and picked them up, then went to the trauma unit and spoke with victims of inner city gun battles. During her tour she bumped accidentally into a corpulent local politician and exclaimed "My, what a stomach!"-- he now reports being on a diet.

Others try to lose weight by using various mechanical or torture devices. Among these, according to a recent study, treadmills may be best for burning off calories (about 700 per hour), followed by stair machines (627), rowers (606), cross country ski machines (595) and stationary bikes (498). For flagging sexual performance, however, at least 15 000 persons, mainly in California, have undergone penis lengthening and widening operations. This procedure--known as phalloplasty and described as "simple, safe, and effective"--can be done for a mere \$5900 by injecting fat and detaching structures from the pubic bone, but has been complicated by frequent failures, lumpiness, scarring, or shrinkage, and other medical or legal complications. Less drastic approaches to impotence include a new drug, sildenafil, which blocks the action of an enzyme in the penis and is effective if taken one hour before it is needed, but "will do nothing in the absence of sexual stimulation." A new cure for baldness based on gene therapy may also soon become available. Meanwhile most of America's 11 million cardiac patients may take heart at the news that sex is safe and unlikely to trigger a heart attack. Those who can climb two flights of stairs without symptoms merely increase their risk from 10 to 20 in a million--the risk for healthy people being one or two in a million.

Elsewhere it took 12 years and 11 000 doctors as guinea pigs to determine that taking a daily antioxidant carotene pill neither helped nor hurt. A Swiss scientist thinks that smoking causes breast cancer; and an American that it forms advanced glycosylation products in patients with diabetes. Health care strategists were shaken by a study indicating that veterans randomized to intensive outpatient follow up by a nurse and doctor had higher rates of readmission, spent more days in hospital, and fared no better than patients receiving usual clinic care. Anticipating, perhaps, this result the Veterans' Administration is considering closing one of its four Chicago hospitals, to the distress of medical school deans using these facilities for faculty salaries and as a "training ground" for students--so that each hopes the other's bull will be gored.

Finally, some experts think that the government is misdirecting its efforts to contain AIDS by spending money to teach safe sex to schoolchildren. Instead, they suggest, it should concentrate on the inner cities, the intravenous drug addicts, and the homosexuals. This would be more in the spirit of the legendary Willy Sutton, who robbed banks (and not hospitals) because, as he put it, "that's were the money is."--