

Spraying lawns and eating grass

Again and again we turn to the daily papers for news and inspiration. We learn that Americans are living longer than ever (mean of 74 years for men, 80 for women); 61% are overweight; infant mortality is at a low of 6.9 per 1000 live births; healthcare costs continue to rise; and a panel recommends that people should exercise at least one hour a day. They should also stay away from mosquitoes, now active in spreading the West Nile virus, especially to Illinois. Transmitted by mosquitoes from bird to bird, the virus has caused smaller outbreaks since 1999, but this year has assumed epidemic proportions by early October more than 2700 cases in the United States (146 deaths) and more than 640 cases in Illinois (36 deaths).

The virus has spread to horses, squirrels, dogs, and wolves. In Chicago it has decimated the bird population, particularly crows, which have almost completely disappeared this year, and it has killed two geese and a turkey vulture at a city zoo. All over Chicagoland trucks have been spraying pesticides to eliminate the insect carriers; the archdiocese has asked Catholics not to adorn graves with flowers; and orthodox rabbis have lifted their interdict against killing animals (mosquitoes) on the Sabbath.

Then we read about chronic wasting disease, caused by prions and related to mad cow disease, so widespread in Wisconsin that authorities each year must kill thousands of deer. Spread by nose-to-nose contact, this fatal brain disease of deer has not affected humans. Nevertheless, some experts have warned against eating venison.

There has also been disappointing news for the \$4.2bn (£2.68bn/4.24bn) herbal supplements market. We read that recent studies have found no depression relief from St John's wort, no memory improvement from ginkgo, no cold prevention from echinacea, no weight loss from ephedra, no stress relief from kava, no cholesterol lowering from garlic but many side effects, ranging from transient hypertension to severe liver damage. While regulators and health experts struggle with this problem, the public continues to exhibit an extraordinary faith in these "natural" remedies. The cynic Voltaire might have said that man's desire to eat herbs almost surpasses that of the common herbivores.