

In brief

White Americans moving off welfare: White Americans are moving off income support programmes faster than blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians in the wake of an improved economy and tougher rules on eligibility, according to a survey by the Associated Press.

Many Chinese are poisoned by coal fumes: An estimated 800 million Chinese use coal for heating and cooking, and in many rural communities it contains arsenic, lead, mercury, fluorine, and other poisonous metals that can pose serious health risks (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 1999;96:3427-31).

Waiting lists fall in England: A fall of 39 000 in the number of people waiting for admission to NHS hospitals in England in February has eliminated the waiting list bulge; the total of 1.1 million is now below the number who were waiting when the Labour government took office in May 1997. However, this reduction has come at the cost of a doubling of the number of patients waiting for a first appointment with a consultant.

Many older people in Britain are inactive: Only 1 in 4 men and 1 in 6 women in Britain aged 50 and over are active frequently—that is, they take part at least five times a week in activity lasting 30 minutes and of the recommended intensity—according to the Health Education Authority's National Survey of Activity and Health and the Allied Dunbar National Fitness Survey.

Poverty damages a child's chances in life: A UK Treasury report, *Tackling Poverty and Extending Opportunity*, shows that children born in the top social classes perform 14% better in educational and developmental tests at 22 months of age than those in the manual and semimanual classes. The six month study showed that the gap between the rich and poor in the United Kingdom has widened sharply in the past 20 years, a trend that is unique in Europe.

Cholesterol lowering margarine launched in United Kingdom

Susan Mayor, *BMJ*

The first margarine spread capable of reducing cholesterol concentrations was launched in the United Kingdom last week, giving a new twist to the concept of healthy eating. The margarine spread—Benecol—contains stanol esters derived from wood pulp, which reduce the amount of cholesterol absorbed by the gastrointestinal system.

A year long study carried out in Finland has shown that the spread can reduce concentrations of total cholesterol by up to 10% and of low density lipoprotein cholesterol by up to 14% if eaten as part of a low fat, low cholesterol diet (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1995;333:1308-12). Using the product makes no appreciable difference to concentrations of triglycerides or high density lipoprotein cholesterol.

Subjects taking part in the study consumed around 3 g of stanol ester each day—equivalent to generously spreading three pieces of toast with the mar-

garine. According to Benecol's marketing company, McNeil Consumer Healthcare Company, the margarine has sold very well since its launch in Finland three years ago, and an estimated 140 000 people are now consuming it daily.

The cholesterol lowering effect seen in trials has been repeated in more widespread use of the margarine in Finland, although the population is generally well educated about risk factors for coronary heart disease, with strategies such as the North Karelia project having achieved considerable reductions in related mortality.

It is still too early to know if use of Benecol translates into reduced coronary heart disease mortality. But studies using drug treatment and other approaches to lipid lowering have indicated that a 10% reduction in cholesterol translates into a 20% reduction in the risk of coronary disease.

Benecol is likely to be heavily marketed to doctors as well as to the general public—advertisements are already appearing in publications for general practitioners. So what is its place in managing patients at increased risk of coronary heart disease?

Results with the product in Finland suggest that Benecol is most likely to be of value in people with moderately raised cholesterol or who have other risk factors.

Gilbert Thompson, emeritus professor of clinical lipidology at the Imperial College School of Medicine in London, commented: "Benecol will probably be particularly useful for general practitioners to suggest to healthy people who have risk factors for coronary disease, where drug therapy is considered inappropriate. It offers an important adjunct in the dietary approach to the primary prevention of coronary heart disease."

The only side effect observed with Benecol has been a 10-20% reduction in β carotene.

Unfortunately, the price of Benecol—£2.49 for a 250 g tub—may be too high for many of those most at risk of coronary heart disease: people in lower socioeconomic groups. □

Spain tackles eating disorders

Xavier Bosch, *Barcelona*

The incidence of eating disorders in Spain is increasing at such a rate that the minister of health, José Manuel Romay-Beccaria, has set up a multidisciplinary working party to investigate the problem.

Current estimates are that the incidence of anorexia is increasing by 15% per year. The main opposition socialist party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, has put forward two propositions to parliament to try to tackle the problem.

It wants the government to introduce new regulations obliging dress designers and manufacturers to make women's clothes in larger sizes than those currently available in shops, and it would like the government to start a dialogue with advertisers and marketing companies to persuade them to use models



Fashion industry will be represented on anorexia working party

who are "in harmony with social reality," rather than exceptionally thin.

The health minister's working party, which will have its first meeting within a few weeks, is made up of psychiatrists, paediatricians, and representatives of consumer and patient organisations and the fashion industry.

According to the Ministry of Health, eating disorders have become a complex "emerging health problem" with multiple

causes. It is therefore adopting a strategy to take action in the fields of health, education, advertising, and marketing.

The preliminary results of an epidemiological study started last year indicate that about 100 000 Spaniards between the ages of 14 and 24 (between 0.5% and 2% of this age group) either have anorexia nervosa or bulimia, or both, or are at high risk of developing these disorders. □