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Apparent increase in autism in children has stopped

The apparent increase in the number of children with autism has levelled out after peaking in 1992, reports a UK cohort study published last week. The results show that the rise in the number of cases reported previously may have been due to greater awareness of autism and to changes in diagnostic criteria, and the plateau in the prevalence of autism provides further evidence against an association with the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination (*Archive of Diseases of Childhood* 2003;88:666-70).

The cohort study of 567 children in five districts in north east London who were born between 1979 and 1998 and who were given a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder showed that the condition reached a plateau, between 1992 and 1996, of 2.6 cases per 1000 live births. This followed an apparent rise from 1979 to 1992. The lead investigator, Brent Taylor, professor of community child health at Royal Free and University College Medical School, London, said: "Reported autism increased by year of birth until 1992, since when prevalence has plateaued. This flattening off persisted after allowing for expected delay in diagnosis in more recent birth cohorts."

If autism had been associated with the MMR vaccine, the number of cases should have increased throughout the early 1990s, as the vaccine was introduced in 1988, he argued.

"There was no association between use of the MMR vaccine and the apparent rise in autism seen previously. The rise occurred before MMR uptake increased."

Susan Mayor *London*

US mental health care needs revamp

A drastic reorganisation of the mental healthcare system in the United States is needed, says the New Freedom Commission of



Fishy diet could help prevent Alzheimer's disease

Researchers from Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke's Medical Center in Chicago have found that elderly people who ate fish at least once a week had a much lower rate of Alzheimer's disease than people who ate fish infrequently.

Led by Dr Martha Clare Morris and Denis Evans, of Rush's department of internal medicine and Alzheimer's disease centre, the investigators enrolled 815 Chicago residents aged between 65 and 94 years who had no evidence of Alzheimer's disease at the outset of the study in 1993 (*Archives of Neurology* 2003;60:940-6).

A self administered food frequency questionnaire was used to assess diet. On average, the participants were given the questionnaire 1.9 years after the start of the study and 2.3 years before clinical evaluation at follow up. Participants were asked about their consumption of tuna, fish cakes and fingers, fresh fish, shrimps, lobster, and crab. They were also asked about their use of dietary supplements, cereals and margarine, types of cooking oil, milk consumption, and fat preferences.

Over the course of the study 131 participants developed Alzheimer's disease. Another 11 people developed dementia of other types. After controlling for confounding factors of hypertension, educational level, heart disease and stroke, ethnic group, sex, and apolipoprotein E genotype, the researchers found that fish consumption was strongly inversely associated with Alzheimer's disease.

Participants who ate fish at least once a week had a 60% lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease than people who rarely or never ate fish (relative risk 0.4 (95% confidence interval 0.2 to 0.9)). Total intake of omega 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids was also inversely associated with the development of the disease, with people whose consumption was in the top 20% having a risk that was 70% lower than the risk among people in the lowest 20%.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Mental Health, a panel of 22 experts on mental health and social services.

The commission was founded in April 2002 by a presidential directive, in a bid to eliminate inequality among US citizens with disabilities. President Bush asked the commission to identify problems in US mental healthcare and disability programmes and to suggest potential solutions.

The commission found that the fragmentation of mental health services among several federal, state, local, and private agencies makes it extremely difficult for mentally ill people to get the coordinated care they need.

"Services and treatments must be consumer and family centred, and not oriented to the requirements of bureaucracies," the report says. "Care must focus on increasing consumers' ability

to successfully cope with life's challenges, on facilitating recovery and on building resilience, not just on managing symptoms," it continues.

The panel found that mental illness affects almost every American family and that every year 5% to 7% of adults and 5% to 9% of children in the United States develop serious mental illness.

Psychiatric illnesses are particularly ignored among very young people, elderly people, and people living in rural areas where access to health care is difficult, the report found. And mental illness is still stigmatised, which prevents many people from seeking help.

The report calls for earlier detection and screening for mental illness, beginning in childhood, and for parity between mental health care and physical health care; the commission found that many health insurance plans limit their coverage for mental illness.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America is available at www.mentalhealthcommission.gov

Asbestos poisoning was covered up by doctors, claims health team

Doctors in India are under pressure to label patients who have asbestos poisoning as having tuberculosis or bronchitis and to underplay the health impact of asbestos, a public health team has said.

Many thousands of people in India have lung diseases caused by exposure to asbestos, occupational health specialists said at a press conference last week, reiterating their demand for a ban on asbestos.

India uses around 125 000 tonnes of asbestos each year, which it imports mostly from Canada and Russia. Nearly all (90%) of the asbestos goes into the construction of roof sheets for homes for poor people.

Eight years ago the Supreme

Court had ordered the asbestos industry to maintain health records of workers and to compensate people affected by asbestos poisoning. "But medical screening of workers is inadequate," said Dr Tushar Kant Joshi, head of occupational medicine at the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital, New Delhi.

Doctors say that their diagnoses of asbestos poisoning are challenged by the industry. "The medical fraternity is under attack," said Dr Sudhakar Kamat, former head of respiratory medicine at the King Edward Memorial Hospital, Mumbai. "Doctors are under pressure to interpret x rays as TB or bronchitis or other chronic conditions," he said.

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

Commons committee calls for more choice over home births

A House of Commons committee has criticised UK maternity services as patchy and has urged more trusts to support women who want to give birth at home.

The health select committee published two reports last week, one on inequality in access to maternity services across the United Kingdom and one on choice in maternity services.

The second report urged healthcare trusts to support the option of home births and to provide independent midwives where needed. The committee estimates that up to 10 times as many women would want to give birth at home, if given the choice, but that this choice was either not provided or taken away.

In its report on access to maternity services the committee says that not all families across the country are getting access to the services that they need.

The report identifies prejudice among maternity care staff relating to race, class, or disability. The Royal College of Midwives admitted to institutionalised racism in the maternity services. The committee recommends that trusts recruit midwives from a greater range of ethnic groups and communities

to redress the imbalance.

In particular the report highlights the problems faced by homeless women, asylum seekers, women whose first language is not English, and deaf women. Upasana Tayal *BMJ Clegg scholar*,

Inequalities in Access to Maternity Services and Choice in Maternity Services are at www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmhealth.htm#reports

Kidney trafficking is "big business," says Council of Europe

The Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly has issued a report saying that, because of a rapidly increasing demand for kidney transplants, trafficking in kidneys has become a hugely profitable business for international organised crime—and for the doctors who perform the procedures.

Between 15% and 30% of European patients die while waiting for a kidney transplantation, owing to a chronic shortage of organs, the report says, noting that the average wait for a legal transplant is now three years and is expected to increase to 10 years by 2010.

Trafficking networks target poor European countries such as Estonia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, where people are pressured into selling their kidneys for as little as \$2500 (£1550; €2200), the report said.

Europe's poorest country, Moldova, where the average monthly salary is less than \$50, is a prime target for traffickers, said Ruth-Gaby Vermot-Mangold, author of the report.

Dr Vermot-Mangold said that during a factfinding visit to Moldova last year she interviewed several people who had sold their kidneys through trafficking networks that link Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine, and Israel. Carl Kovac *Budapest*

Trafficking in Organs in Europe is at <http://assembly.coe.int/documents/workingdocs/doc03/edoc9822.htm>

Study shows poor reliability of prostate cancer test

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The standard blood test used to screen for prostate cancer, the prostate specific antigen (PSA) test, already considered to be inaccurate, is failing to identify eight of every 10 men aged under 60 who later have prostate cancer diagnosed, a study shows.

Between 1995 and 2001 Dr Rinaa Punglia, of Harvard Medical School, and her team examined 6691 consecutive men enrolled in a screening study at the Washington University School of Medicine, in St Louis. The men had their total PSA concentration measured and underwent a manual rectal examination (*New England Journal of Medicine* 2003;349:335-42). Of these men, 705 (11%) subsequently underwent biopsy of the prostate and 182 were given a diagnosis of prostate cancer.

The authors used the PSA concentration from the initial enrolment visit to determine the sensitivity and specificity of the test at various cut-off values.

The authors used a receiver operating characteristics curve to plot the diagnostic accuracy of the various cut-off values. They found that, 82% of the time, men aged under 60 who had prostate cancer nonetheless had a PSA

concentration that was considered normal. Currently, a PSA concentration of 4 ng/ml is considered normal.

According to those criteria, only 2% of the men had a false positive result—they had an abnormal PSA concentration (>4 ng/ml), but subsequent biopsy showed that they did not have prostate cancer.

The authors found that lowering the threshold from 4.0 to 2.6 ng/ml would double the rate of detection of cancer to 36%, although it would also increase the number of false positives.

In an accompanying editorial Dr Fritz Schroder and Dr Ries Kranse of the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam said there was no conclusive evidence that the PSA screening test actually reduces the risk of death from prostate cancer without reducing men's quality of life.

The American Cancer Society's current recommendations say that a PSA concentration above 4.0 but less than 10 ng/ml means a 25% chance of having prostate cancer.

The risk is more than 67% for concentrations above 10 ng/ml, the recommendations say. □



Ice hockey can lead to brain injury, experts warn

Too many young Canadians risk the lasting effects of traumatic brain injury by "bodychecking"—physically blocking an opposing player—in Canada's national sport, ice hockey, writes Toronto neurosurgeon Michael Cusimano in the *CMAJ* (2003;169:124-35). Bodychecking accounts for 86% of all injuries among players aged 9 to 15 years, and this percentage is increasing. Some effects of the practice are not fully realised until the brain completes its maturation.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*