In brief

Women toss their bras during the 5th Push Up the Fight Against Breast Cancer event at the Trocadero Square near the Eiffel Tower in Paris on 16 March 2014. Pink Bra Bazaar is a charity dedicated to breast health education and supporting women diagnosed with breast cancer.

From The Cochrane Library

Cochrane cornucopia!

Autumnal bounty characterises the recent crop of Cochrane reviews. First pick is a new review of 25 trials of the blood pressure-lowering effects of non-selective β-blockers in people with mild-to-moderate hypertension. The review found that, on average, non-selective β-blockers lowered blood pressure by about 10 mmHg systolic and 7 mmHg diastolic and reduced heart rate by 12 beats per minute. Higher doses might increase the risk of side effects, without conferring additional benefit on blood pressure (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD007452.pub2).

A recent update of the review of antibiotics for acute bronchitis now includes the results of a large international multicentre trial that confirms the earlier finding that antibiotics have a limited effect on the duration and severity of symptoms in otherwise healthy individuals. Possible benefits in groups such as frail older people need to be weighed against the small but significant increase in adverse effects observed in the antibiotic group (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD000245.pub3).

To help balance all these risks and benefits, what better way than to consult the updated review of decision aids? This colossus of a review now includes 115 studies and over 34,000 participants. It concludes that when patients use decision aids, for either treatment or screening decisions, they improve their knowledge; feel more informed; have more accurate expectations of possible benefits and harms; participate more in decision making; and are more likely to reach decisions that are consistent with their values (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD001431.pub4).

Looking for more harvest bounty? The abundance of trials in the latest update of the review of echinacea seems to suggest that some echinacea products are more effective than placebo for treating colds, although the potential effects are of questionable clinical relevance (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD000530.pub3).

For more on these and other reviews, check out The Cochrane Library at www.thecochranelibrary.com.

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doi: 10.5694/mja14.00371
Young women have less access to coronary care

Canadian research suggests younger adult women with acute coronary syndrome (ACS) have different access to care than their male counterparts. The multicentre, prospective study involved 4.5 years’ follow-up of 1123 patients (aged 18–55 years) with ACS from 26 centres in Canada, the United States and Switzerland. Women were less likely than men to receive care within benchmark times for electrocardiography (≤ 10 min: 29% v 38%), or fibrinolysis (≤ 30 min: 32% v 57%). They were less likely to undergo reperfusion therapy (83% v 91%) or non–primary percutaneous coronary intervention (48% v 66%). Clinical factors of poorer access included patient anxiety, an increased number of risk factors and absence of chest pain. Feminine personality traits and responsibility for housework were also factors in poorer access. The authors concluded that “these groups … may need targeting for more effective initial management of ACS”.


Conspiracy theories determine health behaviour

Medical conspiracy theories are “widely known, broadly endorsed, and highly predictive of many common health behaviors”, according to a research letter published in JAMA Internal Medicine. An online survey asked 1351 American adults their level of agreement with six conspiracies. Results showed that 37% believed the government was blocking access to natural cancer cures to benefit drug companies; 20% felt health officials knew mobile phones caused cancer; and 20% believed vaccinations caused autism. The theories that African-Americans had been deliberately infected with HIV; that distribution of genetically modified foods was designed to reduce population; and that fluoridation was a way to dump industry by-products were each believed by 12%. The more conspiracies a person believed, the more likely they were to take herbal supplements, vitamins, and the less likely they were to get a regular check-up or flu shot, visit the dentist or use sunscreen.


No link between unsaturated fats and heart health

A systematic review published in the Annals of Internal Medicine has questioned current guidelines promoting decreased cardiovascular risk via high consumption of long-chain omega-3 and omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids and limiting total saturated fat intake. A total of 76 long-term prospective observational studies and randomised controlled trials examining the relationship between cardiovascular risk and dietary intake, fatty acid biomarker levels or taking fatty acid supplements were reviewed. Meta-analysis found that “there was heterogeneity in the associations among individual circulating fatty acids with coronary disease”. The authors found “essentially null associations between total saturated fatty acids and coronary risk in studies using dietary intake and in those using circulating biomarkers”. They also found no association between total and individual monounsaturated fatty acids with coronary risk. “Nutritional guidelines on fatty acids and cardiovascular guidelines may require reappraisal to reflect current evidence”, the authors concluded.


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doi: 10.5694/mja14.n0607

MJA InSight poll

Should patients always give explicit consent to be included in research, even if it is low risk?

56% Yes — always
20% Yes — but verbal consent is OK
24% No — not necessary

Take part in next week’s poll on www.mja.com.au/insight