

International Family Medicine Literature

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Feature Editor

This series features precis of international journal articles related to family medicine education. Feature Editor Anne D. Walling, MD, is professor and vice-chair of Family and Community Medicine at the Wichita campus of the University of Kansas School of Medicine. These summaries are provided, in part, through her responsibilities with American Family Physician, published by the American Academy of Family Physicians. Your comments regarding this column are welcome. 316-261-2607. E-mail: awalling@kumc.edu.

Iodination of Water in China Shows Benefits

Previous attempts to provide iodine supplementation in certain areas of China have failed. A more recent strategy, adding potassium iodate to irrigation water, appears to have been successful and is being credited with decreases in infant and neonatal mortality in treated areas. During the 3-year study period, iodine concentrations increased fivefold in vegetables, crops, and meat; increases in sheep and chickens were threefold. Significant increases in sheep production led to increases in annual income for farmers. The median urinary iodine concentration of women of childbearing age rose significantly, and it is believed that hypothyroidism previously contributed to poor pregnancy outcomes.

(DeLong GR, Leslie PW, Wang SH, et al. Effect on infant mortality of iodination of irrigation water in a severely iodine-deficient area of China. Lancet 1997;350:771-3.)

Medical Students and Elderly Share Housing

A new arrangement in London places apartments for medical students in a community housing complex for the elderly. The students will spend at least 1 hour per week at community activities, such as dances, parties, and bingo. Both groups will benefit from low-

cost, high-quality housing in London. The impact of contact with the students on the health of the elderly residents will be monitored by a longitudinal study.

(Dawson J. UK medical students share a home with the elderly. Lancet 1997;350:791.)

Pygmy Hedgehogs and Other Small Things to Watch Out for: Infectious Diseases in a Nutshell

An outbreak of hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome in Russia has been associated with hantavirus. The striped field mouse *Apodemus agrarius* is suspected to have been the virus vector.

When volunteers in a malaria prophylaxis study in Thailand developed febrile illness but had no laboratory evidence of malaria, investigators discovered an outbreak of ehrlichiosis. The outbreak is the first Asian report of disease due to *Ehrlichia chaffeensis*. Ehrlichiosis is tick borne, but the vector has not been identified for this outbreak. The authors suggest that travelers from Thailand who develop fever, myalgia, malaise, and other symptoms but are malaria-smear negative should be tested for ehrlichiosis and treated promptly with tetracycline.

The discovery of a multi-drug-resistant strain of *Yersinia pestis* in Madagascar has raised fears that plague could reemerge as a potential public health danger. Much

remains to be discovered about the emergence of this plasmid-mediated resistance in the plague bacillus, but the international network of collaborating research and diagnostic centers studying plague has deteriorated substantially in recent years.

African pygmy hedgehogs are cute and popular pets, but they may also transmit salmonella. Ten cases of *S. Tilene* in Canada were traced to infection from pet pygmy hedgehogs.

A large outbreak of sleeping sickness is affecting southern Sudan and may spread to neighboring areas of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. The disruption of health and civil services by war and unusually high concentrations of tsetse flies are blamed for the epidemic. In some areas, up to 20% of the population are affected. *(Lunkvist A, Apekina N, Myasnikov Y. Dobrava hantavirus outbreak in Russia. Lancet 1997;350:781-2.)*

Hepner DG, Wongsrichanalai C, Walsh DS, et al. Human ehrlichiosis in Thailand. Lancet 1997;350:785-6.

Bonn D. Multi-drug-resistant plague case causes concern. Lancet 1997;350:788.

Anon. Be careful what you stroke. Lancet 1997;350:789.

Kigotho AW. Southern Sudan hit by epidemic of sleeping sickness. Lancet 1997;350:502.)

Cereals Can Be Dangerous

In some parts of the world, the cassava tuber is an important source of nutrition. During dry growing seasons, the amount of cyanide in tubers may reach more than 20 times that of the World Health Organization-recommended levels. Intake of cyanogenic glucosides from cassava is implicated in Konzo, an endemic upper-motor neurone disease of cassava-growing regions. A new kit developed in Australia can detect toxic levels of cyanide in cassava quickly and at low cost. The International Center for Insect Physiology and Ecology plans to distribute the kits in Kenya in hopes of reducing the incidence of Konzo and other complications of cyanide ingestion.

Up to 3 million inhabitants of rural China and Tibet suffer from an endemic degenerative osteochondropathy, Kashin-Beck disease. New research implicates fungal contamination of grains. The strongest association was with *Trichothecium roseum* contamination, but significant associations were also found with *Dreschlera* and *Alternaria* species. Researchers recommend disinfection of barley seeds, destruction of crop residues following harvest, and complete drying of grain prior to storage to reduce levels of fungal contamination.

(Kigotho AW. *Cassava may be safer in future. Lancet 1997;350:1081.*

Chasseur C, Suetens C, Nolard N, et al. *Fungal contamination in barley and Kashin-Beck disease in Tibet. Lancet 1997;350:1074.*)

Italy Changes From Two Symbolic Serpents to One

The Italian Medical Association will soon change its symbol from the two-winged rod with two intertwined snakes to the simple ca-

duceus of a single serpent and club. Unfortunately, the change from a symbol that the medical profession shared with that of thieving has coincided with the sentencing of physicians and others involved in an elaborate and longstanding scheme to fraudulently obtain public health funds. Besides being the symbol of Mercury (patron to both physicians and thieves), the "double caduceus" is a symbol of peace and fertility. No comment has been made about the implications of the change on the temperaments or reproductive records of Italian physicians.

(Simini B. *Symbolic changes afoot in Italy. Lancet 1997;350:1085.*)

Zombification in Haiti Is Widespread

Zombification is widely accepted in Haiti, yet zombification is a crime equivalent to murder under the Haitian penal code. Although explanations and interpretations of the condition vary, the central concept is of removal of the *ti-bon anj* (awareness, memory, and other essential personality functions) by a sorcerer either during life or immediately after death. The sorcerer keeps the *ti-bon anj* in a fastened container to retain control over the zombie. The zombie may escape only by breakage of the container, divine intervention, death of the sorcerer, or ingestion of salt. These and other fascinating details are reported in a review that includes case reports and interviews with sorcerers and others. While not reaching firm conclusions, the authors suggest that zombification is most likely to represent a culturally appropriate explanation for wandering mentally ill people in Haiti.

(Littlewood R, Douyon C. *Clinical findings in three cases of zombification. Lancet 1997;350:1094-6.*)

British General Practice Research Database

Available for Nonprofit Use

The UK General Practice Research Database was established in 1987, with the goal of providing an ongoing representative population of about 4 million patients, mainly for post-marketing surveillance of medicines. The original commercial application was unsuccessful, and the database is now managed on behalf of the Department of Health. By 1996, the database had data on more than 25 million patient years and covers a representative sample of 3.5 million people. Physicians from 480 practices contribute information to the database, and the research use has expanded beyond the original interest in pharmacotherapeutics. The database is independently funded by users and other sources and does not currently receive government support. Request for studies or other access to the data for research purposes are considered by a scientific and ethical advisory group, and only those that are nonprofit are considered. Inquiries may be made directly to the Office for National Statistics in London or through the US collaborating agency, the Boston Collaborative Drug Surveillance Program.

(Walley T, Mantgani A. *The UK general practice research database. Lancet 1997;350:1097-9.*)