



Reuters

Men wait to buy bread in front of a bakery in Al Qusayr, Syria, on 1 March 2012. The ongoing violence in Syria has claimed about 7500 lives, according to the United Nations. The UN has condemned the widespread and systematic human rights violations by the Syrian authorities and has warned that the international community has failed the country. "We continue to receive grisly reports of summary executions, arbitrary detentions and torture", UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said earlier this month.

From the NHMRC

Maintaining a healthy weight: updated National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines

Food is a big topic in Australia. About 60% of adult Australians are overweight or obese, with associated health problems estimated to have cost \$58.2 billion in 2008. As a result, there is a critical demand for credible guidance on nutrition and weight management.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has reviewed two guidelines that will provide an evidence-based platform for nutrition and weight management advice. They are the Australian Dietary Guidelines and the upcoming draft Clinical Practice Guideline on the Management of Overweight and Obesity in Adults, Adolescents and Children (Obesity Clinical Practice Guideline).

The Australian Dietary Guidelines have incorporated an analysis of more than 55 000 peer-reviewed scientific articles to provide advice about food choices that promote health and wellbeing and reduce the risk of diet-related diseases.

The Obesity Clinical Practice Guideline discusses methods that primary care providers can use to assist people in managing excess weight. The strong recommendation is that adults who are overweight or obese make lifestyle changes (to diet, physical activity levels and behaviour) to reduce their weight.

To achieve weight loss, both guidelines emphasise the importance of maintaining a dietary energy intake that is less than daily energy

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expenditure. The Australian Dietary Guidelines give more specific advice, stating that energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods ("junk food") are the first that should be removed when reducing energy intakes. In all cases, eating plans for weight management should include a wide variety of nutritious foods.

A draft of the Australian Dietary Guidelines can be obtained from <http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au>, with a final version to be released later in 2012. The draft Obesity Clinical Practice Guideline is soon to be released for public consultation and will be available at <http://consultations.nhmrc.gov.au> for comments from health professionals, which will be valuable in ensuring that the guidelines are relevant and can be implemented.

News

How accurate are rapid influenza tests?

With the influenza season approaching, a new research review has examined the accuracy of rapid influenza diagnostic tests. Early identification of influenza can improve infection control and help clinical management, but the reported accuracy of these rapid tests varies widely.

The research review found that the pooled specificity of rapid influenza diagnostic tests was 98.2%, while the pooled sensitivity was 62.3%. The researchers said that these results showed that if a patient with influenza-like illness had a positive test result, clinicians could confidently diagnose influenza and begin antiviral therapy. However, a negative result had a reasonable likelihood of being a false negative and should be confirmed by other tests if it was likely to affect patient management, the authors wrote.

The research, which looked at 159 studies of the rapid tests, also found that the tests performed better in children than in adults, with a 13% higher sensitivity in children.

Meanwhile, another systematic review in the same journal analysed research on the clinical benefits of antiviral drugs for influenza. The meta-analysis found that oral oseltamivir may reduce mortality, duration of symptoms and complications, while inhaled zanamivir may reduce duration of symptoms and hospitalisations but increase complications. The researchers also said that confidence in the drugs' effects was limited by the quality of available data from the studies.

Ann Intern Med 2012; 27 February (online)

Is selenium supplementation safe?

As far as micronutrients go, selenium is one of the more controversial. The micronutrient forms part of selenoproteins that have a wide range of pleiotropic effects. Research has linked low selenium status with increased mortality, poor immunity and cognitive decline, while high selenium levels have been associated with antiviral effects and reduced risk of autoimmune thyroid disease. So should we all be popping selenium pills? Not so fast, says a recent research review. The paper says that selenium status seems to have a U-shaped association with health benefits. "Whereas additional selenium intake may benefit people with low status, those with adequate-to-high status might be adversely affected and should not take selenium supplements." In fact, supplementation among people who already have adequate intake may increase their risk of type 2 diabetes.

Lancet 2012; 29 February (online)

From the MJA archives

MJA 1916; March 11 (edited extract)

Public Health

New South Wales

Notifications received by the Department of Public Health, NSW, during the week ending 26 February 1916:

Disease	Cases
Diphtheria	173
Enteric fever (typhoid)	79 (4 deaths)
Malaria	4
Pulmonary tuberculosis	35 (6 deaths)
Scarlet fever	171

Victoria

Notifications received by the Department of Public Health, Victoria, during the week ending 27 February 1916:

Disease	Cases
Diphtheria	92 (4 deaths)
Enteric fever (typhoid)	33 (5 deaths)
Pulmonary tuberculosis	31 (12 deaths)
Scarlet fever	21



Global

During the period from 28 November to 18 December 1915, 16248 cases of plague were notified in India. In the same period 12186 people died of this disease.

From 10–30 December 1915, there were 15 cases in Egypt and 10 deaths. In Java, from 3 December to the end of the year, 700 cases were notified, and 697 deaths took place.

Health challenges of Chinese urbanisation

China's urban population has increased dramatically in the past 30 years, from 191 million in 1980, to 622 million in 2009. A new research review analyses what this rapid urbanisation means for China's public health. The review finds that there are health benefits of urbanisation, due to improved access to services and higher salaries, but there are also substantial health risks. The authors found that the new Chinese urbanites often fall through the gaps in health care systems; for instance, immunisation coverage is lower in the children of migrants to cities than in children growing up in rural or urban areas. Changing lifestyles also raise the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Lancet 2012; 379: 843-852

Genetic tests explained

As understanding of the genetic basis of disease increases, so does the raft of genetic tests available, some of which are marketed direct to consumers. An online tool launched late last month by the United States National Institutes of Health aims to make it easier to navigate this rapidly changing world of genetic tests. The Genetic Testing Registry is available free at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gtr>, and can be searched by disease, test name, genes, labs etc. In addition to basic information, the registry offers detailed information on analytic validity, clinical validity and clinical utility, or how likely the test is to improve patient outcomes.

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