



Reuters Images

Room for one more? As the world's population reached 7 billion late last month, crowded scenes like this one from Dhaka, Bangladesh may become more common. Asia, with 4.2 billion people, contains 60% of the world's population. Every year, the world's population increases by about 80 million people.

From The Cochrane Library

Blunt needles, watching where you're going, and sweet help for ears

Taking us straight to the point (or rather, not) is a review involving nearly 3000 surgeons that shows using blunt needles for suturing substantially reduces the number of glove perforations and needlestick injuries (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD009170.pub2). Blunt needles may be more difficult to use, but most surgeons are willing to accept this given the reduced risk of exposure to blood and other bodily fluids.

Providing proof that being able to see where you're going is a good thing, a new review finds that placement of haemodialysis catheters is improved by the use of real-time two-dimensional Doppler ultrasound guidance (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD005279.pub4). More catheters

are successfully inserted on the first attempt, decreasing the risk of arterial puncture and haematomas, and reducing the time taken for successful vein puncture.

Can something sweet really prevent acute otitis media? Apparently so if you're a healthy Finnish child attending a day care facility. The daily prophylactic administration of xylitol, a natural sugar substitute taken as a gum or syrup, reduces the occurrence of acute otitis media by 25% (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD007095.pub2).

The public release of performance data on hospitals and health professionals may be all the rage in some quarters, but its effects are little known. In a review of four studies (three conducted in the United States)

involving more than 35 000 consumers and 1500 hospitals, there was no consistent evidence that providing the public with this information either changes consumer behaviour or improves care (doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD004538.pub2).

One thing we know is that prevention is generally better than cure, so it seems appropriate to highlight some of the prevention-related reviews among the 47 new reviews in the November issue of *The Cochrane Library*: mentoring adolescents to prevent drug and alcohol use; interventions to prevent bed-related injuries in health care settings; and lycopene to prevent prostate cancer. *The Cochrane Library* can be found at www.thecochranelibrary.com.

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News

Men still dominate medicine

Medicine remains a male-dominated profession, according to new figures from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Some 62% of Australia's 88 293 registered medical practitioners are men, says AHPRA's 2010–11 annual report, which was released earlier this month.

The report also suggests that concerns about the ageing workforce may be a thing of the past. There are more doctors in the 30–39-years age group (23 265) than in any other 10-year age group. However, there are still slightly more doctors aged 45 years and over than under 45.

Some doctors are continuing to practise past their 70th birthday — with 6222 doctors in the 70+ age group, including 1801 who are 80 years or older.

Data on the new mandatory reporting system are also included in the new report. Of 4122 notifications against medical practitioners received in the year, only 144 were received under the "mandatory notification" rules. Of all mandatory notifications received, 59% related to a "departure from standards", 30% to impairment, 7% to sexual misconduct and 4% to drug and alcohol issues.

About 4% of all registered medical practitioners were reported to the medical board at least once during the year.



Plus-sized teamwork

In a remarkable feat of teamwork, a group of 116 researchers from 97 institutions worldwide have coauthored a huge meta-analysis looking at the effect of exercise on a gene linked to obesity. Instead of conducting a traditional meta-analysis of published data, the authors mined their own existing raw data to enable a new standardised analysis. For instance, physical activity was defined in several different ways in the original studies, so the authors reclassified participants as either active or inactive to allow for consistent analysis. Ultimately the meta-analysis included 218 166 adults and 19 268 children or adolescents. The researchers found that the effect of the minor allele of the *FTO* gene, which is known to predispose to obesity, was weaker among physically active adults. Physical activity attenuated the odds of obesity by 27%. A comment piece by Australian public health physician Dr Lennert Veerman said the research indicates the futility of screening for genes that predispose to obesity.

PLoS Med 2011; 1 November (online)

Dangers of moderate drinking

Even drinking only three to six alcoholic drinks each week is associated with a small increased risk of breast cancer, according to a study of 105 986 women enrolled in the Nurses' Health Study. The researchers observed a 10% increase in risk with each 10 g of alcohol intake per day. Cumulative alcohol consumption over multiple decades was seen to have the strongest association with breast cancer, while there was also a modest association with binge drinking. So does this mean we should give up alcohol altogether? Not exactly. "An individual will need to weigh the modest risks of light to moderate alcohol use on breast cancer development against the beneficial effects on cardiovascular disease to make the best personal choice regarding alcohol consumption", the researchers wrote.

JAMA 2011; 306: 1884-1890

From the MJA archives

MJA 1952; 15 November

Are we posterity's keeper?

It is tempting for the aged to try to peer into the future, a future which they will never see. One thing is clear already — the skids are under the exogenous diseases. Some will disappear almost entirely, like typhoid fever today, tuberculosis tomorrow; others will remain, but under control.

On the broader scale it is not too difficult to descry great problems looming up in the not too distant future, and in one of these, medical science cannot remain indifferent. In many countries population is outrunning the food supply, and evidence piles up that malnutrition on a gigantic scale is already present and shows every sign of increasing. It would seem that biologically, socially and economically we have not begun to



catch up with the technological advances of the past century. The pace of these advances is so hot that no one has time to think about where we are going, or even to ask the question: "Are we posterity's keeper?"

Hugh Ward

Home HPV test successful

Although it may be premature to declare the end of Pap smears, the first community-based trial of vaginal self-sampling for human papillomavirus (HPV) testing has shown that the technique could be useful in poorer areas. Some 12 330 Mexican women of low socioeconomic status were randomly allocated to the vaginal self-sampling or clinic-based cervical cytology. Women with positive results in either test were referred to colposcopy. The HPV test was 3.4 times more sensitive than cytology at identifying women with CIN 2 or worse. However, the positive predictive value for CIN 2 or worse was only 12.2% for the HPV test, compared with 90% for cytology. The researchers said the self-sampling technique might be preferred in low-resource settings. "Because women at these sites will be screened only a few times in their lives, the high sensitivity of a HPV screen is of paramount importance", they wrote.

Lancet 2011; November (online)

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