Byron: From the Library

Byron began his somewhat erratic connection with Harrow in the boarding house of Henry Drury, recently promoted son of the headmaster. The young Henry Drury was also his tutor and so responsible for both his day-to-day welfare and his intellectual progress. Their relationship was to be tense. At this stage little about Byron seemed exceptional. The boys noticed that one of his gray-blue eyes was bigger than the other, the difference being that of a six penny piece in relation to a shilling, “so they at once called him eighteen pence.” Otherwise he seemed merely “a rough, curly headed boy,” veering between shyness and aggression. (MacCarty, Fiona. Byron: Life and Legend. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002:30)

Recent evidence suggests the importance of evaluating the health of households and not just the individuals who live therein. Sven Wilson at Brigham Young University analyzed data from more than 4700 couples in their 50s gathered for the 1992 Health and Retirement Studies. He found that men with poor health were much more likely to be married to wives with poor health than healthy men. Only 2% of very healthy men had wives in poor health. In comparison, 13% of men with poor health had wives with poor health. Several factors seem to contribute to this correlation: people tend to marry those with similar backgrounds and couples are more likely to make similar choices about diet, smoking, drinking, and exercise. Shared environments and stresses may also have an important role in determining the health of both husbands and wives. (Scientific American 2002;287:34)

The profound adverse effect of smoking on health is well documented. Likewise, the difficulty for many patients to stop smoking is also well known. Studies suggest that the use of antidepressant drugs may be helpful in smoking cessation. A randomized, double blind study of 144 patients in Brazil demonstrated that the use of nortriptyline 75 mg a day for 6 weeks was associated with a significantly higher cessation rate of smoking than in a group receiving placebo. No significant complications were observed in the nortriptyline group. The short term use of nortriptyline appears to be effective and safe in promoting smoking cessation. (Chent 2000;122:403–8)

Many hand lotions and soaps contain antimicrobial ingredients. Nevertheless, their effectiveness in preventing infection in a non-hospital setting has not been documented. In a study by the secretary to the Council on Scientific Affairs for the American Medical Association no data to support the efficacy or necessity of antimicrobial agents in soaps or hand lotions were found. Moreover, data suggest that acquired resistance to antimicrobial agents used in consumer products may predispose bacteria to resistance against therapeutic antibiotics. The recommendations of this study therefore are that the use of common antimicrobials for which acquired bacterial resistance has now been demonstrated should be discontinued in consumer products unless data can confirm that such resistance has no effect on public health. While, ultimately, antibiotic resistance must be controlled through judicious use of antibiotics by physicians and the public, the continued use antimicrobials in consumer products does not seem to be justified. (Archives of Dermatology 2002;138:1082–6)

Type 2 diabetes affects approximately 135 million people worldwide and it is estimated that by the year 2025, 300 million people will be affected. Several studies have shown that diet and lifestyle modification are important means of preventing type 2 diabetes. In a recent study from Harvard Medical School, women between the ages of 34 and 59 who had no history of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or cancer completed a validated dietary questionnaire in 1980. They were then followed for 16 years. The results of this study suggest that the consumption of nuts and peanut butter was associated with a lower risk of type 2 diabetes in these women. In order to avoid increasing total calorie intake the investigators recommend that nut consumption be a replacement for refined grain products or red meats.

Osteoarthritis of the hip joint is a common, painful and disabling disorder of the elderly in Europe and the United States. Evidence exists, however, that the prevalence of this disorder varies among different populations. In a study from the University of California in San Francisco, 1500 patients living in Beijing, China, aged over 60 years were questioned about joint symptoms and underwent radiography of the pelvis. The crude prevalence rate of radiographic hip osteoarthritis in this Chinese population aged between 60 and 89 years was 0.9% in women and 1.1% in men and did not seem to increase with age. This prevalence is 80–90% less than in white patients in the United States. Identifying the genetic and environmental factors that account for this striking difference in prevalence between these two populations may help to elucidate the aetiology and prevention of hip osteoarthritis. (Arthritis and Rheumatism 2002;46:1773–9)

Several studies have suggested the possibility that the use of antioxidants routinely will protect patients from developing neurodegenerative diseases. A study from Chicago has investigated whether the intake of antioxidant nutrients including vitamin E, vitamin C, and carotene prevents decline in cognitive function in an older population. This was a longitudinal population based study with an average follow up of 3.2 years. Nearly 3000 residents were studied who were 65–102 years of age. In this study vitamin C supplements and carotene did not seem to have any effect on measured reduction in cognitive function during the study period. On the other hand, there was a marked reduction in cognitive decline with higher vitamin E intake. This study suggests that vitamin E supplementation may be helpful in preventing cognitive decline in non-demented older patients. (Archives of Neurology 2002;59:1125–32)

There is considerable evidence to suggest that longevity does indeed run in families. For example, a study published recently in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA (2002;99:8442–7) documented that children of centenarians tend to live longer than their comparison cohorts. Moreover, centenarian siblings had half the mortality risk of a general population throughout their lives even into extreme old age. These findings have prompted investigators to seek out the genes responsible for longevity. In a study at Boston Children’s Hospital, 303 exceptionally long lived people in 137 families were studied and a region of chromosome 4 was found to be common in this population. Work is ongoing to identify the genes or gene in this region that may be linked to longevity. (Proceedings of National Academy of Science USA 2001;98:1050–8)