

From the Library

"The Hakim was a doctor in the medieval sense; rather than learning the traditional medical sciences, he studied theology, literary history, logic, and grammar. Often he was a member of a pious society of dervishes, at times a student of the Koran and a poet. Lev witnessed cures of various local diseases—for example, one called pindinka, a horrible skin disease that would begin with one red spot and then spread to engulf the face in flaming red masks of scabs. If it went untreated, the disease could spread to the conjunctiva and cause the loss of an eye. 'I had an insane fear of pindinka, but luckily was spared its suffering,' remarked Lev. (Reiss, Tom. *The Orientalist*. New York: Random House, 2005:59)

The Ebola and Marburg viruses are natural deadly pathogens that could be manipulated for use as agents of bioterrorism. No approved vaccines or therapies against these pathogens currently exist. However, in the 5 July online edition of *Nature Medicine*, a vaccine that appears to offer complete protection in non-human primates infected with the viruses is reported. (www.nature.com/naturemedicine)

Meningiomas of the anterior skull base account for 40% of all intracranial meningiomas. About 25% are tumours of the tuberculum sellae. Women are affected three times more commonly than men. In a report from Germany, encouraging results are reported in a large series of surgically treated tuberculum sellae meningiomas. Total macroscopic resection was achieved in 48 patients. Visual acuity improved in 20 patients with only seven experiencing deterioration. The report unfortunately does not document pre-operative and postoperative visual fields in each case. (*J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2005;76:977-83)

The use of statins to reduce cholesterol levels is now a well established therapy to prevent cardiovascular disease. Recommendations that supplementation of the diet with psyllium fibre might also lower cholesterol are less well validated. However, in a study comparing dietary psyllium supplementation in patients taking statins, psyllium soluble fibre appeared to be safe and well tolerated. This dietary supplement was as effective in lowering

cholesterol as 20 mg of simvastatin alone. (*Arch Intern Med* 2005;165:1161-6)

The potential complications of hormone therapy for the treatment of menopausal symptoms has now been well documented. Current recommendations suggest that this therapy should be at the lowest effective dose for the shortest duration possible to assess the patient's symptoms. However, in a study of more than 8000 women, investigators documented that more than half of women with symptoms associated with menopause will have recurrence of these symptoms after discontinuing hormonal therapy. The investigators suggest that alternative strategies to manage menopausal symptoms are clearly warranted. (*JAMA* 2005;294:183-93)

The overview of systemic antibiotics and the problem of induction of antibiotic resistance in certain bacterial strains is well known. Now, in a study of the use of chloramphenicol eye drops in the treatment of children with conjunctivitis, investigators have concluded that primary care doctors should stop prescribing antibiotic (chloramphenicol) eye drops for children with uncomplicated conjunctivitis. This is based on a study of more than 300 children, in which the clinical cure rates of children treated with placebo drops were similar to those who received initial antibiotic therapy. The economic benefit of adopting this policy is clear as the authors point out that every year one million children present in the United Kingdom to general practitioners with conjunctivitis. (*Lancet* 2005 June 22; doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(05)66709-8)

Controversy surrounds the question of whether neuromyelitis optica (Devic's syndrome) is a distinct entity separate from multiple sclerosis. Recent opinions, however, suggest that it is. The aetiology of neuromyelitis optica is unknown, although connective tissue disorders, tuberculosis, and acute disseminated encephalomyelitis have been associated with it. Neurologists at the Royal Infirmary Leicester have recently reported two cases of neuromyelitis optica apparently associated with gluten sensitivity. The authors suggest that patients presenting with myelitis with or without optic neuritis

should be investigated for possible gluten sensitivity. (*J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2005;76:1028-30)

Immigration has always played an important part in population growth in the United States. A surge in immigration to the United States has occurred since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. One of the benefits of this increase in immigration has been the availability of students interested in science, medicine, and engineering. It appears that too few Americans born in the United States are interested in the sciences. Today, only 2.2% of native born citizens of the United States hold higher degrees such as PhDs and MDs, whereas 3.3% of citizens born in foreign countries hold similar degrees. (*Sci Am* 2005;293:25)

The benefits of breast feeding have been repeatedly documented. Surprisingly, however, a study from Singapore suggests that breast feeding is associated with a significant reduction in the development of myopia in children. In a study of more than 500 children investigators demonstrated that there is a link between breast feeding and a reduced incidence in myopia. (*JAMA* 2005;293:3001-2)

"How about eyes? Would the first bilaterian have had eyes? It isn't enough to say that all modern descendants of Concestor 26 have eyes. It isn't enough, because the various kinds of eyes are very diverse: so much so that it has been estimated that the eye has evolved independently more than 40 times in various parts of the animal kingdom. How do we reconcile this with the statement that Concestor 26 had eyes? To give intuition a steer let me say first that what is claimed to have evolved forty times independently is not light-sensitivity per se, but image-forming optics. The vertebrate camera eye and the crustacean compound eye evolved their optics (working on radically different principles) independently of one another but both these eyes are descended from one organ in the common ancestor (Concestor 26) which was probably an eye of some kind." (Dawkins, Richard. *The Ancestor's Tale. A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004:388)