

PUBLIC HEALTH ABSTRACTS

Professor James S. Lawson, Professor and Head of the School of Health Services Management at the University of NSW, has prepared the following public health items from the literature.

CHILD HOMICIDE — THE EXTREME OF ABUSE

In the past 15 years 17 cases of fatal child abuse were cared for at the Children's Hospital at Camperdown. Most of the children were less than three years old and nine were under one. Seventy-six per cent died from head injury and 24 per cent from asphyxia or strangulation. About one-third had evidence of previous physical abuse. A process of review of these deaths may increase awareness of, and help prevent, fatalities from child abuse.

De Silva S and Oates RK. Child homicide — the extreme of child abuse. *Med J Aust* 1993; 158:300-301.

CALCIUM SUPPLEMENT REDUCES BONE LOSS IN WOMEN

The value of supplementation of calcium intake in the prevention of osteoporosis remains uncertain. An American study has demonstrated that if calcium supplements by way of diet are taken by normal women after they have reached menopause, the rate of loss of bone mineral density can be reduced by 43 per cent.

Reid IR, Ames RW, Evans MC and Gamble GD. Effects of calcium supplementation on bone loss in postmenopausal women. *New Engl J Med* 1993; 328:460-464.

IDENTIFYING WOMEN AT RISK FROM RUBELLA IN AUSTRALIA

A West Australian group has found the incidence of congenital rubella syndrome remains below 2 cases per 10,000 live births. This low rate is a direct consequence of the vaccination against rubella of about 86 per cent of Perth schoolgirls. But experience in Western Australia indicates vaccine acceptance has fallen in some country areas. The group also notes that women born in Asia are at greater risk of having a baby affected by congenital rubella syndrome than women born in Australia. The challenge is to develop mechanisms to identify and vaccinate non-immune women.

Condon RJ and Bower C. Rubella vaccination and congenital rubella syndrome in Western Australia. *Med J Aust* 1993; 158:379-382.

REAPPRAISAL OF HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Two recent studies purport to show improvements in mortality as a consequence of exercise. The studies are by Paffenbarger and colleagues in the United States and by Sandvik in Norway. They do demonstrate a reduction in mortality among physically fit men but, unfortunately, both studies are subject to bias. A review of 27 studies on habitual physical activity in the primary prevention of coronary disease supports the conclusions of Paffenbarger and Sandvik. Again, however, these studies may be biased because it has not been possible to mount a controlled prospective trial. But Curfman, when reviewing all the available literature, has concluded that regular exercise probably does offer some protection against coronary heart disease. Exercise improves work capacity and helps control body weight — both benefits, sufficient in themselves, to encourage regular physical activity. However Curfman argues that when extolling the merits of exercise, health professionals should not overstate the case.

Curfman GD. *New Engl J of Med* 1993; 328:8:574-576. Paffenbarger RS, Hyde RT, Wing AL, Lee I-M et al. The association of changes in physical activity level and other lifestyle characteristics with mortality among men. *New Engl J Med* 1993; 328:538-545. Sandvik L, Erikssen J, Thaulow E, Erikssen G et al. Physical fitness as a predictor of mortality among healthy, middle-aged Norwegian men. *New Engl J Med* 1993; 328:533-537.

SEXUAL LIFESTYLES AND PREVENTION OF AIDS

The availability of laboratory evidence about the human immunodeficiency virus has provided, for the first time, information about sexual lifestyles based on scientific principles in contrast to how people respond to social surveys. Two studies from Britain and France have indicated that many people have a few sexual partners and a few have a great many. Most couples are monogamous, with more than 70 per cent of men and women reporting they had only one partner in the past year in contrast to about 5 per cent of men and 1 per cent of women who reported 10 or more partners in the past five years. The highest rate of partner change is in unmarried urban men and women under the age of 25. The patterns in Britain and France are similar.

The British results show that affluence is associated with partner change and that the top two social classes have a higher rate of partner change than individuals in lower classes in the United Kingdom.

Editorial: Mapping Sexual Lifestyles. *Lancet* 1993; 340:1441-1442.

Caterpillar dermatitis in children

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the application of insecticides must be undertaken to ensure minimal contact to school children and teaching staff. This was not recommended and is generally considered after other options have failed.

The PHU will be advising local GPs through its GP newsletter on the potential of the mistletoe browntail moth to cause dermatitis in humans.

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1. Southcott RV. Lepidopterism in the Australian region. *Rec. Adelaide Children's Hospital*. 1978; 2:87-173.
2. Southcott RV. Moths and butterflies. Toxic plants and animals. A guide for Australia. 1987; 243-257.
3. Lee DJ. Arthropod bites and stings and other injurious effects. *School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine*. 1975; 201-203.