

Celiac awareness

By EMILY LAM
Special to The Epoch Times

Today is Pancake Day (Feb. 5) in the U.K. Many people will be preparing and enjoying a traditional feast of pancakes. However, for persons suffering from celiac (pronounced se'le ak') disease, this day may prove difficult to celebrate due to the serious effects gluten has on their health. This does not mean that celiacs should miss out on the experience altogether, since there are now many gluten-free flour products available.

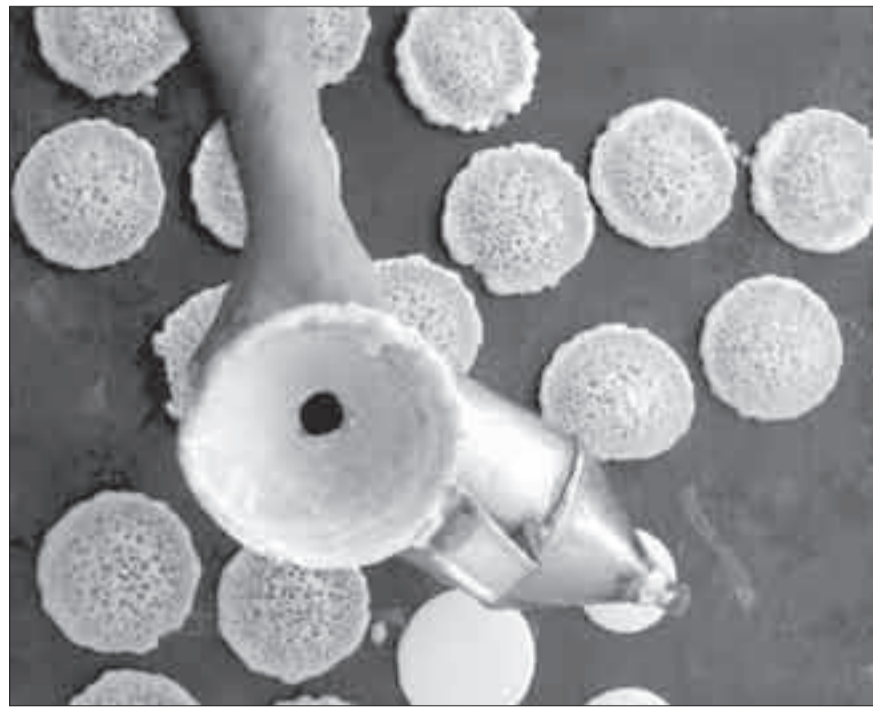
Celiac disease is not a wheat allergy but an autoimmune disease, which causes the body to produce antibodies that attack its own tissues.

Celiac sufferers are intolerant to a protein called gluten. The immune system believes gluten is a threat, and launches an attack against it, which also results in the gut lining becoming inflamed. This leads to the reduced absorption of nutrients. This in turn results in weight loss and vitamin deficiencies, leading to malnutrition.

Symptoms can include bloating, diarrhea, nausea, wind, tiredness, anemia, headaches, and infertility.

It is not known what the exact cause of celiac disease is, although it has been suggested that both genetic and environmental factors are involved.

One in 100 people in the U.K. suffer from celiac disease, however only 12.5 percent of them are actually aware of it. At present, there is no known cure, but the treatment is to follow a gluten-free diet. Gluten is commonly found in wheat, rye, and barley, therefore these cereals must be



Gluten-containing pancakes are a no-no for celiacs.
SAIF DAHLAH/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

avoided.

Avoiding gluten can be a difficult task for a celiac as it is present in many foods such as bread, flour, pasta, cakes, pastries, biscuits, and some alcoholic drinks. Other hidden sources of gluten are sauces and gravies; so, many prepared and processed ready meals must be avoided.

Oats may be safe to consume for some individuals, but for other sufferers they may still cause symptoms. It is important for all celiacs to understand food labeling and to check both the ingredients list on pre-packaged foods.

Once on a gluten free diet, a person's symptoms subside, and the gut lining will return to nor-

mal. It is important for individuals to maintain a strict diet that may seem harsh at first, but is necessary to reduce the risk of serious health complications such as osteoporosis, impaired immunity, and cancer of the small intestine.

Celiacs committed to following a gluten-free diet have the same life expectancy as those without the disease.

References:
Celiac UK: <http://www.coeliac.co.uk>
Celiac Disease and Gluten-free Diet Information Since 1995: <http://www.celiac.com>
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Antidepressant studies found to be biased and misleading

By DR. JOHN BRIFFA
Special to The Epoch Times

Many individuals who work in health care—and perhaps quite a few who don't—will have noticed a general thrust in the direction of what is known as “evidence-based medicine.” But I, for one, have serious reservations about it since it can be affected by “publication bias.”

Originally it was announced: “The practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research.” It's amazing, however, just how often the clinical evidence bit is forgotten.

Having said that, the individuals who forget the importance of clinical experience do often seem to be academics who don't actually see patients. I suppose it's only natural that if you don't have much clinical experience, you're not going to give it that much credence.

Even if we focus on the science and on the studies, evidence-based medicine is still fraught with difficulties. One of these difficulties is publication bias, which is the phenomenon in which “positive” studies tend to be more readily published than “negative” ones.

Such shenanigans are well known in medical research, and can give a much-skewed impression of a drug's effectiveness and of its risk-benefit profile.

The January 17 issue of New England Journal of Medicine carried an interesting article, which sought to identify publication bias in the area of antidepressant medication. The researchers assessed a total of



THE CIRCULAR FILE: A frequent destination for unfavourable studies. PHOTOS.COM

74 studies that had been registered with the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in the United States.

Some of these studies had been published, but many had not (details below). The researchers obtained the unpublished studies using various means, including invoking the Freedom of Information Act.

Analyzing the 74 studies, the researchers found that:

Thirty-eight had positive results, and all but one of these had been published.

Thirty-six had negative results, and 22 of these had not been published.

Of the 36 negative studies, 11 had been published, but in a way that conveyed a positive outcome (this is not publication bias, by the way; it is just plain bias).

This meant that of all the published studies, 94 percent

appeared to have positive findings. However, FDA analysis revealed that only 51 percent of studies were genuinely positive.

Overall, publication bias meant that the drugs appeared about a third more effective than if all the trials had been taken into consideration.

The lead author of this study, Dr. Erick Turner, said: “The bottom line for people considering an antidepressant, I think, is that they should be more circumspect about taking it.” That sounds like good advice to me. But I'd add that the data also suggests that doctors might be a bit more circumspect about prescribing.

This is not the first time that there's been evidence of publication bias in the area of antidepressants. Previous analysis found the same situation seems to have existed in the area of antidepressant use in adolescent.

A Lancet review found that while published studies support the use of a variety of antidepressants in childhood depression, unpublished data shows that, in general, risks of treatment such as an enhanced tendency toward suicidal behavior seem to have been significantly underplayed.

All this stuff about the selective publication of data on antidepressant medication makes pretty depressing reading.

References can be found here: http://len.epochtimes.com/_websites/template/template.asp?type=news&id=65104
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CANCER-CAUSING: Smoking marijuana is not a safe sport.
CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

Cannabis bigger cancer risk than cigarettes

HONG KONG (Reuters)—Smoking a joint is equivalent to 20 cigarettes in terms of lung cancer risk, scientists in New Zealand have found, as they warned of an “epidemic” of lung cancers linked to cannabis.

Studies in the past have demonstrated that cannabis can cause cancer, but few have established a strong link between cannabis use and the actual incidence of lung cancer.

In an article published in the European Respiratory Journal, the scientists said cannabis could be expected to harm the airways more than tobacco, since its smoke contained twice the level of carcinogens compared with tobacco cigarettes.

The method of smoking also increases the risk, since joints are typically smoked without a proper filter and almost to the very tip, which increases the amount of smoke inhaled. The cannabis smoker inhales more deeply and for longer, facilitating the deposition of carcinogens in the airways.

The researchers interviewed 79 lung cancer patients and sought to identify the main risk factors for the disease, such as smoking, family history, and occupation. The patients were questioned about alcohol and cannabis consumption.

In this high-exposure group, lung cancer risk rose by 5.7 times for patients who smoked more than a joint a day for 10 years, or two joints a day for 5 years, after adjusting for other variables.

“While our study covers a relatively small group, it shows clearly that long-term cannabis smoking increases lung cancer risk,” wrote team leader Richard Beasley, at the Medical Research Institute of New Zealand.

“Cannabis use could already be responsible for one in 20 lung cancers diagnosed in New Zealand,” he added.

“In the near future we may see an epidemic of lung cancers connected with this new carcinogen. And the future risk probably applies to many other countries, where increasing use of cannabis among young adults and adolescents is becoming a major public health problem.”

How damage to the horse's tail can paralyze you

By W. GIFFORD-JONES, M.D.
Special to The Epoch Times

Why call 911 when it's the same old pain? After all, John X had suffered from occasional bouts of back pain for years and usually the discomfort subsided within a few days.

However, two or three times he had been totally disabled from severe bouts of sciatica, requiring bed rest for several weeks. But, with the use of painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs, the severe pain that radiated down his leg gradually went away.

One afternoon, after a sneeze, pain struck with a vengeance. This time the usual medication failed to numb the agony, but John refused to seek help. Three days later when he was unable to urinate, or have a bowel movement, his family finally called 911 and he was admitted to emergency.

The diagnosis? Cauda equina syndrome, which required emergency surgery. Why? Because of injury to “the horse's tail.”

Low back pain affects millions of people every year and there are many causes for this universal problem. A simple sudden twist

may stretch a ligament or injure a muscle. In many instances it's hard to pinpoint the cause, but fortunately tincture of time cures most patients.

On occasion, there's no doubt about the diagnosis. Years ago, during a trip to Hawaii, a violent sneeze sent a lightning, knife-like pain radiating down my leg. There was little doubt the diagnosis was sciatica due to a ruptured spinal disk.

The only place I could find to lie down was on the pew of an historic church. As luck would have it, a few moments later a group of tourists entered the church and I knew what they were thinking. “Here's the local drunk lying in a pew at 10 in the morning!” But I was in so much pain I didn't give a tinker's dam what they thought.

Most people are aware of a ruptured spinal disk. But I'd bet that not one in a thousand have heard of the mother of all back pains, the cauda equina syndrome, which injures the horse's tail. And unless treated promptly, this injury can



CAUDA EQUINA: Nerves at the end of the spinal cord look like a horse's tail. PHOTOS.COM

have terrifying consequences.

The horse's tail sounds like a cocktail mixture, but it has to do with the anatomy of the spinal nerves. The spinal cord ends at the upper portion of the lumbar (lower back) spine. But a collection of nerves at the end of the spinal cord continues further down the spine. This bundle of nerves resembles a horse's tail, and if a

massive disk blowout occurs, prolonged pressure on these nerves can cause permanent paralysis of bowel and urinary function.

Several conditions can trigger this emergency. Sometimes an arthritic narrowing of the spinal canal will gradually compress the horse's tail. At other times it's an expanding tumor, spinal haemorrhage, birth abnormalities, or an automobile accident. But the most common cause is sudden collapse of the spinal disk.

How can patients know whether they're suffering from severe backache due to a disk protrusion, or from the cauda equina syndrome? There are several red flags.

Be suspicious if you've suffered from previous bouts of back pain, but this one appears to be the granddaddy of them all. Be particularly apprehensive if the pain is associated with numbness in one or, more commonly, both legs, and an inability to move the

legs. Another red flag is “saddle anesthesia.” It's the inability to feel anything in the body area that sits on a saddle. And, if you're unable to urinate or have a bowel movement, the horse's tail has been badly injured.

One authority adds that a recent onset of sexual dysfunction is a red flag. But since many people suffer from this problem, the other flags are more reliable. Besides, if you're suffering from excruciating pain, unless you're the world's greatest lover, sex at this point is not high on the list of priorities.

There are times in medicine when it's best to let nature do the healing. But when the horse's tail is injured, this is not one of those times. This syndrome requires immediate surgery to remove the pressure on the horse's tail. The sooner the pressure is relieved, the greater the chance that bowel and urinary function will be restored.

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Heart health

By SAM MANGER
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“Heartbroken” and “heart-warming” have long been considered simple expressions with no significant medical meaning. However, research from the National Heart Foundation of Australia has clearly shown that depression, social isolation, and lack of quality social support are three significant risk factors for the development of coronary heart disease. [1]

Heart disease takes one Australian life every 10 minutes and is the leading cause of death in Australia. In 1993–1994 alone, the health-system costs for coronary heart disease were around AU\$900 million (over US\$801 million).

Had a patient asked a doctor 20 years ago whether the doctor believed there was any association between the heart and love, he might have received a chuckle and a pat on the head. However, recent research indicates that joy and interaction are necessities to a healthy heart and body.

Many spiritual and alternative-health philosophies are oriented around the idea that disease is a physical manifestation of a corresponding damaged emotional or psychological condition. It has long been thought that parts of the body represent certain emotions or conditions. For example, the heart represents love; the back represents support, and so on.

These ideas have generally received limited support from mainstream medicine, but are they really so far-fetched? Recent research would suggest not.

According to the World Health Organization, by the year 2020, depression will be the second most prevalent health condition in the world. It is reported that the rate of childhood depression in the United States is increasing at a rate of 23 percent per year. This reflects the situation in Australia—rates of depression are highest in younger age groups, especially females. About half of those affected do not seek medical attention.

In 2001, Australian GPs reported that depression was the fourth most common illness in their practices. GPs



BIG-HEARTED: Emotions play an important role in our health. PHOTOS.COM

have increased their number of prescriptions for antidepressants. The Age Online states that 250,000 antidepressant prescriptions were issued to children and adolescents alone in 2003—an increase of 30,000 from 2002. The statistics call for government and health professionals to take a different approach.

Antidepressants have various adverse effects, including violent and suicidal behavior. Most importantly, pills alone do not address the underlying cause of depression.

Faced with this, health professionals in the future may have to change their traditional approach and begin to incorporate apparently alternative paradigms. We may soon welcome a new age in wholistic medicine.

References:
[1] Stress and coronary heart disease: psychosocial risk factors, National Heart Foundation of Australia position statement update, Medical Journal of Australia, 2003 178 (6): 272–276

Caffeine raises blood sugar level in diabetics

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—Cutting down on caffeine could help people with the most common form of diabetes better control their blood sugar levels, researchers said last week.

Giving caffeine to a small group of people with type-2 diabetes caused their levels of the blood sugar glucose to rise through the day, especially after meals, researchers at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, found.

“Caffeine appears to disrupt glucose metabolism in a way that could be harmful to people with type-2 diabetes,” James Lane, a Duke medical psychologist who led the study, said in a telephone interview.

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, and many soft drinks.

Diabetes is a condition in which one's blood glucose levels are too high. Having too much glucose in the blood can damage the eyes, kidneys, and nerves, and diabetes can also lead to heart disease, stroke, and limb amputations.

Type-2 diabetes is the form closely linked to obesity.

The new findings seem to run counter to previous research regarding diabetes and caffeine. Earlier studies indicated that people who drank coffee had a reduced risk of type-2 diabetes, and those who drank the most coffee had the lowest risk.

The researchers used new tech-

nology—a tiny glucose monitor embedded under the abdominal skin—to monitor the glucose levels continuously in 10 people, average age 63.

On days when the participants were given four tablets containing caffeine equivalent to four cups of coffee, their average daily sugar levels rose 8 percent compared to days when the same people were given four placebo tablets, the researchers reported in the journal Diabetes Care.

“What we are really showing here is that when people with type-2 diabetes who are regular coffee drinkers drink coffee, it produces an elevation in their glucose throughout the day above what it is if they don't have caffeine,” Lane said.

“This suggests that people with diabetes might want to avoid coffee and other caffeinated beverages so that this exaggeration doesn't occur. They may find that it's easier for them to keep their glucose down if they avoid caffeine.”

Lane cited two possible explanations.

Caffeine may interfere with the process that transports glucose from the blood into cells in the body as fuel, he said. Caffeine also triggers the release of the hormone adrenaline, which can elevate blood sugar levels, he said.