

ACSH Dispatches Round-Up: From Fibromyalgia to Phthalates

By ACSH Staff — February 22, 2008

February 11, 2008: Artificial Jarvik, Troubled Ledger, Fat Twins, Menaced Babies

☞Quote to Note: "I'm confused. The way they do these studies shouldn't the rats have died from cancer or something before they could become obese?" -- Comment by "OceanLover" on Lucianne.com News Forum about a study linking saccharin consumption to obesity in rats.

☞The Internet can never be wholly trusted for accuracy, especially when it comes to medical information (remember all of the autism videos on YouTube?). Therefore, ACSH staffers were surprised by the small degree of error found on breast cancer websites -- according to [a study published in the journal *Cancer*](#) ^[1] it's only 5%.

Researchers stated that most consumers use general-search engines when looking for medical information on the internet, and most don't go past the first page of search results. Using major search sites the research team came up with 343 Web pages and found that the 5% that have inaccuracies were mostly ones that offered complementary or alternative medicines.

"That's because there's no such thing as alternative medicine," ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross explained. "It's either medicine or it's not."

As ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava pointed out, it's perturbing to think even 5% of sites are feeding people false information, but there is a silver lining -- it's a much lower percentage than one would expect.

☞China cannot get a break -- just when talk about how polluted the summer Olympics may be in Beijing is dying down, the *New York Times* publishes a story on steroids in China's chickens. These steroids would show up in athletes' urine drug tests -- meaning if athletes consume such steroid-contaminated poultry in the weeks or days prior to the games they may be unable to compete.

The article reported that Tyson's is flying in 15,000 pounds of chicken for U.S. athletes, but we wonder what this means for athletes whose countries are unable to fly in their own food source.

☞ACSH applauds the animated sitcom *King of the Hill*, which last night depicted the town of Arlen, Texas, fighting back against a trans fat ban, which was quickly followed by numerous other food bans. Hank Hill and the other "freedom fighters" in the story (who decide to run a black market food van) explicitly chastised the town's fashionable but unscientific new rules by pointing out they'd do nothing to solve problems like childhood obesity. Eventually the bans were overturned -- and we only wish New York City were as wise as Arlen.

☞As ACSH discussed last week, the controversy about the Lipitor Dr. Jarvik advertisements is still

heated. ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said she was at a party this weekend and a man couldn't believe anyone cared about Dr. Jarvick, developer of the artificial heart, using a body-double in the television ads -- Lipitor, after all, is a fantastic drug.

"The point is not that Lipitor is not a fantastic drug," Dr. Whelan noted. "The point is that the ad unnecessarily introduced a level of fiction with the use of a stand-in actor for Dr. Jarvick's alleged rowing scenes."

It's frustrating for ACSH staffers because Pfizer made itself so vulnerable with this advertisement -- while there's no crime or FTC violation, it just looks bad.

☺ This weekend ACSH trustee Dr. Henry Miller had a letter to the editor appear in the *New York Times*. Dr. Miller's letter called for more FDA reforms, he wrote that the agency's most significant problems are "mismanagement and a culture that is excessively risk-averse." Dr. Miller calls for "competent management, discipline in the ranks, more effective risk-benefit balancing, a commitment to permitting patients to assume more responsibility for the risk of medicines and the banishment of politics from regulatory decisions and policy." Dr. Miller's letter is not a surprise to ACSH staffers -- at a time when most scientists and doctors are afraid to speak up Dr. Miller is a welcome anomaly, always [writing op-eds and letters](#) [2] to the editor.

☺ Matching the flu vaccine with the exact strain of influenza that is hitting the United States in a particular year is difficult -- and it's amazing how accurate the process usually is. But this year there is a fear the matching isn't entirely accurate, meaning there could be an outbreak of flu even among those who were vaccinated. "It's scary," Dr. Whelan noted. "Especially when [we're talking about 30,000 deaths](#) [3] from the flu each year."

Dr. Ross added, however, that even a poorly-matched vaccine is far better than no vaccination at all in terms of reducing the risk of severe flu.

☺ In an apartment building on the Upper West Side of New York, 74th and Broadway, there is yet another controversy surrounding smoking and non-smoking residents.

While most of these issues involve smelling cigarette smoke from one apartment in another adjacent apartment, the debate [this time is about the common area](#) [4] by the elevator. A couple doesn't want its four-year-old child to be exposed to the second-hand smoke and wants the smoking residents to stop smoking.

ACSH, an outspoken group on the dangers of smoking, does not discount the science when it comes to second-hand smoke -- there is no proven harm from inhaling cigarette smoke second-hand for a couple of moments a day while you are waiting in a hall for the elevator. The problem is the Surgeon General says there's no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. If there really were no safe level of exposure then no child should ever be exposed to it.

But the issue here is more aesthetic than scientific, Dr. Ross points out, though even this is pushing it. "If I smell your smoke in my apartment, I believe I have reason to complain. But in a common area? I think they've gone too far."

☺ Along with today's frigid cold throughout the country, fear is also in the air. "High" lead levels have been found in baby products, such as a cooler for storing breast milk and a pacifier carrier.

ACSH staffers find this a bit outrageous. It's one thing to ban toys that contain lead and can be easily consumed by children, such as jewelry and painted plastic figurines. But it's another story altogether if the products you seek to ban are impossible to bite down on. [For instance, the cooler](#) ^[5] for storing breast milk: What child is going to bite down on a cooler?

☺Finally, looks like saccharin will not only cause cancer (according to high-dose rat studies), it also will make us obese. A study published [in the journal Behavioral Neuroscience](#) ^[6] found that the calorie-free artificial sweeteners drove rats to overeat by breaking the physiological connection between sweet tastes and calories.

Dr. Ross pointed out that the study dealt with seventeen rats total, which is hardly a reliable test group. Also, the "sugar" group actually were fed glucose, which is not as sweet as sucrose or saccharin.

ACSH advisor Adam Drewnowski, director of the nutrition sciences program at the University of Washington says it best: "We now have studies showing that sugar calories are associated with obesity and the absence of sugar is associated with obesity. Pity those people trying to do something about obesity."

February 12, 2008: Counted Calories, Clogged Arteries, Alarmist Advertisements and Questioned Funding

☺Quote to Note: "We are doing this because we really want to save lives." Dr. Edythe London, UCLA professor and lead scientist in a controversial three-year study on nicotine addiction in adolescents.

☺Know how many calories you're downing during happy hour? The new menu-labeling mandate taking effect in March in New York City will also apply to alcoholic beverages sold by restaurants with 15 sites or more.

ACSH staffers shuddered at the idea of a third of their daily caloric needs packed into a couple of margaritas, but we also can't think of many alcohol-serving restaurants that will be affected by the menu-labeling law. Are there really that many bars or restaurants with liquor service in New York City that have 15 or more locations?

☺Bad news for younger and middle-aged Americans -- research published in the Archives of Internal Medicine found that heart disease may soon be on the upswing. Researchers looked at autopsies of people who died young (between the ages of 16 and 64) of unnatural causes -- accidents, suicide and murder -- and found that most had some fatty deposits in their coronary arteries. [About 8% had high-grade heart disease and 83% had the beginnings](#) ^[7] of coronary artery disease.

Dr. S. Jay Olshansky, who wrote an editorial on the research, said he believes this imminent surge in heart disease is caused by the "perfect storm" -- introduction of computers, a more sedentary lifestyle, the growth of fast-food chains and larger portion sizes and reduced physical education in schools.

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said she remembers hearing research like this surrounding autopsies of Korean War soldiers. Similarly, those men were dying young from unnatural causes, and they had fatty streaks in their arteries, an indication of future heart disease. She wondered

how the new report's statistics compare with the data from 50 years ago. "Before we get all gloom-and-doom here, we really need to see what direction these findings point to."

¢A whole-page ad in today's *USA Today* caught our attention -- the headline: "Are we poisoning our kids in the name of protecting their health?" The ad uses large graphics and frightening text to compare the autism rate in 1983 to the autism rate now.

"This alarmist, even hysterical ad even goes beyond these groups' usual target, thimerosal," ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross pointed out. Thimerosal, a mercury-containing preservative removed from vaccines about five years ago, is the usual scapegoat for activists who like to blame vaccines for causing the onset of autism in children, although research has repeatedly cleared it as a cause of autism. This ad, which asks readers to help "Green our vaccines" takes it a step further -- the group who funded the ad, Generation Rescue, wants to purge vaccinations of aluminum, formaldehyde and ethers. ACSH staffers were surprised to learn that these substances are in vaccines. In fact, they're not! It's just an attention-grabbing device that while successful is completely false!

No one could figure out how this fringe group could afford such a large, costly (probably in the range of \$150,000) advertisement. But then we noticed special recognition on the bottom of the ad, thanking actors Jenny McCarthy and Jim Carrey. Jenny McCarthy is not a new voice for the autism and vaccinations issue -- check out her past quotes (and the response from an ACSH doctor) in our publication [Celebrities vs. Science](#) [8].

We understand that McCarthy, whose son has autism, and Carrey, who is dating McCarthy, may actually believe that this is a "noble" act -- perhaps they believe they're doing an altruistic thing. But what they do not realize is by scaring parents about vaccines they are inevitably causing more harm than good. After the well-publicized but completely flawed, study on MMR vaccines and autism in the UK, cases of mumps and measles soared. Study after study has proved there is no link between vaccinations and autism -- but it doesn't take a scientist to understand the link between vaccinations and the decreased number of deaths from the diseases against which those vaccines protect.

¢Dr. Edythe London's research is controversial. For starters, she's feeding monkeys liquid nicotine and then killing at least six of them to study their brains. (Dr. London is no stranger to protests from animal-rights activists -- back in November ACSH linked to her brave op-ed in the LA Times where [she spoke out against the violence and threats made against her, her home, and her family](#) [9] by animal rights extremists).

But the controversy is now expanding to include more than animal rights protestors, due to the funding source for her research on nicotine and addiction in adolescents -- [the tobacco company Phillip Morris is paying \\$6 million](#) [10] to fund her research.

"I am really proud of what we are doing," Dr. London said. "We have a track record for contributing to science, and we would like to bring that to bear on the problem of nicotine addiction."

The question is still there, though -- can any scientist who takes money from big tobacco really be trusted? Dr. Whelan said she believes they can -- if it is high quality, peer-reviewed research. Why

is the tobacco industry funding Dr. London? We do not know. But she should not be personally attacked. Her research results should be judged and evaluations made regardless of the source of her funding.

Dr. London continues to do lifesaving research, and for that we applaud her -- and we encourage those who are attacking her to wait to see the scientific results.

February 13, 2008: Conflicts, Lesions, and Common Sense

☞Quote to Note: "In the complex treatment decision-making process, it is often possible to lose sight of the fact that DCIS poses limited risks to a woman's overall mortality." --Authors of a study published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* on how many women worry unnecessarily after receiving a precancerous breast lesion diagnosis.

☞ACSH staffers were surprised to see the atypical headline "[Precancerous Breast Lesions Cause Unnecessary Worry](#)" ^[11] in the *Washington Post*. Most of the time, news articles, especially headlines, hyperbolize fears and urge readers to worry more. Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is a risk factor for invasive breast cancer, ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross explained, and many women are very anxious about this prognosis, even though those with DCIS face a low risk of recurrence or of developing a more invasive breast cancer, particularly when they undergo local surgery and post-surgical radiation.

We can understand why women who are diagnosed with DCIS may be "waiting for the other shoe to drop" -- any diagnosis that has the word "cancer" in it can be terrifying. ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan pointed out that when former First Lady Nancy Reagan was diagnosed with DCIS, she underwent a mastectomy. Nowadays, we know more about DCIS. Dr. Whelan noted that in Greece, where autopsies are more common than in most countries, doctors found that more than 40% of women between the ages of forty-five and fifty who died of unnatural causes had DCIS. Also, as the *Washington Post* article points out, metastatic breast cancer follows a diagnosis of DCIS less than 1% of the time.

☞In a recent report on the keys to long life and good health, ACSH was not surprised to see what we've said all along grace the pages: Don't smoke, exercise regularly, [and maintain a normal](#) ^[12] body weight. There's not a word on avoiding phthalates and the other much-touted bogus risks. No warnings about sushi or acrylamide. The research, part of the Physicians' Health Study, found that a healthy seventy-year-old who had never smoked, had normal blood pressure and normal weight, and exercised up to four times a week had more than a 50% chance of living until ninety.

While 25% of the variation of lifespan is a result of genes, two thirds is determined by lifestyle. So quit smoking and start exercising!

☞[One article that perturbed ACSH staffers was](#) ^[13] this one, which pointed out supposed "conflict of interest" in medical schools when they have financial ties with companies like drug- and medical device-makers. The article noted that only a third of U.S. medical schools have policies restricting these ties.

Dr. Whelan pointed out that the article implies that ties to pharmaceutical companies in some way taint or hurt education. In actuality, we should be encouraging these ties. Pharmaceutical

companies and medical device-makers are responsible for innovating lifesaving drugs and devices -- shouldn't we want these researchers to interact with top scholars? Isn't it in all of our best interests?

February 14, 2008: Science Won in Hawaii, McCain Is Lost in Canada

Quote to Note: "My living habits are beautiful. I don't take any medicines. I don't smoke and I don't drink. Never did anything like that." --Rosa McGee, 104, on why she believes she's lived so long.

If January and February are any indication, this year is going to be all about politics. As the candidates fight it out for nominations, here at ACSH we are looking, in a bipartisan fashion, at their science- and public health-related positions.

In the coming months, we will evaluate the presidential candidates' public health policies. We are not naive -- we realize all political campaigns employ spin -- but we hope our words of wisdom do not fall on deaf ears. While we will be giving all candidates attention, today we start with probable Republican nominee Sen. John McCain.

It's only one issue in the race for the presidency, but for ACSH staffers it's an important one -- Sen. McCain's stance on drug importation from "Canada." ACSH staffers are disappointed in Sen. McCain's rhetoric on this issue thus far -- not only is he in favor of drug importation, he lambastes American drug companies because they "want to keep your drug prices high." He also states that Canadian drug companies make drugs and ensure quality control -- and that the main reason healthcare costs are soaring is because of high drug prices. Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said after reading Sen. McCain's remarks, she wonders if he is misinformed about the issues related to drug development, costs, importation, and safety -- or if he is knowingly pandering to those protesting the high cost of drugs. Very few new drugs are in fact produced in Canada -- or in any other country with price controls.

The reason that Rx drugs cost less in countries like Canada is that international laws on commerce treat prescription drugs differently from other consumer products. U.S. pharmaceutical companies are required under a 1994 treaty to sell their drugs at drastically cut prices to countries with drug price controls. Any pharmaceutical company that fails to comply can be punished by having its patent protection taken away. It is as if you were selling books in the United States for \$10 and when you offered them to Canada, officials there told you that they would either give you \$4 per book or violate your intellectual property rights and make copies of the book without your permission.

To comply with this treaty, drug companies slash prices for countries with price controls, which means most countries in the developed world, Dr. Whelan explained. The purchasing countries in this "deal" are supposed to agree not to turn around and resell the drugs to Americans. Thus, programs to "reimport" drugs are illegal, but the law is almost never enforced.

In addition, [many drugs imported from Canada to the United States through websites are actually counterfeits](#) ^[14] -- originally made in China, India, Russia -- who know where -- and there's no regulation. Furthermore, as ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross pointed out, Sen. McCain's remark that rising

health care costs can be attributed to high drug prices is completely false.

We'd like to think that if Sen. McCain were informed of the inaccuracies of his statements, he would change his stance.

¢Today's article in the *Washington Post* about the fact that many prostate cancers do not need to be treated is a step in the right direction -- ACSH has long stressed the importance of taking PSA results with a grain of salt.

The article says that older men [should have the option to wait before deciding whether or not](#) ^[15] to have surgery. Dr. Whelan noted, though, that the age that the researchers deemed "older" (mean age of seventy-seven) is not young enough. The real issue is whether or not to aggressively treat PSA detections in men between the ages of fifty and seventy-five.

Still, we think raising awareness about men not necessarily needing treatment is a good thing. We just think they should extend this "watchful waiting" to younger patients.

¢ACSH staffers breathed a sigh of relief when we learned Hawaiians will still be able to enjoy diet soda. Legislators in Hawaii placed the proposed ban on aspartame on the backburner. They claim they're overloaded with other bills, so the bill is not dead yet.

Still, ACSH staffers are pleased that the forces trying to ban aspartame have been thwarted -- for now, at least.

¢Oftentimes, when we read about the elderly, we read that women are much better at taking care of themselves into old age than men are. (ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava noted that this is probably because men need women to take care of them.) But a recent study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* contradicted this, at least partially. Of the men and women who lived to be 100 years old, three-quarters of men could bathe and dress themselves, [while only one in three women](#) ^[16] can.

More women still lived to be that age than their male counterparts, causing researchers to attribute this surprising statistic to the possibility that men must be in exceptional condition to live that long.

February 15, 2008: Formaldehyde, Fluoride and Smoke-Free living

¢Quote to Note: "Fluoride is the Kennedy assassination of chemicals, a fountain of myths and misinformation, with people on each side of the issue accusing those on the other of using half-truths and twisted facts to push their agenda." --Mike Anton, LA Times staff writer, in a Dec. 22, 2007 article about fluoridated water.

¢It's the day after Valentine's Day and we are full of love...at least for the pediatrician who wrote in to the LA Times about an article the paper printed about the most recent phthalates scare.

Dr. Daniel C. Postellon from Grand Rapids, Mich., wrote that the scientists in the study "did not measure the phthalate content of any baby care product, although they quoted papers that stated it was possible to make such measurements. Without showing that there were any phthalates in baby care products, they concluded that such products were the source of the phthalates found in the urine. The urine samples in this study were squeezed from wet diapers, but the authors failed to mention if these were commercial diapers made with phthalate-containing plastics."

It's so rare we see doctors speaking out, so we applaud Dr. Postellon and award him an honorary seat at ACSH's morning breakfast table. We only wish more physicians followed in his footsteps.

☺ Topping today's science news is the topic of formaldehyde in FEMA-provided trailers for Hurricane Katrina victims. Tests were conducted in a sampled selection of 519 trailers and the results were that the formaldehyde levels were five times higher than levels in new housing, reported the LA Times.

The reaction to this news is predictable -- people are in an uproar. Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast two and a half years ago, but as of Feb. 1 there were still more than 38,000 households living in trailers and mobile homes. At its peak, about 144,000 households were living in the FEMA-provided homes.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a branch of the CDC, cites the "permissible" exposure limit that [should not be exceeded in an 8-hour day](#) ^[17] to be .75 parts per million of ambient air. The formaldehyde levels in the FEMA trailers ranged from .01 to 3.66 ppm with an average of 1.04 ppm -- clearly above NIOSH acceptable levels. While these are the CDC's numbers, the media and other organizations are still debating them.

Just because levels are higher than the recommended levels, though, does not necessarily mean these levels pose a health hazard. ACSH staffers are currently looking into this and will report back shortly.

☺ What's a recognizable trait that most Brits share? Stereotypes say it's their bad teeth. In an article today we think we may have discovered one of the reasons why -- a relatively small percentage of England's population drinks fluoridated water -- only about 10% of the total water supply contains fluoride.

"It seems to me that if offered a solution to this horrible problem, parents would be jumping up and down insisting the water be fluoridated," ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan noted. Instead, it's the anti-fluoride activists who seem to be making the most noise. According to these opponents if you have fluoridated toothpastes and fluoride treatments, why do you need fluoridated water? (Why not, we ask? There is no harm, only great benefits!)

One other thing the article stated is that two-thirds of the United States' water supply is fluoridated. We have discussed this at our morning meetings before, but it warrants reminding. How is it that this number is still so low? New York City began fluoridating its water in the mid-1960s, and studies found fluoridation was beneficial as early as the late-1940s. As our quote to note indicates, though, opponents still refuse to step down.

☺ A condominium in Minneapolis [is making history by deciding](#) ^[18] to ban smoking. Residents are

voting to make the building smoke-free, in individual units, common areas, garages and private balconies. Current owners who wish to continue smoking would be allowed, but any future buyers will be required to follow the new rule.

Dr. Whelan says she believes it's fully in the rights of the condominium to set forth this regulation in a privately-owned condo. "It's a private business and the board members decided they do not want smokers in their midst, she explained. Dr. Whelan also reminisced about how six years ago a similar proposal was made for the first time. On 185 West End Ave. in New York City the board of the Co-op decided to refuse the sale of any co-ops to smokers. Eventually, the board of directors of the condo gave into pressure (primarily from media criticism) and withdrew the proposal to ban smokers.

"The Minneapolis condo's new rule is a harbinger," Dr. Whelan noted. "I think we're going to see more and more buildings banning smoking. I also bet this time, the rule is going to stick."

February 19, 2008: Toys, Cows, Rats, Exercisers, and NYT Articles

☞Quote to Note: "The Humane Society of the United States showed videotapes on January 30 showing workers at the plant using several abusive techniques to make animals stand up and pass a pre-slaughter inspection. These included ramming cattle with forklift blades and using a hose to simulate the feeling of drowning." --Reuters reporters Charles Abbott and Christopher Doering, describing the reasons behind the largest meat recall in U.S. history.

☞After the holiday weekend paying homage to past presidents, ACSH staffers returned to work -- and back to the world of junk science.

Reporting on the annual Toy Fair in New York City this weekend focused on the proliferation of "green" toys on the market. ACSH's Jeff Stier said CBS coverage of the toy fair focused on phthalates. Even the toy makers admitted that science doesn't support the claim that phthalates are dangerous. "But why chance it with your children?" the toymakers said. What a typical scare scenario.

"I'd like a journalist to do an anatomy of a scare," ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said. There are hundreds of articles published every month about the "dangers" of phthalates -- a completely unscientific claim. "That's why I was so interested in that pediatrician who wrote a letter to the editor last week -- it's such an anomaly for scientists to speak out."

☞Also in the news: one article claims that eating "junk food" can increase the risk of cancer and dementia. The author of that statement, Professor Bruce Ames of the Children's Hospital of Oakland Research Institute, said this weekend that through a "lack of vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients in the diet," [junk food may contribute](#) ^[19] to cancer, dementia, and stroke.

First of all, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava pointed out, it depends how you define junk food. Just because some of your meals are not completely nutritionally balanced does not mean you aren't also getting micronutrients from other sources such as fruits and vegetables -- especially at home.

¢Yesterday, the front page of the *New York Times* reported the largest meat recall in history -- [more than 140 million pounds of meat](#) [20] are under recall.

"It's not a safety issue, it's a regulatory issue," Dr. Kava explained. Meat companies are not supposed to allow meat from downer cows (cows that cannot walk) into the food supply. Further, there was evidence that some of the animals were not treated in a humane manner. "The actual risk to health is as close to zero as we can get," ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross said. (The USDA said in a statement that all cattle the plant processed passed antemortem inspection.) In addition, most of the meat has already been consumed (much of the meat is more than a year old). Also, this is categorized as a "class 2" risk -- safer, for instance, than E. Coli, which is listed as a "class 1" risk. The main story here is how embarrassed the USDA should feel for allowing sick cows be used for food at all -- ACSH staffers wonder how such abuses got past the agriculture inspectors.

¢The *New York Times*' public editor wrote a detailed response to three recent health-related stories -- the editor explored in [his column](#) [21] whether or not the *New York Times* was "too" balanced. (Evidence of its "too"-balanced reporting can arguably be found in coverage of cigarette companies in the 1950s and 1960s -- when writing about the dangers of cigarettes, the Times didn't stop quoting mouthpieces for the tobacco industry until the mid-1960s.)

The Times analyzed its own coverage of autism and vaccines when reporting on the ABC show *Eli Stone*. While the Times did report that there is no proven link between autism and vaccines, ACSH is disappointed that it did not slam the door shut on the issue -- there will always be "one more study," as the Times says. But it is a non-issue scientifically, and the Times should recognize that. Other controversies the Times assessed were its own reporting on the existence of fibromyalgia (the Times reported on it well, Dr. Ross says -- there's no way to "prove" the condition doesn't exist) and tuna and mercury (another true controversy -- science goes one way, but there's the regulatory issue we can't discount).

¢A story in today's *Wall Street Journal* analyzed whether or not new exercisers (those who used to live sedentary "couch potato" lives) should get a stress test before they begin working out. Some doctors suggest getting a treadmill stress test "to evaluate the health of the heart," while some say the test is "overkill."

Dr. Ross said a stress test is not a highly-reliable screening test. "Too many false positives," he explained. "If your pre-test risk is in the middle, then it's a good test. But if your pre-test risk is very low or very high, it's not very good at predicting real risk of cardiac events provoked by exercise. Of course, middle-aged and older folks, and anyone with significant risk factors, should consult with their doctor before beginning an exercise program and follow that advice."

¢Finally, make sure to check out Dr. Kava's letter to the editor in the *Los Angeles Times* this weekend about the unreliability of rodent tests, [specifically the recent rodent test](#) [22] linking artificial sweetener to obesity.

February 20: Politicking, Data-Dredging, Blaming TV, and Keeping Things Local

¢Today, ACSH staffers learned a new term: "food miles." The term refers to how far food products travel before they reach consumers. The concept of local foods is rising in popularity -- there are

even "locavores" -- people who will only eat food that's grown locally. ACSH staffers wondered what counts as "locally" grown. For instance, is it even possible to be a "locavore" in Manhattan?

One thing ACSH knows for sure is, it's not a health issue. Also, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava pointed out, for certain foods you may need a lot of land to grow something locally, especially if the local land is not compatible with certain crops.

Still, as ACSH staffers looked at the ad on page A-13 of the *New York Times*, about an Israeli-made apartment building with gardens on each floor, we supposed that if we could have gardens on our terraces in New York, we might just turn into "locavores" ourselves. (Although we still can't see how a Manhattanite would find a really local source for eggs and milk!)

¢A lawsuit against Wyeth over thimerosal in vaccinations came to a close this week. A Maryland judge threw out the "expert" witness who was going to defend a link between thimerosal and autism. The judge found that "it is generally accepted in the relevant scientific community that thimerosal in vaccines does not cause or contribute to neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism."

ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross said he hopes this result will cool the ardor of plaintiffs' attorneys tempted to sue the vaccine makers. (As we mentioned yesterday, maybe this will help shut the door on the "vaccines-cause-autism" lunacy in general).

¢ACSH trustee Dr. Betsy McCaughey wrote [a thought-provoking op-ed](#) ^[23] in today's *Wall Street Journal*, "Health Questions for the Candidates." The op-ed posed questions for Democratic presidential hopefuls Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton. Dr. McCaughey, who is also chairwoman of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, raised good points about the hidden tax on young people that would be created by government-imposed universal healthcare.

Health insurance is undeniably important -- and it's a step in the right direction to have political candidates discussing the issue. But Dr. McCaughey raised important, complex questions about the difficulties of bringing the candidates' proposed plans into action. We'd like to see Senators Obama and Clinton answer these questions at their next debate.

¢When looking at the most recent issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, ACSH staffers were pretty shocked to see [a study linking cell phones to salivary gland cancer](#) ^[24] (studies about the supposed link between cell phones and other cancers, like brain cancer, have found no causal link).

"This latest report is a great example of data-dredging," Dr. Ross noted. If you examine enough inputs and enough variables, out of 100,000 possible causal associations, you are bound to come out with a few that pass the statistical significance test, just by chance. But that doesn't mean that there's any actual causal relation.

¢Great news for Americans: cancer rates continue to plummet. The number of cancer deaths in the country went up a mere 6,000 from 2004 to 2005, while the population of the country has increased in far greater numbers. Lung, colorectal, prostate, breast, and other cancer types actually fell in 2005, the most recent year for these figures.

Of course, the average reader wouldn't figure this out from skimming the headline on some versions of this story: "[U.S. Cancer Deaths Increase](#)." [25] How typical of the media to package this story as bad news, when it actually bodes well for Americans.

¢In the *Journal of Pediatrics*, researchers wrote that the large number of fast food commercials on Spanish-language television channels in the United States [may be a cause of the obesity epidemic](#) [26] among Hispanic youth.

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan pointed out that it's inappropriate to single out fast food commercials as the sole cause of obesity. On the other hand, Dr. Kava noted, "We can't say advertising cigarettes to children has an effect on smoking habits and then turn around and say advertising fast food to children doesn't have an effect."

¢Finally, be sure to check out [the op-ed](#) [27] by ACSH's Jeff Stier in the *New York Post* today. He writes about the insanity of many health scares, including lead paint "reforms" going on in Congress and California's phthalate ban.

February 21, 2008: Satellite-Phobia and Other Forms of Dementia

¢Quote to Note: "Let's think about this for a minute. If you were, say, sitting on the porch reading the newspaper when a satellite plummeted into the backyard, emitting foul-smelling fumes, what are the chances you'd decide to stay very close to it and inhale a lot of it?" --Gail Collins, in her *New York Times* column about the relative risk of danger from the "toxic satellite."

¢The big news carrying over from yesterday is the Supreme Court's decision to limit lawsuits against manufacturers of FDA-approved medical devices. As ACSH has said before, we are pleased to read this decision and hope this ruling is a harbinger for the future regarding the case before the Supreme Court next week on the legal vulnerability of companies for FDA-approved drugs.

ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross predicted the ruling for medical devices, but says that even though this decision is promising it does not directly translate to the pharmaceutical case. "The case for medical device manufacturers was fairly clear-cut," Dr. Ross explained. "With the drug case, it's more complex."

But ACSH remains optimistic that the Supreme Court will also move to limit lawsuits against the manufacturers of FDA-approved drugs. Doing so would provide a major incentive for drug companies to keep researching and bringing to market new, life-saving pharmaceuticals.

¢Times are a-changing, not only regarding when companies should or should not be held legally responsible, but also regarding regulation of cigarette smoking. A decade ago finding a truly non-smoking hotel room was a bit of a challenge. Now many hotels are fining smokers \$250 for their first offense -- for [smoking in a non-smoking](#) [28] room or area.

The hotels' reasoning is that the cost of cleaning rooms thoroughly is very high. Therefore, discouraging smoking with financial penalties is a cost-effective solution for hotel managers.

While it's an interesting concept, ACSH staffers wonder about the incentive program some of these hotels have set up -- sometimes offering staffers \$10 bonuses if they "catch" a hotel resident

smoking. Might such an incentive result in unscrupulous employees "planting" cigarette butts? And what else could they be paid to "catch" us doing?

☺Yesterday, ACSH staffers bemoaned the spin several media outlets put on the news that cancer death rates have declined: the reports focused on the fact that the hard numbers of cancer deaths have gone up but failed to put that in the context of population increases.

We're happy to see the headline "U.S. Cancer Death Rate Declined 1% in 2005" on some versions of [this story](#) [29] -- it means someone is reading the annual report by the American Cancer Society, not just cherry-picking the most negative headline possible.

☺Gail Collins' column in the *New York Times* today was both spot-on and quite funny. She wrote about the absurdity of [worrying about health risks from the "toxic satellite"](#) [30] the United States has shot down.

Collins' column mixed humor -- falling satellites sounds like something out of a Bruce Willis movie, she writes -- with a dose of skepticism. If the satellite does not pose harm to American citizens, Collins worries about the "small, paranoid minds" who understandably wonder if "the whole poison-gas story is just an excuse to give the Pentagon a chance to test its hardware."

We don't debunk conspiracy theories, we just dislike baseless pseudo-scientific fears, whether exploited by conspiracy theorists or actual conspiracies.

☺Great news for aging Americans -- research appearing in the most recent issue of the journal *Alzheimer's and Dementia* found that older Americans are having less trouble with their memories. Researchers attribute the drop in significant memory loss to increased education. For people older than seventy, it fell 3.5 percentage points from 1993 to 2002.

ACSH staffers welcome the good news that cognitive impairment is on the decline, but we wonder about the attribution to education. It does make sense that people who "exercise" their brains (i.e., by doing crossword puzzles daily, as Dr. Ross does to maintain his youthful vigor) may be increasing their chances of future cognitive performance. But is this the only reason? ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan proposed an untested hypothesis -- maybe statins are helping.

February 22, 2008: Pain, Meat, Snow, and Phthalates

☺Quote to Note: "The addition of an aquatic exercise program to the usual care for fibromyalgia in women is cost-effective in terms of both health care costs and societal costs." --Researchers Narcis Gusi and Pablo Tomas Carus, in the journal *Arthritis Research & Therapy*, about how swimming may ease pain from fibromyalgia.

☺What a mind-boggling study -- women who eat diets rich in meat and dairy may be lowering their risk of breast cancer, and those women who eat more fiber, fruits, and vegetables may decrease their risk of ovarian cancer. Starch-rich diets, though, [were tied to increased risks](#) [31] of both cancers. What's left to eat if you want to avoid breast and ovarian cancer?

ACSH staffers typically dismiss such links between diet and cancer. "My usual take is that it's really difficult to rely on the accuracy of dietary intake data," ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava noted.

☺While some doctors scoff at the idea that fibromyalgia is a real disease, European researchers

say they've found a treatment that significantly eases the pain of the ailment. In their study of thirty-three women, the researchers found that swimming eased the patients' pain [and they reported](#) ^[32] an improved quality of life.

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan pointed out that if people have anxiety, if in fact that is what fibromyalgia sufferers have, swimming could very well relax them. Dr. Kava added that exercise is good for almost everything. (The researchers of the European study did not compare aquatic training to other forms of exercise.) Dr. Ross, who was a rheumatologist when in practice, saw many such patients and said that this condition, while of unknown cause, can be debilitating. He welcomed the prospect of such a simple method to reduce suffering, since medications for fibromyalgia are largely ineffective and often associated with unpleasant side effects.

Dr. Whelan noted that today she woke up not only to lots of snow, but also to more than a hundred Google news alerts for phthalates.

"About 99% of the stories on phthalates were negative," Dr. Whelan explained. When it comes to this particular scare, ACSH staffers say they're at a loss as to how to counter the paranoia.

Many stores, like Walmart, are taking more than 90% of phthalates out of products -- but even if there is less than 1% phthalates in toys like rubber duckies, for instance, activist groups say this is too much. Dr. Whelan says scientists have found there is no human harm from phthalates, but activists continue to promulgate this fear. Yes, we can switch to replacements, but they're more expensive and largely untested. And while activists have't brought medical devices into the picture yet, medical tubing and catheters also are made with phthalates -- what are we going to do, switch to glass?

Dr. Whelan said that scientists need to speak out more generally about the pervasive, irrational fear of chemicals and the apparent willingness of consumers to demand that "chemicals" be removed from products even without scientific justification, and without regard to what the alternatives might be. Maybe ACSH should start a sweeping anti-junk science ad campaign.

Corrie Driebusch is an ACSH research intern. Receive these dispatches each workday in your e-mail by becoming an ACSH donor -- donate [here](#) ^[33], send a tax-deductible donation to the Broadway address at the bottom of this site, or call (212-362-7044 x225) or e-mail [DriebuschC\[at\]acsh.org](mailto:DriebuschC[at]acsh.org).

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Links

[1] <http://uk.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKN1055853120080211>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/opinion/l10fda.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

[3] http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20080208/hl_nm/flu_usa_dc

[4] <http://www.1010wins.com/Tenants-in-Famous-Building-Gripe-About%20Smoking/1624293>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/11/business/11toy.html>

[6] <http://www.lucianne.com/threads2.asp?artnum=385179>

[7] http://www.nydailynews.com/lifestyle/food/2008/02/11/2008-02-11_nyc_calorie_regulation_would_cover_cockt.html

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[9] <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-london1nov01,0,6486994.story?coll=la-tot-opinion>

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[18] <http://www.startribune.com/local/15617577.html>

[19] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/healthy_eating/article3378809.ece

[20] http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20080218/hl_nm/food_recall_hallmark_dc;_ylt=ApNDpqN7knyC27AH4u3BIB0Q.3QA

[21] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/opinion/17pubed.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=hoyt&st=nyt&oref=slogin

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[24] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7250372.stm>

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[27] http://www.nypost.com/seven/02202008/postopinion/opedcolumnists/safety_insanity_98467.htm

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[30] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/21/opinion/21collins.html?_r=2&hp&oref=slogin&oref=slogin

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[33] <http://ACSH.org/support>