

# ACSH Dispatches Round-Up: Phosphorus, Colons, Soda, Gates's Mosquitoes, and More

*By ACSH Staff — February 13, 2009*

February 13, 2009

Victories for Vaccines, Soda, Smokers, Cold Sufferers, Eggs, and Vacationers

Elizabeth Wade

Court rules in favor of vaccine safety

ACSH staffers are pleased that a special federal vaccine court followed the science and ruled against parents claiming that vaccines caused their children's autism. "The studies have been quite definitive on the fact that childhood vaccines have nothing to do with autism, and the three-judge panel commonly referred to as the 'vaccine court' seemed to exercise a very thorough analysis of the topic and came to the right conclusion," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

ACSH's Jeff Stier notes, "We shouldn't rely on the courts to be the arbiter of science, but this decision is certainly good news. People who are concerned about autism should be especially pleased because we can now pay more attention to investigating the real causes of the condition."

While we are not under the illusion that this ruling will silence anti-vaccine activists for good, we hope it reassures worried parents that childhood immunizations are safe and effective.

Governor abandons soda tax

Even New York Governor David Paterson has given up on the proposed tax on sugar-sweetened soft drinks, since it appears that the state legislature will not pass the bill. "From the get-go, the public was against the soda tax," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Stier agrees, "The legislature is more accountable to the people, and it is listening to public opinion."

Dr. Whelan adds, "Soda is not the cause of our obesity epidemic. We need more science-based solutions to this serious health threat." Read the written testimony ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava submitted to New York State's Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Committee on Ways and Means about the soda tax. For even more on this topic, check out Dr. Whelan's New York Postop-ed "NY Soda Tax: All Politics, No Science" and her related video commentary.

Cigarette companies will finally pay in court

A Florida jury has ruled that a smoker's death was attributable to his addiction to cigarettes -- and that Philip Morris can be held liable for damages. "In Florida, it is now legally accepted that smoking causes lung cancer and that cigarettes are addictive," Dr. Whelan explains. "This is a

very important ruling that will create a legal environment in which people adversely affected by smoking will have a greater incentive to sue the cigarette companies."

Even though an earlier class action lawsuit against Philip Morris was thrown out, smokers can now sue the cigarette makers individually. "Each individual smoker can take their case to the courts," Dr. Ross says. "It will be devastating for cigarette companies, at least in terms of their American business."

While some argue that lawsuits against cigarette companies are not warranted because "everyone knows" the dangers of smoking, Dr. Whelan points out, "The tobacco industry lied about and misrepresented the risk of cigarettes for decades -- but in court, they almost always prevailed." The tide may have turned now, with the Florida case providing the building blocks for similar rulings in other states.

### Researchers genetically decode the common cold

Scientists have decoded the genome of ninety-nine versions of human rhinovirus, which causes the common cold. While this breakthrough could help researchers develop a treatment, a cure for the common cold is not likely anytime soon.

"The biggest challenge to finding a cure is not scientific but rather economic and regulatory," Stier says. "There's the high cost of getting a drug to market and then the fact that the FDA would probably not be willing to approve a drug with risky side effects to treat a condition that doesn't pose a major threat to most patients."

Dr. Ross believes, "The trick would be finding a common antigen in all these types of rhinovirus so that a vaccine could be developed, which would be wonderful. Even though the cold is nothing more than a nuisance for most people, it has a huge economic impact."

### Eggs finally cleared of cholesterol worries

A new study debunks the nutritional myth that eggs raise cholesterol. "In reality, eggs are nutrient dense, rich in protein, and low in saturated fat," Dr. Kava clarifies. "They are easy to eat and easy to digest."

Dr. Whelan says, "Twenty years ago, it was commonly accepted that eggs raise cholesterol, but now it's high time that we dispelled the mythology surrounding eggs and heart disease." For more information, see ACSH's publication *The Role of Eggs in the Diet*.

### Happy President's Day!

In honor of President's Day, Morning Dispatch will be taking a holiday on Monday. Until our return on Tuesday, we invite you to enjoy this clever spoof of the misguided Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act.

February 12, 2009

Financial incentives, Valentine's, bones, flu, and phosphorus

By Elizabeth Wade

Can financial incentives help people stop smoking or lose weight?

The Wall Street Journal reports that smokers quit more successfully when they are paid to do so -- but at its highest point, the quit rate among people who were offered financial incentives as part of a study didn't even reach 15%. "This story reinforces again how dismal quit rates are," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. Rather than bribing people to give up cigarettes, smoking cessation efforts should focus on promoting and providing harm reduction tools such as smokeless tobacco.

While ACSH staffers are well aware that foods are not cigarettes, we see a parallel to paying smokers to quit in South Carolina's proposal to charge obese public employees more for state health insurance. "Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight knows how difficult it is, and people who are dangerously obese don't necessarily have their weight totally in their control," Dr. Whelan says.

But ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava notes, "It's not that your weight is totally out of your control when you're obese, but it takes an awful lot of discipline to change your lifestyle and then maintain those changes." As always, we're curious to know what Morning Dispatch readers think of this issue. Email [morning@acsh.org](mailto:morning@acsh.org) <sup>[1]</sup> with comments that you'd like to see posted at the end of the week on our FactsAndFears blog. (Remember: by emailing us you agree to allow us to post your comments.)

E-condoms for Valentine's Day

Another topic that resulted in some disagreement around the ACSH breakfast table is the NYC Health Department's e-condom, a Facebook application that allows users to send messages to one another about safe sex. "It's very clear that using condoms in the absence of a definitely monogamous and STD-free relationship reduces the risk of adverse health consequences," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "There's nothing wrong with encouraging people to do so."

But Dr. Whelan says, "I worry that putting this message in a Valentine's Day context might offend some people and ultimately lessen the impact of the important message to use condoms."

Osteoporosis drug may help breast cancer patients

The bone loss drug Zometa appears to reduce the risk that breast cancer will recur or spread to bone. "Breast cancer -- like several other cancers -- tends to metastasize to bone," so having a drug treatment to prevent that would be a boon, Dr. Ross explains.

Many breast cancer patients are already prescribed Zometa or another drug to prevent bone loss because, Dr. Ross adds, "Pre-menopausal women who are taking aromatase inhibitors to treat breast cancer are at an increased risk for osteoporosis." More research is currently being done involving both pre- and post-menopausal breast cancer patients, and other studies are testing the drug's effect on prostate cancer and lung cancer.

Flu season hits New York

The number of flu cases in New York has increased over the past week, and this year's most common strain is largely resistant to the drug Tamiflu. "However, the B strain of influenza that is circulating is still sensitive to the drug," Dr. Ross says. "Plus, the A strain's resistance to Tamiflu

could fade over time, and doctors are still recommending combining Tamiflu with another antiviral to treat especially susceptible patients, such as people in nursing homes." And remember: it's still not too late to get a flu shot, which is the first line of defense against this dangerous disease.

Hidden phosphorus can lead to problems

High levels of phosphorus in processed foods can be a concern for patients with kidney disease, and as more and more products contain phosphate salts, it can be difficult for people to know if they are getting too much of the mineral. "This isn't news we can dismiss, because extra phosphorus can be a serious problem for people with kidney disease," Dr. Whelan says.

Dr. Kava adds, "People with this condition should be paying special attention to the list of ingredients on food package labels."

February 11, 2009

Book Banning, Body Weight, Botox, and Blood Pressure

By Elizabeth Wade

Drugs are necessary to treat high blood pressure

ACSH staffers aren't surprised that drug treatments appear to be the only effective tool for lowering high blood pressure. A new Canadian study shows that lifestyle changes like eating better or exercising more do not improve hypertension, while existing drug treatments often help people get their blood pressure under control. "If you want your blood pressure to go down, you have to be on some type of hypertensive agent," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. "Don't fool around."

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross generally agrees. "This ties into what we are saying about salt. While there is a big push to lower sodium levels in processed foods, some people shouldn't be lowering their salt intake. In fact, doing so could make some people's blood pressure go up. The only 'lifestyle' change that usually helps to lower blood pressure is weight loss."

Public health efforts aimed at reducing rates of hypertension should focus on getting people screened for high blood pressure and treated with the appropriate medications, rather than encouraging widespread lifestyle changes.

New law bans books

The New York Times weighs in on the issue of banning books today over one controversial volume, but ACSH staffers are disappointed it doesn't mention the fact that many children's books published before 1985 are now technically outlawed thanks to the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA). Many thrift stores and book sellers are throwing out all books they cannot afford to test for minuscule amounts of lead, while some older books with decorative covers and ornate illustrations are failing the new tests -- even though no child has ever been harmed by lead in book illustrations. "All the attention this law is drawing indicates that they may have gone too far this time," says Dr. Whelan.

Dr. Ross notes, "The Consumer Product Safety Commission has modified the rules and provided

loopholes for many businesses and products to slip through. But that doesn't address the underlying problem that the CPSIA is harmful to small businesses and not beneficial to children's health."

ACSH's Jeff Stier believes, "the Times should pay more attention to the vast harm being done to booksellers and libraries and less attention to one book in Miami." Check out an interview by WIBA with Jeff about the CPSIA.

#### A new use for Botox

A new study suggests that Botox injections may relieve symptoms of an enlarged prostate, or benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH). "Botox is a very effective muscle relaxer, so there's no reason why this shouldn't work," Dr. Ross explains. Unfortunately, the Botox must be injected directly into the prostate -- but with patients experiencing relief for up to thirty months, it might be worth considering. Dr. Ross adds, "Prostate cancer can have similar symptoms to BPH, so researchers might want to see if Botox injections have any effect -- beneficial or adverse -- on prostate cancer."

#### Obesity: "The nightmare that never ends"

Obese women appear more likely to give birth to babies with birth defects such as spin bifida, heart problems, and cleft palate. "Obesity is like the nightmare that never ends," Dr. Whelan says.

While no biological mechanism is specified in the article, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava hypothesizes, "An increase in some of these birth defects has also been associated with a folate deficiency. Folate may not be functionally the same in obese women."

As the general population in the U.S. gets heavier, the number of obese soldiers is also going up. "The military may be accepting people it wouldn't normally accept" to avoid the alternative of low enlistment numbers, Dr. Kava says. "It also says something about the population. But maybe now that the military is being affected by the obesity epidemic, it will generate some more action."

For those hoping to lose weight, some doctors are now recommending fifty minutes of exercise per day, rather than the previously touted thirty minutes. "As long as you don't hurt yourself, the more exercise you do, the better results you will have," Dr. Kava says. "But even fifteen minutes will help if you're really sedentary."

Dr. Ross notes, however, "There's a difference between optimal recommendations and the amount you have to do to get some benefit." For more information on the litany of health problems associated with obesity (including birth defects), see ACSH's publication *Obesity and Its Health Effects*.

February 10, 2009

Balance in Britain, Banned in Boston, plus Lead, Vitamins, and Statins

By Todd Seavey

Quote of the Day -- and a seat at the table, across the Atlantic

We think the New York Times' Jane Brody squeezed a great deal of common sense into a short passage in her article today on sweeteners, saying (in what we declare the Quote of the Day):

Some consumers consider high-fructose corn syrup to be an "artificial" ingredient, whereas sugar is believed to be "natural." They are equally artificial or natural depending on how you define the terms, since neither occurs in nature in the form they are used; both must be extracted from plant material.

Some consumers fear the genetically modified enzymes or corn used to produce high-fructose corn syrup. Yet enzymes do not become part of the product, genetically modified corn is not a health hazard, and, anyway, almost every food we consume has been genetically modified.

ACSH also applauds the UK group Sense About Science -- and offers them an honorary seat at the ACSH breakfast table -- for laying out the basic facts about genetically-modified foods, noting their huge potential benefits for combating hunger and disease and countering the absurd Frankenstein fears of anti-g.m. activists. And they're not the only admirably-skeptical Brits in today's Dispatch...

Anti-horse Nutt makes a good point

Use of the drug ecstasy is no more dangerous than horse-riding, according to Prof. Nutt -- David Nutt, the chair of the UK's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. It may sound like a bizarre comparison, but Nutt is acknowledging that almost all our activities have benefits and risks, a simple concept but one routinely ignored in discussions of drugs (licit or illicit) and other influences on our health. Pointing out to the UK's horse-riding aristocrats that one of their favorite activities carries its own set of dangers -- but is not as culturally taboo as drug use -- makes a certain amount of rhetorical sense. To weigh the relative strength of some other dangers, though, check out ACSH's Riskometer. Nutt recommends moving ecstasy from the list of Class A to the list of less-penalized Class B drugs -- and has coined the joking term "equasy" for addiction to the dangerous activity of horse-riding.

In less auspicious news for drug aficionados, though, today also brings word of a study suggesting that marijuana increases the risk of testicular cancer -- and shows a dose-response relationship. "That's entirely news to me," offers ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "It is well-known that smoking marijuana is associated with some adverse health effects, mainly lung diseases, including cancer. But I've never heard of an association with other cancers. Of course, this study must be replicated before we can confirm that there's a causal relationship."

Banned in Boston

Apparently learning nothing from the historical experience of Prohibition and the current futility of the Drug War -- namely, that banned substances are simply sold in different venues -- Boston has banned cigarette sales in all pharmacies. Will the former customers of these establishments stop smoking or buy their cigarettes elsewhere (while coping with the higher prices or business failures their old neighborhood pharmacies may suffer due to lost sales)? No need to hold your breath waiting for an answer.

Of course, our skepticism about the usual legal remedies for the scourge of smoking in no way

undermines our expectation that it will continue to be associated with a host of diseases -- and a new study suggests that the differential aging effects of smoking on skin can be seen in twins.

### National Bankruptcy Day

Johnny Law isn't just cracking down on cigarette sales and ecstasy, though -- toys (and many other safe products aimed at the childrens' market) are feeling the cold arm of the state today. As the site NationalBankruptcyDay.com laments, today is the day that sweeping and poorly-planned anti-lead regulations, far beyond anything needed to ensure the health of children, go into effect, likely destroying the second-hand toy business and other retailers who can ill-afford expensive new lead-testing procedures mandated even for old, existing products. ACSH's Jeff Stier warned of the impending tragedy in a recent New York Post column.

### Stimulus bill contains federal healthcare-monitoring

Still more health-related regulation ahead? As a column by Betsy McCaughey (former New York lieutenant governor, founder of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, and ACSH Trustee) atop Drudge today notes, the mind-bogglingly massive economic "stimulus bill" poised for passage -- and described as pork-filled even by ardent defenders such as New York Times columnists Gail Collins and Paul Krugman -- also has some hidden provisions that could be harbingers of coming European-style healthcare rationing: requirements for the federal government to monitor private healthcare decisions to make sure they're ones the government considers cost-effective.

In world where Canadians, for example, are already growing accustomed to being told they're too old in their fifties to warrant experimental hip surgeries and Brits line up around the block for rationed dental care, it's worth steeling ourselves for much greater governmental intrusions on the healthcare free market in the very near future (and let us hope the criteria for determining which healthcare to subsidize will not simply be opposing whatever plans might make money for pharmaceutical companies, as seems to be the New York Times editorial board's litmus test).

### Multi-vitamins, multiple debunkings

One form of health intervention we have to agree is overrated is America's love affair with vitamin supplements, which another in a long and growing line of studies has shown are often useless. Studies come close to showing "a lack of efficacy of any kind of supplement," says Dr. Ross, "as far as preventing any disease."

This is not to say that no one ever suffers from vitamin deficiencies, though. "The fact that there are legitimate cases for taking supplements," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, "confuses the issue for people." Most Americans, though, ACSH advises, do not need routine vitamin supplementation. The vast supplement industry is built on a foundation of paranoia and the false assumption that extra vitamins must help and can do no harm.

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava adds, "We've been skeptical of the utility of vitamin/mineral supplementation for many years."

Statins continue to dazzle

On a more optimistic note -- on a day that brought everything from gloomy news on STD-induced infertility to a promising diagnostic rundown for strokes -- we continue to be impressed by the achievements of the anti-cholesterol drugs called statins, not only in combating cholesterol itself but also heart disease and possibly even Alzheimer's. "Statins lower the risk of heart disease in everyone, it seems," says Dr. Ross.

A new study adds to evidence that even people who are not ill could benefit from statins. "So what does a physician do with a study like this?" asks Dr. Whelan.

Responds Stier, "If the physician happens to be [anti-pharmaceutical crusader] Sidney Wolfe, he freaks out."

February 9, 2009

Measles, TV, counterfeits, peanuts, and Gardasil

By Elizabeth Wade

Measles continues to rise in England

The number of measles cases in the UK is up for the third year in a row, with 2008 marking a particularly dramatic 70% jump. Vaccination rates are rising slowly and are now up to almost 80%; however, officials estimate that a 95% vaccination rate is needed to confer "herd immunity" on the British population.

The number of children who were given the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine declined significantly after The Lancet published the now-discredited paper by Andrew Wakefield in 1998, supposedly linking the MMR vaccine to autism, and as these new data show, childhood immunization rates have yet to recover. "Since Wakefield's inaccurate study appeared in The Lancet, the measles vaccine rate has declined substantially in Great Britain," notes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Wakefield's paper was eventually withdrawn and his co-authors repudiated the findings. The saga continued this weekend, as the Times of London published an article accusing Wakefield of manipulating the data. "We've known the study was unscientific since its publication, but this article goes further to say that he falsified the data intentionally," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

Will television get a black box warning?

ACSH staffers question the conclusion of a study claiming that watching a lot of television increases a teenager's risk of depression later in life. "I think it's more likely that depression causes more TV watching, not the other way around," says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava.

ACSH's Todd Seavey agrees. "If you are a less social and less active person, you're probably more likely to watch more television."

Dr. Ross hopes no one takes this study seriously enough to call for any regulatory action. "Next thing you know, people will be saying this means we must ban TV -- or at least add a black box warning to it," he says.

CBS promulgates another anti-vaccine scare: This time it's Gardasil

We are disappointed -- but not surprised -- to see the latest Gardasil scare story is written by CBS reporter Sharyl Attkisson, whom ACSH previously took to task for her biased reporting on the nonexistent link between childhood vaccines and autism.

"She's not a sound witness on the subject of vaccine safety," believes Dr. Ross. "She quotes the National Vaccine Information Center rather than any reputable scientists, blithely calling it 'a private vaccine-safety group,' when she knows full well it's an advocacy organization devoted solely to scaring parents about vaccines. She uses anecdotes instead of statistics to promote her case against Gardasil."

In fact, the scare story doesn't even provide the number of girls and women who have had all three Gardasil shots without incident. Dr. Kava notes, "The story ends with the fact that Merck is seeking FDA approval to use Gardasil in boys, but it's framed as though it's going to make these phantom problems even worse."

Dr. Ross adds, "I don't know how they can get away with putting this blatant scare down in black and white and calling it a news story."

Counterfeit drugs kill 84 children in Nigeria

Counterfeit teething medication has killed eighty-four children in Nigeria and likely sickened many more. An unlicensed chemical dealer in Lagos reportedly substituted diethylene glycol, an industrial solvent and an ingredient in antifreeze and brake fluid, for more expensive glycerin, a sweet syrup often used in medicines. "This reminds us that problems with counterfeit drugs are so much more serious in the developing world," Dr. Whelan says.

Dr. Ross remarks, "If you can make money from a substandard product, people are going to do it, no matter how much harm such devious practices may cause." For more information on the dangers of counterfeit medicines, see ACSH's recently updated publication *Counterfeit Drugs: Coming to a Pharmacy Near You*.

Salmonella outbreak puts food safety in spotlight

The recent outbreak of salmonella in peanut products from a Georgia plant has drawn a lot of attention to food safety. While some are calling for more regulations, it's clear that the plant was not following the laws that were already in place. The facility's leaky roof led to unsanitary conditions conducive to bacterial growth, and it appears its management didn't appropriately follow up on inconclusive test results for salmonella. "It was a sin of omission, rather than commission," says Dr. Kava.

Dr. Whelan wonders whether food irradiation could have helped protect the food supply in this case, but Dr. Kava is doubtful. "High fat foods really can't be irradiated without affecting the product's taste, and peanuts do contain a fair amount of fat," she explains.

February 6, 2009

Salt Panic, Tax Hypocrisy, CPSIA Tragedy, Flu Lessons, and Autism Treatment

By Elizabeth Wade

Seat at the table goes to Dr. Michael Alderman

We'd like to offer a seat at the ACSH breakfast table to Dr. Michael Alderman, Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, for his critical New York Times op-ed decrying the current push by the NYC Health Department to restrict salt in processed foods. "Salt -- sodium chloride -- is only one of many essential elements in a sound diet...a change in this single dietary element might disturb unknown nutritional interactions and thus generate other as yet unrecognized effects, good or bad," Dr. Alderman writes.

"His points about unintended consequences are valid and incisive," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan remarks, "I find it amazing that New Yorkers spend so much time worrying about salt and trans fats but tolerate the risk of birds interfering with airplanes -- which is a real danger that recently almost killed 150 people."

Health hypocrisy apparent in NY tax proposal

Today's New York Post details New York Governor David Paterson's new tax proposal, which includes both the much-hyped tax on sugar-sweetened soft drinks and a tax on gym memberships. "Governor Paterson says that obesity is a major health concern, but he wants to tax gym memberships and personal trainers," says Dr. Whelan. "What's wrong with this picture?"

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava believes that taxing both soda and gym memberships "shows how duplicitous the whole thing is. Neither of the proposed taxes has anything to do with obesity or health." (Read her testimony against the soda tax [here](#).) Dr. Whelan agrees, "it's a money grab, but it will ultimately be counterproductive because people will figure out ways to cut back rather than pay the new taxes."

CPSIA looms over mom-and-pop businesses

The ill-planned Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA) is scheduled to go into effect next Tuesday, and many mom-and-pop stores worry that the strict new requirements for testing all children's products for miniscule levels of lead and certain phthalates could drive them out of business.

"The law is very clear in saying that toys that haven't been tested under the CPSIA's requirements cannot be sold after February 10, so businesses must either test everything or throw out perfectly safe products," Dr. Ross explains. "This law will do nothing to protect children's health, but it could cause many businesses -- especially small ones -- to go belly up at exactly the wrong moment in time."

The toy industry says it won't appeal the law, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission is under so much political pressure that it probably won't either. We hope that Congress makes an amendment in time to save countless businesses and companies.

Past flu epidemics help researchers prepare for future ones

The peak of the flu season has arrived, so according to Dr. Whelan, "We should expect a dramatic increase in the number of cases over the next three weeks." Meanwhile, researchers continue to prepare for another pandemic by learning from past ones. For example, it appears that many of the deaths during the 1918 flu pandemic may have been caused by a bacterial infection rather than the influenza virus itself.

"The influenza virus killed many people within hours or days by causing an immune system storm that overwhelmed the body and basically drowned the patient," Dr. Ross explains, "but a lot of people were left with lungs filled with fluid, so it was very easy for them to become infected with *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and die from that rather than from influenza itself."

Many doctors think that threat is actually preferable, because now we have antibiotics to treat such infections. Dr. Ross notes, though, "The *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bug is now 30% resistant to penicillin, so the real answer would be the pneumococcal vaccine."

The challenge of treating autism

ACSH Advisor Dr. Marvin Schissel wrote to us regarding yesterday's Morning Dispatch story about behavioral interventions as autism therapy:

...The autism intervention called "applied behavior analysis" or ABA is considered by far to be the most effective treatment available. It works and is the only treatment approved by New York State for early intervention. The CNN story says it costs \$20,000 a week, but that is a gross exaggeration. Some insurance coverage is often available. ABA is both treatment and the collection of patient data for analysis to help determine in which direction to continue treatment...

Dr. Schissel is planning to write more about this issue in the coming weeks on [HealthFactsAndFears.com](http://HealthFactsAndFears.com).

February 5, 2009

Breasts, colons, kids with autism and RSV -- plus Bill Gates's Mosquitoes

By Elizabeth Wade

Breast health in the news

New research shows that the use of mammograms has declined in the U.S. over the past decade, with drops reported in nearly two thirds of states. We wonder if the decline could be related to

demographic shifts, since researchers report that Hispanic women are less likely to get mammograms -- and, therefore, are more likely to be diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer when the disease has already progressed. "The fact that Hispanic women are less likely to get mammograms sounds like a socio-economic phenomenon," says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava. "There have been other studies saying the same thing about African-American women."

We agree with Dr. Jacqueline Miller, the lead author of the mammogram study, who says, "We need to do more to get the word out to women and health-care providers about the importance of mammography."

One thing ACSH staffers are sure of is that the decline in breast cancer since the Women's Health Initiative study in 2002 is not likely to have been related to the fact that many women stopped using hormone replacement therapy (HRT) that year. As Dr. Avrum Bluming, a professor at the University of Southern California and co-author of ACSH's soon to be released paper about the safety of HRT, argued in the Wall Street Journal, the drop occurred too quickly to be linked to changes in the use of HRT. "You don't see a decrease in six months," he said.

Autism intervention nothing but one possibly successful anecdote

CNN's story about an intervention that improved the behavior of an autistic child has ACSH staffers thinking about potential autism treatments -- and the need for them to be scientifically tested in controlled studies. "This is an anecdote," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "Anything is possible when the sample is  $N = 1$ . Every child is different, and what works for one may not work for another, especially because the diagnosis of autism is very flexible."

Respiratory virus found to be quite common in U.S. children

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is more common in U.S. children than doctors previously believed. The virus, which can cause pneumonia, is responsible for 2.1 million visits to the doctor or hospital each year, and its hospitalization rates are three times higher than those for influenza or influenza-like viruses. "Kids are uniquely vulnerable to RSV," explains ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Dr. Ross agrees, "I've never heard of a case in anyone over seven, and doctors have known for many years that RSV posed a threats to neonates. But it seems to be more common in two- to five-year-old children than we thought." He continues, "While RSV is not commonly life-threatening, there's currently no treatment for it. Doctors are working on making a vaccine now that they've realized how extensive the infection is. There is already experimental immunotherapy for those at especially high risk."

Two isn't better than one for colon cancer drugs

We are disappointed to learn that combining two effective colon cancer drugs may actually worsen the disease. While the drugs Erbitux and Avastin each attack tumors in different ways, the combination of the two appears to harm patients. Dr. Kava says, "Hopefully doctors will hear about this study and avoid combining these two drugs off label."

Bill Gates brings the dangers of malaria home

Bill Gates released a jar of mosquitoes during a speech at a technology conference in order to make a point about malaria -- and ACSH staffers agree that such an unpleasant illustration would certainly have grabbed our attention. While Gates initially let audience members believe the mosquitoes were infected with malaria, he later assured them that the bugs were safe.

"He was trying to bring home the dangers of malaria and the fact that we need to do more to retard the progress of this deadly disease," Dr. Ross says. "These are the conditions that people live in every day, and maybe it helped some members of his audience put themselves in the greater picture."

February 4, 2009

Smokeless, Coffee, Drugs/Docs, Lead, Suicide, Fetuses

By Elizabeth Wade

Seat at the table goes to Dr. Frederic Little

We'd like to offer a seat at the ACSH breakfast table to Dr. Frederic Little for his insightful letter about smokeless tobacco in the Wall Street Journal. He writes, "'Swapping addictions' is a tacitly accepted part of addiction care...the lesser of two evils is lesser, after all. Rigid adherence to the party line can be counterproductive in the end."

We're glad that smokeless tobacco and harm reduction have been receiving more publicity lately -- a trend we hope continues now that Swedish Match AB and Philip Morris have teamed up to market smokeless tobacco worldwide.

Coffee never fails to make headlines

ACSH staffers often enjoy coffee over breakfast, but we aren't buying the new claim that people who drink coffee have a lower risk of developing dementia. "Coffee is just irresistible as a health story, whether the 'findings' are pro or con," observes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. "This study is just junk presented as legitimate science."

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava agrees. "I would have more faith in this study if it involved a whole dietary analysis. It's more valuable to look at a whole pattern rather than individual components."

Should drug companies and doctors be forced to sever ties?

The crusade against conflicts of interest is only getting more extreme, with Dr. Marcia Angell, a professor at Harvard Medical School and former editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, saying, "I believe there should be no relationship between the drug industry and either prescribers or patients."

But as ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross notes, "Cutting off all communication between doctors and pharmaceutical companies seems like killing a mouse with a cannon. Focusing on gifts like textbooks, stethoscopes, and calendars is ridiculous and assumes that all doctors are corrupt."

## Do-it-yourself home renovations can result in lead exposure

We weren't surprised to read a warning about home renovations being an important source of lead exposure for young children, with 14% of the elevated blood lead levels investigated by the CDC in 2006-2007 being attributable to home renovation, repair, and painting activities. "I'm surprised it's not more than 14%, since old paint is one of the only things that stills contains dangerous amounts of lead," Dr. Ross says.

The article makes the important point that renovations done by the homeowner or tenant are more likely to result in dangerous lead exposures. As Dr. Ross advises, "Renovations and repairs, especially on older homes, should be done by contractors who are familiar with the concept of lead toxicity in old paint."

For more information on lead, see ACSH's publication *Lead and Human Health: An Update*.

## SSRIs reduce suicide risk, despite warning

Despite fears of anti-depressants increasing suicidal thoughts in teens, a new study shows that the drugs significantly lower suicide risk for adults and the elderly. "Unfortunately, the black box warning still applies to prescribing these potentially life-saving drugs to teens," Dr. Ross says.

He explains, "The warning was put in place because the drugs were believed to increase suicidal thoughts in teenagers, but after patients and their parents were scared away from using them, the number of teen suicides actually went up." For more on this issue, see Dr. Ross' op-ed "Black Box Backfire."

## Smoking during pregnancy reduces blood supply to fetus

While the dangers of smoking during pregnancy are often alluded to, ACSH staffers appreciate a new study highlighting the specific fact that smoking reduces blood flow to the fetus, thereby slowing its growth. "It's obvious that smoking during pregnancy can harm the fetus, but it's important to educate women about the specifics," Dr. Whelan believes. "Talking about cutting off the blood supply to the fetus is more graphic and could have a greater impact than vague warnings about smoking."

February 3, 2009

Soda tax, HRT spotlight, Alzheimer's lesson, kids' vitamins, and polio

By Elizabeth Wade

## State budget hearing draws huge crowd

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava traveled all the way to Albany yesterday to testify about the proposed tax on sugar-sweetened soft drinks -- but so many people were scheduled to speak that she wasn't able to offer oral testimony. "It was a hearing on the very large bill that included the tax on soft drinks, so it drew all kinds of health-related people and groups," she explains. "Dr. Richard Daines, the New York State Health Commissioner, spoke for four hours, and the list of people scheduled to testify after him was four pages long."

Dr. Kava opted instead to submit written testimony about the soda tax, which we believe won't

have any beneficial effect on curbing obesity in New York. Read and watch ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan's comments on the issue as well.

### Spotlight shines on HRT

Ever since ACSH staffers helped with an article about the safety of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for an upcoming issue of *The Cancer Journal: The Journal of Principles & Practice of Oncology*, HRT has been on our minds. So naturally, we were pleased to see an informative discussion about the issue by Melinda Beck in today's *Wall Street Journal*.

"She states that if women use HRT for a small window shortly after menopause, their risks are actually reduced for some health problems -- contrary to what the Women's Health Initiative trial concluded in 2002," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "Additionally, the increased breast cancer risk that scared so many women away from HRT appears to be linked to progesterone rather than estrogen." We encourage women to explore these findings so they can properly assess the benefits and risks of HRT.

### Education doesn't slow Alzheimer's

New research suggests that more education does not slow the cognitive decline associated with Alzheimer's disease (AD). "These new data run counter to the popular wisdom," notes Dr. Whelan. But as Dr. Ross explains, "This study showed that once the decline associated with AD starts, the progression is the same regardless of a person's level of schooling. However, education still appears to delay the onset of AD."

### The wrong children take vitamins

A new study finds that kids who already eat a balanced diet, have access to health care, and exercise regularly are the ones who tend to take vitamins -- perhaps because they are mostly from middle-class families that can afford the supplements. On the other hand, low-income children who don't eat balanced diets -- and, therefore, could benefit from nutritional supplements -- rarely have access to vitamins.

Dr. Whelan says, "Supplemental vitamins are basically useless if you're already eating a balanced diet" -- but as Dr. Kava points out, "That's a big 'if' these days."

Dr. Ross says, "I can't imagine that there are that many kids who need supplemental vitamins to stay healthy, but they don't hurt as long as you aren't getting too much of them."

### PBS explores "The Polio Crusade"

PBS aired a fascinating show on "The Polio Crusade" yesterday, chronicling the search for an effective and safe vaccine against the dangerous disease. (The show is available online.)

"There was a big controversy over whether to use Jonas Salk's live-virus vaccine or the one developed by Albert Sabin, which used a killed virus," Dr. Ross says. Salk was less cautious in testing his vaccine so he reached the finish line first, prompting the desperately awaited mass vaccination campaign that stemmed the terrible summer polio epidemics in 1955 and largely eradicated the disease from the U.S. by the late 1950s.

"The only problem that arose from the vaccine was when hundreds of children got polio from a batch of vaccine in which the virus wasn't properly killed," says Dr. Ross. "It is known as 'the Cutter incident,' because the dangerous vaccine was produced by Cutter Labs in Berkeley, CA. While it only halted the polio vaccination program for eight days, it sent a big chill through vaccine regulation that continues to be felt to this day." He continues, "Polio wasn't really a common disease, but the aura of fear it cast far outweighed its prevalence."

Dr. Whelan even remembers being hospitalized: "My parents and I were convinced I had polio, but I guess the publicity and hysteria put us in that frame of mind. I was released the next day -- without a diagnosis," she says.

Dr. Kava remarks, "I hope that parents who fear vaccines watch this show and realize how crucial vaccines have been -- and still are -- in protecting children from some very dangerous diseases!"

While polio has been eradicated in most of the world, pockets of the disease still exist in Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. We hope Bill Gates' recent pledge jumpstarts the effort to eradicate polio once and for all.

February 2, 2009

Soda, Radiation, Salt, Flu, and Cholera

By Elizabeth Wade

ACSH in Albany

We had an empty seat at our breakfast table this morning because ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava is currently in Albany testifying against New York's proposed tax on sodas and other sweetened drinks. While Gov. David Paterson says the soda tax will combat obesity in the state, ACSH staffers are against singling out certain "bad foods" as the cause of obesity and believe the tax will do nothing to advance public health. For more on this issue, read the op-ed "NY Soda Tax: All Politics, No Science" by ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Quotes of the Day

ACSH staffers are particularly impressed with two quotes from the New York Times article "Spinach and Peanuts, With a Dash of Radiation, which focuses on how food irradiation could decrease the incidence of foodborne illnesses -- and why it's not being used to its fullest possible extent.

First, Christine Bruhn, director of the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California, Davis, and member of the ACSH Founders Circle, weighs in: "Our society is running around with our head in the sand because we have ways to prevent illness and death that aren't being used...The rules are so tight on irradiation that you can't pull it out and use it when a new problem arises, and that's to the detriment of the American public."

Then, Harlan Clemmons, president and chief operating officer of Sadex, says, "It's very amazing. There are so many products that could be made safe by using irradiation." He is surprised -- as we are -- that Sadex's Iowa irradiation plant does twice as much business irradiating pet treats and livestock feed as human food.

For more on the benefits and safety of food irradiation, see ACSH's publication *Irradiated Foods*.

### Who's afraid of salty soup?

The attack on salt continues, with the latest health scare claiming that consuming large amounts of it can lead to stomach cancer. "The article contains a lot of information about how much salt there is in soup but nothing to support the claim about salt's link to stomach cancer," observes ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

He adds, "There have been some hypotheses about a salty diet contributing to high rates of stomach cancer in Japan, but those are a far cry from saying salt 'probably increases the risk of stomach cancer,' as this article does." We won't let this scare ruin our favorite winter meal. After all, as Dr. Whelan says, "What's soup without salt?"

### Flu season starts late but could still hit hard

Flu season is off to a late start this year -- so far, Virginia is the only state to report a widespread outbreak. "However, health officials say the flu could come rampaging in February and March," Dr. Ross reminds us. "It's still not too late to get your flu shot, which is a very good match to this year's pathogenic flu strain."

Taking advantage of the current abundance of well-matched flu shots is particularly important because this year's most common strain is largely resistant to Tamiflu, the drug used most often to treat severe cases of the flu. "While this year's vaccine is a good match, we have a very bad match for treating people who develop serious cases of the flu," Dr. Whelan says.

### Cholera epidemic rages on in Zimbabwe

The cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe has now surpassed the World Health Organization's previous "worst case scenario," killing 3,161 people since August and spreading throughout the country. Heavy rains and holiday traveling added fuel to the epidemic over the past few months, and medical attention is extremely hard to come by because the country's current political and economic crisis has led to the collapse of its health care system.

"Cholera is transmitted through contaminated water and food, and it is able to spread because of poor sanitation," Dr. Whelan explains. "In the U.S., we think diseases like cholera are long gone, but the situation in Zimbabwe reminds us of the things we take for granted" -- from safe sewage systems to access to doctors.

January 30, 2009

Mad Cow, Stem Cells, Prostate Cancer, and Junk Science

By Elizabeth Wade

## Junk science double header

Two health scares caught our attention today: one hyping an association between cured meats like hot dogs and childhood leukemia, and the other claiming that women exposed to perfluorinated chemicals such as perfluorooctanoate (PFOA), which is used in some non-stick surfaces, have a harder time getting pregnant. “Both of these stories epitomize junk science, data dredging, and biological implausibility,” says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross.

We’re glad that the author of the article about hot dogs and leukemia made it clear that the findings represented an association and not a cause-and-effect relationship, but ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan worries that the public is so overwhelmed by health scares that they won’t draw that important distinction. “These scare stories are just getting more and more frequent,” she says. “It’s like we’re under assault.”

## Blood test might help detect early cases of mad cow disease

Canadian scientists have developed a blood test to determine whether elk are infected with chronic wasting disease, and they suspect that their research could soon lead to a way to screen cattle for mad cow disease.

“This is a small and preliminary study, but having a simple blood test for mad cow disease would be very good for both worried consumers and cattle producers,” says ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava. “Having a reliable test would make it easier to remove infected animals from the food supply as well as ease exporting meat to other countries.”

## “Breast cancer gene” linked to aggressive prostate cancer in men

Men who have the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutations appear to be a greater risk for developing aggressive prostate cancer. BRCA1 and BRCA2 are often called the “breast cancer genes” because they greatly increase a woman’s risk that she will develop breast cancer.

“This is a case where I would actually speak in favor of data dredging,” Dr. Ross says. “We know that these BRCA gene mutations increase the risk of breast cancer in women, so it is a good idea to test men with the same variations for any adverse health effects. You want to see if there is some linkage between the BRCA genes and any disease in men.”

The prostate cancer finding could be particularly important because doctors have a hard time predicting which early stage prostate cancers will develop into aggressive forms of the disease. Early detection and appropriate treatment are often the key to beating cancer, and this study may help doctors determine which treatment option is best for individual patients.

## Duraflame fights California ban

We at ACSH often feel like we’re only voice speaking out against junk science, so we were pleased to see that the makers of Duraflame artificial logs are suing California’s Bay Area Air Quality Management District for banning the burning of the logs on certain days in an effort to reduce air pollution.

The new regulation prohibits burning all combustible materials on eight “Spare the Air” days this winter, but Duraflame, Inc. is arguing that its product was unfairly included in the ban because the

air board failed to quantify emissions from the artificial logs and didn't explain how banning them would reduce air pollution. "It's very rare that scientists, companies, or industries stand up for themselves and fight back against junk science like this," Dr. Whelan notes.

Stem cell therapy shows signs of a promising future

While former President Bush imposed a ban on federal funding for research using embryonic stem cells, the controversial research is already showing signs of flourishing under the new administration, which has promised to reverse the ban. In fact, researchers are already reporting success in reversing the symptoms of multiple sclerosis in a few early stage patients by using bone marrow stem cell transplants.

An interesting article in the Economist explains the how's and why's of current stem cell research, including details about promising investigations into ways of growing stem cells without destroying human embryos. Dr. Ross notes, "Paradoxically, the Bush ban on using stem cells from human embryos might have had the unexpected, beneficial effect of encouraging discoveries of other means of generating stem cells for research and, eventually, therapy." ACSH staffers are excited to see where all forms of stem cell research will take us now that it is finally being embraced.

January 29, 2009

Smoke and Obama, BPA, Autism, Peanuts, Malaria, Toys, and Hype

By Elizabeth Wade

Seats at the table for Campbell Brown and Nancy Snyderman

We'd like to offer seats at the ACSH breakfast table to two TV reporters today: CNN's Campbell Brown for her take on lobbyists in the Obama administration and NBC's chief medical editor Dr. Nancy Snyderman for her powerful comments on the dangers of smoking.

Last night, Brown criticized President Obama for moving to appoint former lobbyists even after promising to impose tougher restrictions on hiring them for positions in his administration. "If you have no intention of abiding by your new rules, then don't make new rules. That would be actual transparency," she said (watch the video).

ACSH staffers are concerned about the appointment of William Corr, who opposed harm reduction as an executive director for the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, to the Department of Health and Human Services and the possible appointment CSPI's Caroline Smith-DeWall as the head of the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Inspection Service.

Meanwhile, Dr. Snyderman appeared on the Today Show this morning as part of the ongoing series "The Today Show Calls It Quits" (scroll down their site for details). She encouraged two young men to quit smoking by telling them, "Smoking affects every organ in the body."

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava says, "That's the first time I've heard anyone on TV be so frank about how widespread the dangerous health effects of smoking are." We wonder if she read our publications *The Irreversible Health Effects of Cigarette Smoking and Cigarettes: What the Warning Label Doesn't Tell You*.

## The return of the BPA health scare

The health scare over bisphenol-A (BPA) is back with a study claiming that the chemical, which is often used to manufacture hard plastics, remains in our bodies for longer than previously suspected. "We know that BPA is excreted quickly, so I'm sure what they are detecting are trace levels," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "More importantly, the study doesn't say anything about whether BPA causes negative health effects -- it's just biomonitoring."

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan is suspicious of the journal that published the study, *Environmental Health Perspectives*. "Chemophobic activists have created journals that are just for their own crowd," she says. "You never see anything in them that is not basically a scare story."

## Autism linked to premature birth

An interesting new study suggests that babies who are born very prematurely are more likely to have autism spectrum disorder. "There's an established link between premature birth and cerebral palsy, so obviously the nervous system is affected when the baby is not carried to full term," Dr. Kava says. "One reason that we are seeing more cases of autism now may be because we're saving so many more very premature babies." We hope more research is done on this hypothesis, rather than on the discredited idea that childhood vaccines contribute to the disorder.

## Georgia peanut plant may face criminal charges

Some members of Congress are calling for a criminal investigation of the peanut processing plant in Georgia that shipped and sold peanut butter contaminated with salmonella even after some of its products tested positive for the dangerous bacteria. "I find this reprehensible," Dr. Kava says. "It raises the question, should someone be given the authority to enforce a recall of contaminated food?"

ACSH's Jeff Stier notes, "The policy debate that has arisen from this situation is whether we should have more food safety regulations. But in this case, the laws that were already on the books were being broken. We need to focus on enforcing the regulations we have rather than creating new ones."

## Novartis introduces kid-friendly malaria pill

ACSH staffers are excited by the news that Novartis plans to launch a pleasant-tasting malaria pill aimed at children. "The fact that existing malaria pills are so bitter is a very serious problem because it's hard to get kids to take them," Dr. Ross explains. "Children are the main victims of malaria, so this new drug could have a very positive impact."

For more on the challenges of fighting malaria, see Dr. Ross's op-ed "Insecticide or Suffering?" originally published by the *Washington Times* and recently reprinted by the advocacy group *Africa Fighting Malaria*.

## ACSH in the news

ACSH staffers would like to congratulate our advisor Dr. Geoffrey Kabat, an epidemiologist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, on the positive review of his book *Hyping Health Risks: Environmental Hazards in Daily Life and the Science of Epidemiology* in the current issue of

the New England Journal of Medicine.

"The book focuses on a few specific health scares, such as environmental causes of breast cancer, health effects of electromagnetic fields, risks associated with residential radon, and harm from environmental tobacco smoke," explains Dr. Whelan. "The review is quite laudatory, and Dr. Kabat deserves this praise and more."

Jeff Stier has also received a lot of attention regarding his op-ed "How 'Child Safety' May Kill NYC Jobs" in yesterday's New York Post. "Many people have expressed their opposition to the misguided Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act for a variety of reasons," he says. For just a taste of the ongoing debate, check out the blog post about it from Consumer Reports -- and the passionate comments it elicited.

January 28, 2009

Toys, Breakfast, Salt, Corn Syrup, and Smoking

By Elizabeth Wade

When regulations run wild

We'd like to congratulate ACSH's Jeff Stier for his excellent op-ed in today's New York Post criticizing the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, which imposes unnecessarily stringent regulations on lead levels and bans some forms of phthalates in children's products. Stier writes, "In the name of safety, the law imposes absurd standards and insane testing requirements. These aren't based on science, but on political hysteria -- and they're a major burden on business. In this recession, they could close down countless companies whose products are perfectly safe."

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan adds, "This new law will be particularly damaging to small businesses because they cannot absorb the cost of the new regulations and standardize production like big businesses can. If the regulations go into effect on February 10 as planned, they will worsen the economic climate without doing anything to improve public health."

Seat at the table goes to Dr. Stan Young

We'd like to offer a seat at the ACSH breakfast table to our advisor Dr. Stan Young for his work debunking the study linking a mother's consumption of breakfast cereal before conception to the likelihood that she will give birth to a boy.

Dr. Young, a statistician and assistant director of the National Institute of Statistical Sciences, suspected that this association was simply the result of chance in a large set of data and recently wrote a rebuttal in the current issue of Proceedings of the Royal Society B, the journal where the study was originally published. "If you can pick and choose your data after the fact, you can make them look however you want," he explains.

"Dr. Young's important work clarifying the difference between association and causation is exactly on point for us here at ACSH," Stier says. "We're proud to have him as an advisor." For more on this important topic, see ACSH's publication Distinguishing Association from Causation.

## NYC's war on salt heats up

A long article in today's New York Times reports on New York City's war on salt. In an effort to reduce levels of hypertension in the city (and, ultimately, the country), Dr. Thomas Frieden, commissioner of New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, is meeting with food industry leaders to encourage them to reduce the amount of sodium in processed foods. While the talks and any reductions are currently voluntary, Dr. Frieden is considering imposing regulations on salt in a few years if changes are not made.

"If I were in charge of the New York City Health Department, I would certainly be concerned about hypertension. But I wouldn't spend time and money targeting salt," Dr. Whelan says. "I would focus on getting people screened and treated for high blood pressure."

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross agrees, "Losing weight and quitting smoking would do more for the city and country's heart health than regulating salt. More productive health benefits would come from outreach to get the millions of Americans with undiagnosed and uncontrolled hypertension on effective therapy."

And as the article rightly points out, "salt's role in processing packaged foods goes beyond flavor. It helps create structure in breads and encourages browning in baked goods. Salt helps emulsify the ingredients in bologna and American cheese, and keeps pathogens at bay."

Salt intake is obviously a complicated issue, but as the cartoon of the "food police" included with the article deftly illustrates, New York City residents might not be allowed to make our own decisions about it for much longer.

## Mercury in HFCS: A slam-dunk health scare

Another day, another health scare: the latest claim is that some foods containing high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) are high in mercury. "It's part of the ongoing effort to demonize high fructose corn syrup," Stier believes.

Dr. Ross says, "The principle 'the dose makes the poison' makes this claim ridiculous from the get-go. But being able to target both high fructose corn syrup and mercury in the same health scare is a win-win for chemophobic activists."

## Morning Dispatch sparks debate

Our commentary yesterday on the new estimate that 73% of cancer deaths are attributable to smoking elicited a wide range of responses on both sides of the issue from Morning Dispatch readers. While ACSH staffers suspected the real percentage fell somewhere between 73% and the previous estimate of 34%, ACSH Advisor Dr. John Dale Dunn of the Carl R. Darnall Hospital in Fort Hood, TX, considers even 34% to be too high: "Take a look at the deaths from cancer and you will see that there is no way reasonably to support the 34%. Associations with smoking in the small ranges don't prove anything."

On the other hand, ACSH advisor Dr. R.T. Ravenholt of Population Health Imperatives reminded us, "When I analyzed tobaccosis mortality most thoroughly for ACSH a decade ago, I found approximately 50% of U.S. male cancer mortality and 40% of U.S. female cancer mortality

attributable to tobacco."

But no matter the accuracy of the estimate, ACSH staffers believe the article's real take-away message is this statement from Dr. Bruce Leistikow of UC Davis: "The full impacts of tobacco smoke, including secondhand smoke, have been overlooked in the rush to examine such potential cancer factors as diet and environmental contaminants."

January 27, 2009

Cali toxins, smoking cancers, vaccine safety, PTSD, PEDs, SIDS

By Elizabeth Wade

Dr. Miller's prescription: Consult the Riskometer

ACSH Trustee Dr. Henry Miller has an op-ed in Investors Business Daily about evaluating health risks. He argues that when developing California's new initiative aimed at eliminating many "toxic" materials, "the governor and members of his panel seem oblivious to the fact that we live in a sea of chemicals -- and that, in fact, our bodies are actually comprised of them -- and also to the toxicologists' credo, 'the dose makes the poison.'"

Dr. Miller recommends that readers consult ACSH's Riskometer to put risks in perspective. Our interactive website shows you that cigarette smoking is by far the leading cause of cancer death, while exposure to "dangerous" chemicals like arsenic or the dry-cleaning fluid perchloroethylene (PERC) carries a only minute amount of risk.

ACSH staffers agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Miller's assertion, "The media's 'pseudo-scare mode' is a disservice to its readers and viewers...if most stories focus attention on minor (or virtually nonexistent) threats, greater risks that individuals may be able to control get short shrift. The bottom line: Be skeptical, be informed, consult the Riskometer."

How many cancer deaths are the fault of smoking?

ACSH staffers are skeptical of the new estimate that 73% of all cancer deaths are attributable to cigarette smoking. ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan says, "That number seems mind-boggling high. Even in the case of pancreatic cancer, which is strongly tied to cigarette smoking, the attributable risk to smoking is one-third."

We also doubt that the previous estimate of 34% is accurate -- but this time, we suspect it is too low. "Just in the past year, we've learned that so many more cases of colon cancer are linked to cigarette smoking than we previously thought," explains Dr. Whelan.

She concludes, "Certainly the 73% is overstated, but the 34% is probably understated. What bothers me about estimates like this is that they could damage the credibility of public health by making people believe that all science is junk science."

Evidence for vaccine safety continues to pile up

A new study of the effects -- of lack thereof -- of the mercury-based preservative thimerosal in childhood vaccines adds to the "mountain of evidence" supporting vaccine safety. Thimerosal has long been cited by anti-vaccine scaremongers as a cause of autism, but no scientific evidence has

ever backed up their claim. While we wish this study would be a final nail in the coffin of the vaccine-autism scare, we suspect, as ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross says, "they will always find more cases to fight about."

Ironically, the success of vaccines at virtually eradicating deadly and previously rampant diseases may contribute to some parents' willingness to forgo them for their children. Since they have never seen the devastating effects of the illnesses, they wrongly believe they no longer pose a threat. But a story in today's New York Times about a woman living with the effects of polio reminded ACSH staffers how lucky we are to have a vaccine against the illness.

"Many people born after the polio vaccine became widely available have never seen or heard about anybody with polio," says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava. "It's a horrible disease, and many people don't realize that it's still out there -- especially in Africa and India."

### Smoking may worsen PTSD symptoms

Researchers have found that cigarette smoking appears to worsen the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but most clinics neglect to treat PTSD and addiction (to nicotine and other substances) at the same time. "The common wisdom is that you shouldn't encourage traumatized people to quit smoking during their recovery because it would cause too much additional stress," says Dr. Ross. "But the data show that we shouldn't give smoking a free pass."

Dr. Whelan also reminds us that many recovering alcoholics are never encouraged to quit smoking -- and that many end up dying of lung cancer or other smoking-related diseases. "The Mayo Clinic has a program where addictions to alcohol and cigarettes are treated at the same time, which seems like a better strategy," she says.

### Spotlight: Real risks that children face

While we at ACSH usually find ourselves debunking news stories designed to scare parents about their children's safety, today we'd like to focus on two stories about true and serious risks that children face.

The first calls attention to a study showing that children -- when tested in a virtual street-crossing evaluation -- seem to face a much higher risk of accidents when using their cell phone while crossing the street. "Every parent of a young child has to lecture their child about this danger," Dr. Whelan believes. "You need your full attention when crossing the street, especially in a city like New York."

The second story reports that the rates of sudden infant death from suffocation have quadrupled in the last twenty years. "Many parents choose to take their baby to bed with them, and then they roll over and suffocate the infant in the middle of the night," Dr. Whelan explains. "It's very important for young parents to be aware of this danger."

January 26, 2009

Fat Contagion, Hib, ADHD, Cavities, and a Smoking Tot

Is obesity hardwired? Or maybe contagious?

Two of today's stories attempt to explain the current obesity epidemic in novel ways. The first claims that some people are "hardwired" to overeat because of what some researchers call "external food sensitivity." These individuals are more likely than others to crave food after seeing or smelling it, even if they aren't hungry.

But, as ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava points out, "Such hardwiring might have an impact on some people's food intake, but it would probably have affected it for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It doesn't explain why the prevalence of obesity has gone up over the past few decades."

The second story focuses on a contagious virus that can cause the formation of new fat cells, potentially encouraging weight gain. "It's been shown that you can make animals gain weight by giving them certain viruses," Dr. Kava explains. "The viral hypothesis has been around for a long time and it might have an impact. But again, it doesn't explain why obesity rates have risen so dramatically in recent years."

"Too bad," adds Dr. Ross. "If a virus were the main cause, pharmaceutical researchers would probably be able to make a vaccine to prevent obesity. Just wishful thinking, I guess!"

#### Deadly disease returns after vaccination rate falls

A drop in vaccination rates has led to a resurgence of *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib), a bacterial infection that primarily strikes children under five. In Minnesota, five children recently contracted the disease, and one of them has died. "This certainly isn't something to take lightly," Dr. Kava says. Hib can cause pneumonia, epiglottitis, and meningitis, as well as brain damage and deafness in survivors. One in twenty children infected with Hib dies.

The dangerous disease was curbed significantly after a vaccine against it was introduced in the early 1990s, but vaccination rates have dropped recently due to the health scare falsely linking autism to childhood immunizations. In fact, three of the children sickened with Hib (including the one who died) had not been vaccinated against Hib because of parental decisions.

There is also concern that low vaccination rates are damaging "herd immunity," allowing the bacteria to find a foothold in the community and endangering those who would have otherwise been protected, such as children with weakened immune systems or those too young to receive the series of shots. "This is another tragic example of the flight from vaccines and its consequences," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Dr. Ross adds, "Another problem highlighted by this tragedy is that there are now only two companies making Hib vaccine in the U.S. -- Merck and Sanofi. There were once many vaccine makers, but they've fled from this litigious market -- and America's children are the victims."

#### ADHD drug side effect causes concern, but what's the real story?

A new study shows that some children may suffer from hallucinations while taking ADHD drugs. "It's a meta-analysis of forty-one studies, so presumably it involves thousands of patients," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "But the story doesn't tell us exactly how many kids were involved or how many of those suffered these side effects."

Dr. Harold Koplewicz of the NYU Child Study Center supplied some needed perspective: "These

side effects are rare," he was quoted as stating. "Once you stop the medicine, the side effects go away."

ACSH staffers are very curious about issues surrounding ADHD drugs, such as Ritalin and Adderall. "Some parents say these drugs are a pure miracle," Dr. Whelan says. "But I've heard about questionable prescribing practices, and there's a big backlash right now arguing that these drugs are overused." There are many complex issues regarding these drugs that need to be explored further, and doctors should discuss such potential side effects with parents and children before prescribing them.

#### More children experience dental cavities

The percentage of young children suffering from dental caries increased from 18% during 1988-1994 to 24% during 1999-2004, moving even further away from the national target of 11%. "Perhaps the increase is linked to more children drinking non-fluoridated bottled water as opposed to fluoridated tap water," Dr. Ross suggests. Dr. Kava wonders if more parents are putting babies to bed with a bottle of formula, since, she explains, "this practice can result in caries in the primary teeth."

Dr. Whelan points out, "The fact remains that 40% of the public water supply in this country isn't fluoridated because a very vocal minority has people terrified about fluoride toxicity." We hope that steps are taken to correct this disparity and improve dental health across the United States.

#### Mom prosecuted for letting three-year-old smoke

ACSH staffers are shocked by the story of the three-year-old who was recently filmed lighting and puffing on a cigarette in front of his mother. Based on the video, the mother pled guilty to one count of child cruelty in British courts.

"He seemed like a very experienced smoker," Dr. Whelan says. "He was actually inhaling!" Almost as scary as his smoking habit is the fact that the child apparently had his own lighter. This story gives a new meaning to "Don't play with fire!"

January 23, 2009

HRT, HHS, ESC, and Pets

By Elizabeth Wade

HRT declared "viable and safe" in Canada

Countering a popular medical myth, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada recently released a report stating that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is safe when used for a short time to relieve menopausal symptoms. "It's very refreshing to hear this fact publicized," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

Many women were scared away from using HRT after the Women's Health Initiative concluded in 2002 that the drugs increased the risk of breast cancer. However, according to the Dr. Robert Reid, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, "We now see that concern about that risk is unfounded and is the result of a distorted perspective about

the influence of HT [hormone therapy] on breast cancer."

This issue is near and dear to ACSH's heart, as we recently worked with oncologist Dr. Avrum Z. Bluming and social psychologist Dr. Carol Tavris on a paper about the safety of HRT when used for a short time early in menopause. Their work will soon be published in *The Cancer Journal: The Journal of Principles & Practice of Oncology*.

Anti-tobacco lobbyist circumvents conflict of interest rule

Former anti-tobacco lobbyist William Corr is poised to serve as the next deputy secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services -- despite President Obama's assurances that no lobbyist appointed to his administration would be allowed to work on issues for which they previously lobbied.

"Corr worked hand-in-hand with Altria to draft last year's legislation giving the FDA the power to regulate tobacco products," ACSH's Jeff Stier points out. "That legislation, of course, failed to recognize the different levels of risk between products such as cigarettes and smokeless tobacco."

To get around this conflict, Corr has promised that he will recuse himself from tobacco issues while in his new position. But Stier wonders, "How can the number two person at the Department of Health and Human Services not deal with tobacco? It's the leading preventable cause of death." For such a high-ranking health official to ignore tobacco issues would be almost as irresponsible as appointing him in the first place.

Stem cell trial finally approved

ACSH staffers are excited that the FDA has finally approved the first clinical trial of a treatment for spinal cord injuries that is derived from embryonic stem cells. The study will be performed by the biotechnology company Geron Corp. and will focus on treating paralyzed patients within fourteen days of their spinal cord injury.

"Although both Geron and the FDA deny that the timing of this approval was political, it is clear that the FDA was just waiting for the administration to change," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "The coincidence of the approval coming down two days after Obama was sworn in cannot be missed."

President Obama vowed during the campaign to repeal the restrictions imposed on stem cell research by former President Bush, and approval of this trial may signal the first step in that direction.

Salmonella in pet treats -- but also in pets

Certain dog treats are the latest products to be recalled in the salmonella outbreak linked to peanut butter products. The dog biscuits were made with peanut paste manufactured in the Georgia plant where a strain of salmonella was found. While it is possible that dogs could get sick from contaminated biscuits, the real fear is that people -- especially children -- might contract salmonella from handling the treats.

But, as Forbes points out, you are much more likely to contract salmonella from handling live poultry than from touching or eating a contaminated peanut butter product. "Pet turtles and other reptiles can also carry the bacteria," ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava reminds us. "Hygiene is extremely

important when handling any animals, whether you're going to eat them or not."

January 22, 2009

Salmonella, Menthol, Detox, and Polio

By Elizabeth Wade

Mystery still surrounds peanut butter salmonella outbreak

Yesterday, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava participated in a media availability call with Dr. Stephen Sundlof of the FDA and Dr. Robert Tauxe of the CDC about the current salmonella outbreak linked to peanut butter. While Reuters is reporting that the contaminated peanut butter all came from a single plant in Georgia, Dr. Kava clarifies, "They found salmonella in the Georgia plant, but it wasn't the same strain as they found in people who got sick. There's still some mystery to the whole thing."

So far, 486 people have been sickened and 107 of them have been hospitalized. Six deaths are believed to be associated with contaminated peanut butter products. "The culprit has mostly been institutional food," Dr. Kava reports. "They are postulating that the contamination happened after the peanuts were roasted, but they still aren't sure of the details."

As we saw last summer with the salmonella outbreak that was initially linked to tomatoes but ultimately pinned on jalapeño peppers, outbreaks of foodborne illnesses can be difficult to trace and control. As ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross says, "No matter how many regulations you have, you can't stop a worker from contaminating a batch of food if he isn't careful with his or her own hygiene."

Quitting may be even harder if you smoke menthol cigarettes

Researchers report that menthol cigarettes may be more difficult to quit than regular cigarettes. "This has public policy implications because while currently proposed tobacco legislation does not ban menthol, it gives the FDA authority to do so in the future if menthol cigarettes are found to be more harmful than standard cigarettes," says ACSH's Jeff Stier. "These new findings could provide the necessary health justifications for a menthol ban."

Dr. Ross notes, "This is an observational study showing that low-income menthol smokers tend to have lower quit rates than other smokers. It's not necessarily causal, but it is suggestive."

Researchers postulate that the correlation is particularly strong among low-income smokers because they tend to inhale more deeply or puff on each cigarette more times in order to stretch out their packs. Menthol masks the harsh taste of smoking, potentially making it easier to inhale more smoke in short periods of time.

Detox programs can do more harm than good

A detox craze is supposedly sweeping the nation, which has some ACSH staffers worried. As the New York Times reports, people undergo intense "cleansing" programs to rid their bodies of the pesticides, dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), phthalates, and food additives that have supposedly built up in their bodies. "People think they are getting sick from this 'build up' when they aren't, which is a problem," Stier says.

And because the "cleansing" programs usually involve restricting your diet while consuming various combinations of stimulants, laxatives, and diuretics, "you are more likely to be harmed by this process than to benefit from it," Dr. Ross says. "Excessive ingestion of such harsh cathartics can lead to real intestinal problems, as well as cause circulatory damage from loss of potassium and other electrolytes. And, as is often the case, this is a 'cure' for no disease -- there is absolutely no evidence that these substances are harming us, nor that detox is beneficial in any way."

Dr. Kava concludes, "Like colon cleansing, these detox programs are just a particularly unpleasant placebo."

Millions promised for polio eradication

Bill Gates, Rotary International, and the governments of Germany and the UK have collectively pledged \$635 million toward eradicating polio worldwide. "We've been very close to eradicating polio for many years, but one problem is that people can be infected and excrete the polio virus without showing symptoms of the disease," Dr. Ross explains.

Dr. Kava notes, "There was also a backlash against the polio vaccine from Islamic fundamentalists in Northern Nigeria, who scared people away from getting it with conspiracy theories. That led to a recurrence of polio in central Africa, and the virus was then exported to nearby areas where it had previously disappeared." We hope the newly pledged funds jumpstart the final push toward eradicating this deadly disease.

January 21, 2009

Soda, Child Stress, Senatorial Stress, Fish, Peanuts, and Free Drugs

By Todd Seavey

JAMA: Soda studies could use improvement

A commentary in the Journal of the American Medical Association sensibly called for better studies and more cautious scientific conclusions regarding whether sodas -- specifically, "nutritively sweetened beverages" -- are a special cause of obesity. While perhaps overemphasizing the importance of avoiding ties between industry and research (a goal that, as ACSH has reported, has become something of a crusade), the commentary rightly "critiques the simplicity," as ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan puts it, of simply assuming, as many do, that soda is especially correlated with weight gain.

ACSH Nutrition Director Dr. Ruth Kava says it's a "much more complex issue," in part because soda consumption may be something that people watching their weight tend to avoid even without it making a decisive calorie contribution. The authors' quibbles with the studies themselves, though, hinged on some rather technical points, including their insistence that controlled random

trials in the topic should focus on "efficacy" rather than "effectiveness," saying only the former "assures fidelity of the intervention."

An honorary seat at the ACSH breakfast table to the first donor to give an extra \$100 and explain the efficacy/effectiveness distinction to us in plain English, since we know the limits of our expertise.

Peanut butter scare may subside, but will the problem be solved?

"Six deaths have been linked now" to the outbreak of peanut-butter-borne salmonella, says Kava. "And 500 illnesses," adds ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. The government warning about tainted peanut butter is widening, and two companies are involved, but both appear to have gotten their peanut base from one plant, run by PCA (Peanut Company of America) in Georgia.

"Could this have been prevented?" asks Whelan. Surely, some small misstep such as failing to clean the relevant equipment must have occurred -- but it does not necessarily follow that the inevitable, rising chorus of calls for increased regulation -- to "restore consumer confidence" -- will have make any substantial difference.

Childhood trauma may contribute to asthma

Yet another study suggests possible psychological contributors to asthma, this one reported in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*. Dr. Kate M. Scott told Reuters Health "it has been known for a long time that people with asthma are more likely to also experience some anxiety disorders and possibly depression, [but] it is usually thought that these mental disorders occur as a consequence of asthma."

The new study might contribute to partially reversing the causal arrow. If asthma is known to occur at a higher rate in certain subsets of the population or in certain geographic areas, could it be because they are subject to common psychological stressors rather than because of some common environmental exposure? The new study notes that the death of a parent or other adversity in childhood appears to increase adult asthma rates.

Tilapia, Alpha and Omega

A tilapia craze had barely begun when a report emerged suggesting that while fish such as salmon are high in beneficial omega-3 fatty acids, red meat and fish such as tilapia contain high levels of omega-6, which blunts the effectiveness of omega-3. "Can you imagine being the head of the tilapia association [if there is one]?" asks Whelan. This sort of news can cause a U turn among food faddists.

Trying to adjust your diet for every subtle bit of health news along these lines may be futile, though -- plants also contain omega-6, and sooner or later, you're going to have to eat something whether you like it or not.

Cancer's the thing to aim for in Britain

"In Britain, they're giving free drugs to cancer patients" and for some other chronic conditions, notes Ross, to which Whelan asks, "Why cancer?"

When we first heard about this plan being proposed, we wondered why (aside from creating an opening wedge for a broader later policy) cancer would be singled out, awful though it is. "I've got a few other diseases I'd like to suggest," notes Ross, skeptically. "How about stroke? Stroke's horrible." If he were a patient in Britain, he suspects, "I'm going to have the doctor give me my drugs, but the diagnosis is always going to be cancer." With even skin conditions being (quite rightly) covered as cancer, there will likely be a shift in diagnosis toward "cancer" for some ambiguous conditions.

#### Politicians' health and the body politic

There may be a tendency to downplay the ill health of major public officials. Sen. Ted Kennedy was diagnosed with a brain tumor some time ago that is known to have a very high mortality rate and has already affected his mobility -- but that was not the official explanation for his seizure after the Obama inauguration. "It seems pretty clear to me that his seizure was related to his brain tumor, or to its treatment," says Ross.

Whelan says, "It's amazing he was even there," and Ross agrees: "You've gotta give him credit." There's no question the inauguration had emotional effects, though -- witness stories like this woman, who says cleaning up trash with cooperative people on the Mall in DC helped end her ten-year depression. Happy days are here again, apparently.

January 20, 2009

#### Toys, Peanuts, Heart Attacks, Cravings, and Dementia Dissension

By Todd Seavey

#### They are coming to take your toys

So-called "mommy bloggers" are understandably outraged over the hastily-passed Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, which by mandating extensive and unnecessary lead testing of all toys sold will effectively destroy the market in inexpensive, used toys. That's no big deal if you're a major manufacturer who can afford the tests -- or for that matter, someone wealthy enough that you only buy new toys -- but for secondhand toy stores, this may be apocalyptic. "Didn't anybody think about that when they passed this law?" asks ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "It won't help public health at all...The law serves no purpose except to bring down an industry."

Mommy bloggers -- and mommy vloggers -- are registering their anger, while the mainstream media, always fond of regulations and regulators, have been slow to notice this rare anti-regulatory backlash. "When you think about all the scares we've been through, there's almost never a reaction," observes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. Legal analyst Walter Olson and ACSH's own Jeff Stier have been following the story, and you can follow their reactions on Twitter. (And a hat tip to SavvyAuntie.com.)

#### Kellogg confirms salmonella in crackers

Peanut butter crackers are the latest food to be touched by a widespread salmonella outbreak, as Kellogg has announced. Amidst the usual calls for more regulation, Stier asks, "Will more investigations make a difference, or is it something so prevalent that changing the regulatory

regime won't matter?" He notes that there are options besides the usual post-crisis increase in the number of inspectors: "How about better science to detect salmonella?"

Ross notes that Congress's default reaction is "more regulation and throwing money at the problem." Whelan cautions, though, that such incidents are a wake-up call about the ease with which pathogens can get into the food supply.

First heart attacks are now less likely to be severe

The traditional image of the middle-aged, likely male victim being struck dead out of the blue by a heart attack is less accurate than ever before. Not only have we become more aware of the low-grade, ongoing symptoms that often characterize heart problems in females, but first heart attacks in both sexes -- and in blacks as well as whites -- are now less likely to be severe. The reasons are complex.

"Medical diagnosis is a variable," says Ross, "and they have more sensitive means to detect heart attacks now." ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava suggests that people may be more aware of subtler telltale symptoms of a heart attack -- such as arm numbness -- than they were in the past, though there was some disagreement about this hypothesis at the ACSH breakfast table, and in fact, we found, the article about the report says the level of awareness is unchanged.

Women less likely to control food cravings?

Speaking of the ACSH breakfast table -- which featured such hardy fare as a bowl of nacho chips from a prior gathering -- a new report suggests women are less able to control food cravings, which obviously makes weight maintenance more difficult. Kava says "it's quite preliminary, but it's intriguing -- and where's my chocolate?"

"I saw some chocolate earlier but passed it right by," retorts an amused Ross, adding, "Oh, everybody knows it's true! 'Preliminary investigation' ha!"

Party, albeit calmly, to avoid dementia

In an amusing reminder that one study can often produce two very different-sounding headlines, separate articles this week announced that the likelihood of dementia can be decreased by partying -- and by being calm. "So the answer is to go to a party but stay calm," interpolates Ross.

Making a bit more sense of the paradox, the study found that people with a full social calendar who are not easily stressed were 50% less likely to develop dementia. Perhaps, then, an active schedule -- but not a maddening schedule -- is key to staying mentally fit.

A seat at the table, but a wobbly one, for smoking piece (plus: autism, Ross)

ACSH would like to offer Melinda Beck of the Wall Street Journal an honorary seat at the ACSH breakfast table for addressing an editorial to President Obama and pointing out that "The fact that somebody as smart and self-disciplined as you are hasn't been able to quit completely is a testament to the addictive power of cigarettes. More than 40 million other Americans are in the same boat." We are giving her a wobbly chair with only three legs, though, due to her failure, in a litany of quit methods, to mention smokeless tobacco, which ACSH has reported on as a means of harm reduction. (ACSH was also among the first to report on implications of Obama's smoking.)

Other welcome items in the papers include Jane Brody's warning about bogus autism treatments and letters in the New York Times praising vaccine-defender Dr. Paul Offit -- but less welcome is the nearby letter warning about sinister effects of vaccines and "fluoride," the latter another seemingly undying conspiracy theory. And in the Washington Times this weekend, our own Dr. Ross warned that EU anti-chemical regulations will block pesticides and end up killing more malaria victims.

January 16, 2009

Risks, Autism, Counterfeit Drugs, and Vitaminwater

By Elizabeth Wade

Should we worry about our next flight landing in the Hudson?

U.S. Airways Flight 1549's surprise "landing" in the Hudson River (about one mile away from the ACSH office!)—and the amazing rescue of all passengers and crew members on board—has ACSH staffers thinking about evaluating risk in New York City. "Birds flying into the engines of a plane could have killed over 100 people yesterday," notes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. "How many people have trans fats killed?"

We appreciate New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's commonsense approach to the situation. In a press conference after the event, he advised people to make sure they were wearing their seatbelts to and from the airport, rather than spending time worrying about the danger of flying. To put more risks in perspective, check out our Riskometer.

Seat at the table goes to Alison Singer, former VP of Autism Speaks

We'd like to offer a seat at the ACSH breakfast table to Alison Tepper Singer, who resigned as executive vice president of communication and awareness for Autism Speaks because of the organization's policy on vaccine research.

"She believes Autism Speaks is going overboard with their anti-vaccine crusade," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. "We wish more advocates for autistic children would realize that anti-vaccine hysteria has no scientific support and merely represents a distraction from more productive lines of discovering the real causes of and treatments for autism spectrum disorders."

ACSH's Jeff Stier explains, "Autism Speaks is a powerful mainstream organization, but they see themselves as an umbrella for all autism issues. They want to cover all the bases, and that is starting to include junk science alleging a link between childhood vaccines and autism. It is a tragedy that Alison Singer had to resign over this issue, but she is always welcome at our table."

### Pfizer goes after counterfeit drugs

We are very pleased that Pfizer is working with the UK's Medicines and Health Products Regulatory Agency to launch a campaign warning people in Britain about the dangers of counterfeit drugs. The campaign's first advertisement, which is to be shown in movie theaters across the UK, depicts a man coughing up a rat after taking a pill he bought on the Internet.

With more than 330,000 men buying drugs from unregulated sources every year in the UK, "It's great that Pfizer is making an effort to alert the British public about the dangers of counterfeit drugs," Dr. Ross says. "We'd certainly like to see a similar campaign in the United States."

Dr. Whelan adds, "This is a really important issue for us at ACSH. I'm glad that the pharmaceutical industry is finally waking up to the problem and dangers of counterfeit drugs." For more information, see ACSH's publication *Counterfeit Drugs: Coming to a Pharmacy Near You*.

### CSPI sues over Vitaminwater—and for once, we're on their side

ACSH staffers are loath to agree with the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), but we find ourselves doing just that in the case of the organization's lawsuit against Coca-Cola Co. for making deceptive health claims about Vitaminwater beverages.

"The whole marketing of Vitaminwater smacks of snake oil," Dr. Ross says. As CSPI points out, "Coke markets Vitaminwater as a healthful alternative to soda by labeling its several flavors with such health buzz words as 'defense,' 'rescue,' 'energy' and 'endurance.'" As is often the case with the marketing of supplements and health food products, these claims are not supported by science and ultimately mean nothing.

Dr. Whelan notes, however, that CSPI neglected to take any action before the company making Vitaminwater was taken over by Coca-Cola. "That is in keeping with their general policy of going after big businesses with 'deep pockets,'" she says.

"While CSPI may be targeting Vitaminwater to get at Coke, the points it makes about the product's false image of being healthy and 'natural' are correct," Stier says. "However, we shouldn't forget that there are scientific ways to fortify beverages and make them healthier (like Diet Coke Plus)—and we shouldn't automatically target those as well, even if they happen to be owned by Coke."

January 15, 2009

Alt-Med, Autism, and an Ad About Tobacco

By Elizabeth Wade

Seats at the table go to Dr. Richard Slater and Dr. Michael Buratovich

On the heels of the news that more people are turning to alternative medicine in an effort to save

money (as we noted in yesterday's Morning Dispatch), we are impressed by two letters in the Wall Street Journal that take on the article "'Alternative' Medicine is Mainstream" -- so impressed, in fact, that we'd like to offer both authors seats at the ACSH breakfast table.

In his letter, Dr. Michael Buratovich of Spring Arbor University argues, "The only reason such practices are becoming mainstream is due to the fact that our populace is scientifically illiterate...Only a scientifically literate populace can combat this quackery." We at ACSH couldn't agree more with the importance of educating people about sound science.

Meanwhile, Dr. Richard Slater, in his letter, takes on the specific assertion that prostate cancer is "largely preventable and even reversible by changing diet and lifestyle." As a physician recently diagnosed with prostate cancer and successfully treated with robotic surgery, he writes, "Cancer of the prostate remains the second-leading cause of cancer death among men, and to suggest that diet will cure it is irresponsible. Early detection and treatment are the keys to prolonging survival."

Unfortunately, common methods of early detection of prostate cancer are notoriously inaccurate. Many men are advised to have a biopsy after a test reveals elevated levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA) in their blood, but only about 25% to 30% of those who undergo biopsies actually turn out to have prostate cancer.

"Right now what is done essentially is barbaric," said Dr. Faina Shtern of the nonprofit organization AdMeTech, which is leading the charge toward developing so-called "man-o-grams," a more accurate detection method for prostate cancer that resembles the technique used to detect breast cancer.

"Many men go through invasive procedures for no reason at all," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. "We need a more accurate means of diagnosing prostate cancer, and we certainly shouldn't waste time advising men to change their diets to reverse the course of this potentially lethal disease."

Autism rate "skyrockets" in California -- but what's really going on?

Researchers from the University of California, Davis, report that autism rates have soared in California, up from 0.8 per 10,000 children born in 1990 to 11.2 per 10,000 children born in 2006. "They say that 68% of the increase can be explained by factors other than occurrence -- namely, a change in the age at diagnosis and the inclusion of milder cases," says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava. "But they are still talking about a huge increase."

Dr. Whelan adds, "The size of increase they purport makes me suspicious of their agenda. There's a built-in premise that the reason for the increase is environmental." Indeed, one of the researchers even said, "It's time to start looking for the environmental culprits responsible for the remarkable increase in the rate of autism in California."

Combating hypocrisy about cigarette taxes and smokeless tobacco

Lorillard Tobacco Company published an "op-ad" in the print version of the Wall Street Journal's editorial page today about the "inherent hypocrisy" of relying on cigarette taxes to fund an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program. As ACSH's Jeff Stier explains, "If the

goal is to encourage people to quit smoking, we shouldn't build a financial reliance on cigarette taxes into our healthcare system."

One of the best quitting tools available is smokeless tobacco, but as Stier recently argued in an op-ed he co-wrote with Dr. Brad Rodu, proposed legislation would discourage practical harm reduction strategies in favor of less effective tools such as nicotine gum and patches. Fortunately, Stier will be meeting with Sen. Richard Burr and Rep. Steven Buyer in the coming weeks to discuss ways to give smokeless tobacco the place in the public health arsenal it deserves.

January 14, 2009

STDs, Alternative Medicine, Statins, and an MRI at the Zoo

By Elizabeth Wade

STD rates are on the rise

Rates of chlamydia and syphilis are going up in the U.S., and the number of new chlamydia cases is at an all-time high of 1.1 million per year. "This shows yet again that the consequences of unprotected sex are often dramatic and long-lasting," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

While some of the increase may be due to more people reporting cases of the diseases, we are particularly disturbed by the gender gap in the new data -- the overall rate of chlamydia infections among women is almost three times the rate among men, with black women ages fifteen to nineteen having the highest rates of both chlamydia and gonorrhea.

"It's so well known that sexual relations are an efficient way of transmitting disease, and yet encouraging condom use doesn't seem to be enough to keep rates down," notes ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. "It would be tremendously productive to have a means of protection other than condoms in place -- such as vaccines." We hope research is being done into vaccines and other chemoprevention strategies for these common STDs.

More people turn to alternative medicine, despite health risks

According to MSNBC, the current economic downturn is causing more families to try to save money by relying on herbal remedies and other alternative medicines, rather than buying more costly prescription or even over-the-counter drugs. "There is absolutely no quality oversight and regulatory control of these products," says Dr. Ross. "We don't know if they're safe, let alone effective."

Dr. Whelan observes, "Many people who are so concerned about pharmaceutical safety are willing to use alternative treatments that have never been proven safe." Indeed, many women turned to untested herbal remedies to treat menopausal symptoms after a widely publicized study linked hormone replacement therapy to an increased risk of certain adverse health effects.

Now, however, doctors are again warning that those alternative treatments are not only ineffective but can cause unwanted side effects and have dangerous interactions with other medicines. (For more on this issue, see ACSH's publication *What's the Story? Drug-Supplement Interactions*.)

There is also an article in the current issue of the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*

that finds a link between the heavily advertised nutritional supplement Hydroxycut and rhabdomyolysis, a dangerous condition associated with the breakdown of muscle fibers that can lead to kidney failure. "Seeing these three stories together today really illustrated the dangers of turning away from traditional medicine in favor of untested alternative treatments," says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava.

Dr. Ross adds, "As I've said many times before, there is no such thing as 'alternative medicine' -- it's an oxymoron. A treatment is either evidence-based or it's not, in which case it's faith-based or superstition."

Even more people could benefit from statins

Researchers report that 34 million people in the U.S. would benefit from taking statins -- over 20% more than are currently on the cholesterol-lowering drugs. "The good news about statins never stops," Dr. Whelan says.

Dr. Ross explains, "The recent 'Jupiter' study, which showed that people with elevated levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) but normal cholesterol levels benefited from the statin Crestor, provided a new parameter for indicating if you might need these drugs." CRP levels are a marker of arterial inflammation, which increases the risk of heart disease.

Heavy humans may have to head to the zoo for MRIs

A five-foot, 275-pound woman was reportedly advised to go to the zoo for an MRI, since she was too big for the local hospital's MRI machine. "This story is actually indicative of a problem that many hospitals are facing," Dr. Kava says. "As patients get bigger, hospitals have to increase the size of all their equipment. They need bigger beds and gurneys, and sometimes they even have to use longer needles to get through the fat."

Dr. Whelan adds, "It's a sign of the times."

January 13, 2009

Inoculation, Corruption, Adoption

By Elizabeth Wade

Pro-vaccine voice makes an impact in the New York Times

ACSH staffers were pleased to see a New York Times article about Dr. Paul Offit and his important work defending vaccine safety. As the chief of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Dr. Offit wrote *Autism's False Prophets*, an excellent book taking on those who believe that childhood vaccines cause autism. "I'm very excited that he is getting the publicity he deserves," says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. ACSH is very proud to count Dr. Offit among our official scientific Advisors.

"I'm disappointed that nowhere in this story does it mention the Lancet's publication of Andrew Wakefield's junk study as the root of the vaccine-autism myth, but otherwise it is an excellent article," says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. In addition to Dr. Offit, it also focuses on actress Amanda Peet and her work as a spokesperson for the pro-vaccine organization Every Child by Two. We

appreciate her work and admire her emphasis on the fact that parents should get their medical advice from doctors, "not from me or any other celebrity."

The media often present stories about the vaccine scare as if there were two legitimate sides to the vaccine-autism "debate" -- when in fact journalists have a responsibility to point out that science firmly supports vaccine safety. As the Times article points out, "Many doctors now argue that reporters should treat the antivaccine lobby with the same indifference they do Holocaust deniers, AIDS deniers, and those claiming to have proof that NASA faked the Moon landings."

For more information on the vaccine-autism scare, including links to recent articles about Dr. Offit and Amanda Peet's pro-vaccine work, see our recent publication [The Top 10 Health Scares of 2008](#). To learn more about the health benefits of vaccines, read our booklet [What's the Story? Childhood Immunizations](#).

NYT: "Corrupt" FDA facilitates drug studies and off-label prescriptions

ACSH staffers are disappointed by an editorial in the New York Times accusing the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of not sufficiently investigating conflicts of interest in trials of new drugs and medical devices. "The people who write these editorials have clearly never participated in the development of pharmaceuticals," Dr. Ross says.

Dr. Whelan takes issue with what she sees as "an underlying assumption in all these stories that everyone is dishonest." Even doctors' individual decisions regarding prescriptions are being called into question now that the FDA has made it easier for pharmaceutical companies to distribute medical journal articles about drugs' off-label uses to physicians.

But, as ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava points out, "No doctor in his right mind is going to prescribe something off-label unless he is sure it will have a beneficial effect -- because the threat of litigation is so high."

Too fat to adopt?

A British man and his wife have been told that they cannot adopt a child unless the man loses weight. According to the Leeds Adoption Panel, Damien Hall, who is thirty-two years old, slightly over six feet tall, and weighs 343 pounds, must achieve a body mass index (BMI) of lower than 40 before he can adopt. His current BMI of 42 is deemed a health threat that throws into question his ability to "provide the best possible lifelong care" for an adopted child.

Dr. Ross disagrees with this decision, saying, "I categorically reject using BMI as a threshold for adoption. Things like obesity and smoking habits may be taken into account when a person applies to adopt, but the only factor that should automatically disqualify people is a lethal disease that makes it more likely than not that they will die or become severely disabled in the next five years."

For an in-depth discussion of the dangers of obesity, check out ACSH's recent publication [Obesity and Its Health Effects](#).

Nanotechnology may improve your cholesterol

Researchers have built an artificial high-density lipoprotein (HDL) molecule, which they hope could

someday help treat high cholesterol. HDL is often called "good cholesterol" and is not affected by statins -- which lower LDL, or "bad cholesterol" levels. "It's a fascinating story, but it doesn't seem like they've tested it in any living system," Dr. Ross says.

Even though research is in an early stage, Dr. Chad Mirkin, director of Northwestern's International Institute for Nanotechnology and author of the study, says, "The hope is this will be a material that doesn't have side effects, that allows you to do what the statins don't do. That is, raise the HDL level, which might be able to reverse a lot of the damage and plaques that are already there." We hope further studies show that this is a technology to keep an eye on.

*Elizabeth Wade is a research intern at the American Council on Science and Health ([ACSH.org](http://ACSH.org) [2], [HealthFactsAndFears.com](http://HealthFactsAndFears.com) [3]), and Todd Seavey contributed to this batch of Dispatches as well. Receive ACSH Morning Dispatch in your e-mail in-box each weekday by donating to ACSH and then requesting subscription.*

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