

## 2016-02-01 FOCUS

### PROTON BEAM THERAPY

You'll remember little Ashya King who was whisked away by his parents in order that he could receive proton beam therapy – a more precise form of radiotherapy – to treat his brain cancer. The Lancet Oncology journal says this appears to be as safe as conventional radiotherapy with similar survival rates, according to new research carried out at Massachusetts General Hospital. Importantly, the findings suggest that proton radiotherapy may not be as toxic to the rest of a child's body as conventional radiotherapy.

### BREAST AGAIN

A paper in The Lancet has two headlines: The first is: "Increasing breastfeeding worldwide could prevent over 800000 child deaths and 20000 deaths from breast cancer every year." The second is: "Failing to breastfeed costs the global economy around US\$302 billion every year."

It goes on to say: "Just 1 in 5 children in high-income countries are breastfed to 12 months, whilst only 1 in 3 children in low and middle-income countries are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months. As a result, millions of children are failing to receive the full benefits provided by breastfeeding. The findings come from the largest and most detailed analysis to quantify levels, trends, and benefits of breastfeeding around the world.

Although breastfeeding is one of the most effective preventive health measures for children and mothers regardless of where they live, it has been overlooked as a critical need for the health of the population. There is a widespread misconception that the benefits of breastfeeding only relate to poor countries. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Analysis of data from 28 systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that breastfeeding not only has multiple health benefits for children and mothers, but it also has dramatic effects on life expectancy. Yet, worldwide rates of breastfeeding are low, particularly in high-income countries."

The Guardian picks up the story. Kate Hodal writing under the slogan 'Maternal health - Women's rights and gender equality' says: "Poor government policies, lack of community support and an aggressive formula milk industry mean breastfeeding is not as widespread as it could be."

She adds: "Children who are breastfed for longer have higher IQs, lower death rates and less risk of infection than those who are breastfed for shorter periods or not at all, the research found. Breastfeeding may also protect against diabetes and obesity later in life, while for mothers it can help with birth spacing, protect against breast cancer and may reduce the risk of ovarian cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Despite these proven benefits, however, only 37% of children aged six months and under in lower- and middle-income countries are exclusively breastfed, with women worldwide failing to receive the support they need to start, or continue, the practice."

She quotes Professor Russell Viner of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health: "The benefits of breastfeeding have been widely publicised yet ... it's clear that efforts are still falling far too short and the grave reality is that this is costing children's lives."

The BBC website keeps it simple: "UK 'world's worst' at breastfeeding"!

I spoke to a young Mum recently about the practical problems. She said the midwives at Broomfield were very nice but extremely busy and the first time mums were usually left to their own devices. She felt that more support at that critical time could make a big difference. Once you're home there is backup, however. There are advice lines such as the Provide Breastfeeding Support Service on 07795 612776 (7 days a week 9am-9pm). You can attend the support group at Chetwood Children's Centre which is open on Wednesdays between 11.30am -1pm. (It follows on from the baby weighing clinic which is handy.) Go to <https://www.nct.org.uk/branches/chelmsford/support-groups/breastfeeding> or Google 'Chetwood breast feeding centre' for full details. There is also a Facebook page – Google 'breast feeding support south woodham ferrers' or you can email the lovely Gemma at [glnicholls@gmail.com](mailto:glnicholls@gmail.com).

For those who need more persuading, the authors of the Lancet paper have one more card up their sleeves ... they say that breast milk not only has social, medical and economic benefits, it is also environmentally friendly as more than 4,000 litres of water are needed to produce a kilo of formula powder!

## NHS CUTS

We GPs have received a letter from a certain Donald McGeachy formerly a full-time GP in SWF, although his focus was always elsewhere. It says: "I am writing to let you know that Mid Essex Clinical Commissioning Group has agreed, with immediate effect, two further changes to its service restriction policy: (1) to stop routinely funding gluten-free products on prescription. (2) to stop routine funding of vasectomy and female sterilisation."

This follows a public consultation which wasn't quite the farce these things usually are – think back, for example, to the one that preceded the opening of the Springfield walk-in centre whereby, by giving a grossly misleading picture to the public, the proposal was pushed through. The result was a facility which was very popular with patients ... until they were told that it was gobbling up £millions of taxpayer's money without having any impact on the number of people who were treated in GP surgeries or in the far more costly A&E environment. Another example is the farce that preceded the opening of 'The New Surgery' premises – the old Maldon and South Chelmsford PCT decided in its wisdom that what we needed was a 4th surgery in the town centre (the 4th having been put there on the basis of a 'business plan' supported by 53 people in a town with a population of some 18,500 at that time!) A far better site for a new health facility would have been the redundant car park at the Station as many SWF residents – and many patients from elsewhere – pass through the station each day. Since then the building has been gobbling up a hefty slice of the healthcare budget in SWF – some £107,000 in 'rental' alone (which I'm told is more than all the other surgery premises in the town put together.)

In the current debate on cuts, the meetings were well publicised even though they were attended in some cases by only half a dozen or so people. That said there were other ways to get your point across.

As for the decision, there is something to be said for the 'abolition' of prescribed gluten in straightened times given that the NHS is struggling to provide the most basic services. Gluten free foods were, at one time, a niche product but now are widely available from Supermarkets at reasonable prices. Needless to say it costs a great deal less if you do your weekly shop in the supermarket rather than in a pharmacy. I think the patient pressure groups probably did more harm than good in that they were at one time giving patients shopping lists – all sorts of exotic items were demanded on prescription – and some people were turning up at pharmacies with shopping trolleys borrowed from their local supermarkets in order to stock up. Gluten free products are now comparatively cheap, as I say (whereas food on prescription from pharmacies is, of course, extremely costly.) We are told that exceptions to the blanket ban can be made in the most unusual needy cases. We'll have to see if there's any truth in this.

The ban on sterilisation, on the other hand, could well have unintended consequences. Free contraception is widely available in this country – although that would come as a surprise to you if all you'd seen were the figures for unintended/unwanted pregnancies. The worry is that there will be a rise in terminations and, worst of all, unwanted children. This move will probably save the local NHS money in the short term – but it will be interesting to whether or not it's a costly move for Great Britain plc in the long term.

For those who would rather fight for a fair deal for Mid Essex than witness further cuts go to <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/110663> or Google '*e petition fair funding Mid Essex*' (and you'll get to it via the Moulsham Lodge Surgery.) If you don't stand up for your rights you'll have only yourself to blame when the next round of cuts come along.

## EXERCISE BENEFITS

Each extra hour of daily sedentary time (for example spent sitting at a computer) is associated with a 22% increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, concludes new research carried out in the Netherlands and published in *Diabetologia* (the journal of the European Association for the Study of Diabetes). That sounds a bit high to me – at first glance I reckon I have a 330% higher rate of developing diabetes on the basis of this figure. Whatever the small print, however, there is no doubt that regular exercise greatly decreases your risk of diabetes, various cancers, heart attacks and strokes, etc – and being a couch potato has the opposite effect.

## **NEW HEALTH FACILITY**

It looks like the Sainsbury's project has got the go-ahead. I imagine there are mixed feeling. Purely from the healthcare perspective, however, South Woodham is a disgrace. Essex County Council, when it planned the new town, gave no thought to healthcare – and, in consequence, the facilities have been left to grow haphazardly in the wake of the development. Other new towns have been far better provisioned – so SWF is the perfect example of 'How NOT to do it.'

The edge of town is not the best site for a new health facility – but we are where we are. Over the years I have attended meetings with NHS people that produced enough hot air to launch a fleet of barrage balloons – but nothing constructive has come of them. The NHS in this area has neither the ability nor the funds to bring a project of the magnitude required to a satisfactory conclusion. So, as far as I can see, we either take what is on offer, or go without.

That said, all such decisions should be made on the basis of a proper democratic process (in which the people of SWF have their views taken into account in a meaningful way). Any new initiative must be in line with what the residents of the town want and need.

**Dr John**