

2016-02-29 Focus

NO SMOKING DAY IS COMING UP SOON

9th March to be precise. The British Heart Foundation says: "Around 10 million people in the UK still smoke, while around 100,000 die every year from smoking-related causes. That's 100,000 too many!" Giving up on 9th means that you'll be in good company and are more likely to have encouragement and surveys have shown that you're more likely to successfully quit if you have the support of family and friends.

This year there's a financial message: "Quitting smoking doesn't have to be about losing something – it's about getting something back too. Currently a typical packet of 20 cigarettes costs over £8, so quitting would save a 20-a-day smoker almost £60 a week."

So ... how about giving up for a day and then giving the money to Sport Relief which follows (18th – 20th March). Or giving up for a week, saving yourself around £60 ... and giving half to Sport Relief and buying a treat with the other half (or for your other half.)

Alternatively get friends, workmates and your family to sponsor you for giving up. It'll help you stick to your resolution as you won't want to let them down – and it'll help Sport Relief too!

ZIKA VIRUS – ANOTHER WORRY

You'll have read about the ongoing Zika virus disease epidemic in Latin America – which is the largest such epidemic ever recorded. On Feb 1, 2016, the WHO declared the suspected link between Zika virus and neurological disorders and neonatal malformations a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The 'neonatal' problem is under-developed brains in babies (microcephaly.)

The neurological disorder in question is Guillain-Barré syndrome – a serious attack on the nervous system involving the motor nerves principally ... so the muscles are rapidly weakened/paralysed. (It's an 'acute peripheral neuropathy') Fortunately it's very rare in this country – I haven't seen a case since I was a junior hospital doctor at Addenbrooke's.

As well as discovering the syndrome which bears his name, Guillain-Barré also composed the James Bond theme music. (*No, that was John Barry. Ed.*) Whoops – sorry – easy to get the two muddled!

Anyway ... the Lancet reports that, between October, 2013, and April, 2014, French Polynesia experienced the largest Zika virus outbreak ever described at that time. During the same period, an increase in Guillain-Barré syndrome was reported ... suggesting a possible association between Zika virus and Guillain-Barré syndrome. The researchers looked into it – and found one case of Guillain-Barré among every 4,000 infected patients ... so, although there is an increased risk, it's still fairly low.

This is the first study providing evidence for Zika virus infection causing Guillain-Barré syndrome. The authors advise that, because Zika virus is spreading rapidly across the Americas, at risk countries need to prepare for adequate intensive care beds capacity to manage patients with Guillain-Barré syndrome.

START THE WEEK

Oon Radio 4 this week featured a discussion on Nature v Nurture ... particularly with regard to why children succeed or not. This followed on from a spate of stories which basically conclude that affluent children succeed better at school and are far more likely to go on to get the top jobs. (For example, there was recently a story in the Times dealing with the fact that poor children are less likely to succeed in affluent areas.)

These people are everywhere – two of the stars in the acclaimed TV series 'The Night Porter' are old Etonians! What's more, Downton's Hugh Bonneville was on Desert Island Discs this week – and he was quite open about the role his privileged background played in his success as an actor.

On 'Start the Week' this Monday, the journalist Helen Pearson talked about the Life Project, a study of the health, wellbeing and life chances of thousands of British children, started in 1946 and continued to the present day. There were some fascinating insights into the kids who had 'broken out' – i.e. had gone on to succeed despite 'humble beginnings'. The help and support of their parents – particularly during their early development – was a big factor. Kids who are told they can succeed tend, needless to say, to do much better than those who are given the impression that there is no hope. Motivation also played a part, of course. The programme is still available on-line ... and it's well worth a listen!

TAKING VITAMIN D

Taking Vitamin D supplements during pregnancy, as recommended for all women under UK guidelines, has no significant effect on the bone density of babies, according to the first randomised controlled trial of its kind, published in The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology journal. However, the findings suggest vitamin D supplements may be beneficial for babies born in winter months, potentially counteracting the seasonal drop in vitamin D levels caused by a lack of sunlight.

Bone growth in the womb and in early infancy is linked to overall bone strength later in life, and weaker bones in infancy and childhood may predispose to conditions such as osteoporosis in older age. Previous studies have associated higher maternal pregnancy vitamin D levels with increased offspring bone mass ... which is why the present policy was introduced. When the dust has settled we will presumably go back to the advice that, in many cases, a 'healthy diet and the 'right amount' of exposure to sunlight (not too little and not too much) is the right approach ... but attitudes to vitamin supplementation are changing so it's a case of 'watch this space.'

ONE MONTH TO SAVE MID-ESSEX

The campaign for better funding for the NHS in Mid Essex, whose plight is getting worse by the day, is hotting up. A new publicity campaign contains the following message:

"We are fighting for better funding for the NHS Mid Essex so patients here can have their fair share of what resources are available. The current situation results in general practices which are struggling to cope and hospitals which are stretched to the limit and beyond. This has direct implications for you and your nearest and dearest – patients have to wait longer, there are less treatments and services available here than elsewhere, and you are treated by exhausted doctors and nurses whose morale is at its lowest ebb. This inevitably makes medical disasters such as a missed or delayed diagnosis much more likely.

Since our campaign began we have seen cuts to gluten free food and ingredients to patients who are gluten intolerant, and an end to NHS sterilisations/vasectomies. What is more there have been other 'hidden cuts' that you don't see but will soon feel. There are also other important services (such as physiotherapy) which are under threat.

There was additionally a widely publicised general practice disaster – the four GPs who run the Sutherland Lodge practice in Chelmsford (see <http://www.sutherlandlodgesurgery.co.uk/> for details) have handed in their resignations following a swingeing cut to their budget, and given notice that they will terminate their contract. Many other practices are struggling to stay open and many more still are cutting back on their staff and the number of services they offer having experienced major cuts to their budgets.

If you don't act NOW expect more NHS cuts in Mid Essex which WILL affect you AND your nearest and dearest."

There is a warning of what will inevitably happen if you don't do something about it now: "MORE CUTS, MORE GP SURGERIES CLOSING, and LONGER WAITS."

So ... 'go to the e-petition at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/110663> and vote. Don't forget to click on the link that is sent to your email address directly following your registration (which is quick and easy). And please remember to pass on the link by e-mail, facebook, Twitter etc to all your friends and relatives and workmates in Mid Essex ... as well as to any clubs, schools, or other organisations to which you belong.'

I can add to the warning given above that the three independent practices in SWF (Kingsway, Brickfields and Greenwood) are not immune to what is going on elsewhere in Mid Essex ... far from it! All are under severe financial pressure – and all have written to NHS England to ask for help. If you petition for more funds for Mid Essex – we don't want any more than anyone else, all we are asking for is a fair deal – will help us, as will dropping a line or sending an email to your practice manager asking what you can do to help.

Dr John