

## A TALL STORY

The late great Eddie Cochran sang about two young men running a race to decide which of them will wed the lovely Miss Lucy.

*"Now Dan had all the money, And he also had the looks,  
But Shorty must have had something, boys, That can't be found in books."*

Shorty was the exception to the rule, according to the BMJ. Being a vertically challenged man is associated with lower chances in life in areas such as education, occupation, and income, as is being an overweight woman. We're told that: "The findings provide the strongest evidence to date that overweight people, especially women, are at a socioeconomic disadvantage – and that taller people, especially men, are at a socioeconomic advantage" and "It is well known that higher socioeconomic status is associated with better health and longer life. In developed countries, being taller and thinner are associated with higher socioeconomic status."

A bunch of researchers from the University of Exeter, decided to look again at the accepted view. They set out to test whether genetic variants influencing height or BMI play a direct (causal) role in socioeconomic status using info on 119,000 individuals aged between 40 and 70. They say: "The results show that shorter height, as estimated by genetics, leads to lower levels of education, lower job status, and less income, particularly in men, and that higher BMI leads to lower income and greater deprivation in women" ... so no change there.

Miss Lucy, however, clearly hasn't been reading the BMJ. She says:

*"Cut across Shorty, Shorty cut across, It's you I wanna wed!"*

## ENJOYING LIFE FOR LONGER

We are living longer – but are paying the price for the 21<sup>st</sup> century lifestyle in that far too many are suffering from avoidable maladies in old age.

Jane Kirby writes in the Independent that "Public Health England (PHE) said evidence shows that living healthily in mid-life can double a person's chances of staying well aged 70 and older." She adds: "Middle-aged Britons are being urged to get off their couches and cut down on unhealthy food as part of a Government-backed drive to make people look after themselves. Stark warnings about the risks of drinking and obesity form part of a new Public Health England campaign, called One You, which has been billed as the biggest national health drive since Change4Life."

The reasons behind the campaign are that about 40 per cent of all deaths in England are related to poor lifestyles, such as smoking, drinking too much and being sedentary. JK also gives a financial rationale for the campaign: "The NHS spends more than £11bn a year on treating illnesses caused by the effects of diet, lack of exercise, smoking and drinking alcohol. The direct cost to the NHS of obesity and people being overweight is estimated to be £6.1bn a year, while lack of exercise costs around £900m a year. Alcohol misuse costs the NHS £3.5bn a year."

So, given that we fund the NHS, we're paying a great deal to try to reduce the damage done by our unhealthy lifestyles and to lessen the pain resulting from preventable diseases. The money could be better spent.

## **AVOIDING ALLERGIC DISEASES**

Allergic and autoimmune diseases have increased in prevalence in many countries and are leading causes of chronic illness among young people. The BMJ tells us that: "Evidence suggests that early dietary exposures in infancy, such as intact cows' milk protein in the form of infant formula, can increase the risk of these diseases. Current infant feeding guidelines, including those in North America, Australasia, and Europe, recommend hydrolysed cows' milk formula, in place of standard infant formula, to prevent such diseases in infants during the first months of life. However, Robert Boyle at Imperial College London and colleagues have found no consistent evidence that partially or extensively hydrolysed milk formula prevents allergic or autoimmune diseases in infants."

They looked at data on 19,000 participants, undertaken between 1946-2015 ... including common allergic conditions, such as asthma, eczema, allergic rhinitis and/or conjunctivitis, food allergy and allergic sensitisation, and the autoimmune disease type 1 diabetes. They conclude: ""We found no consistent evidence to support a protective role for partially or extensively hydrolysed formula."

Despite a lack of evidence in their favour, experts from the University of Melbourne point out that these formulas are still recommended. This has a downside, however ... "They explain that this can unwittingly undermine efforts to promote breastfeeding and attempts to conduct more definitive research on this issue, and hinders efforts by formula producers to improve products. They conclude: "It is now time for this evidence to be used for updating and clarifying current recommendations and guidelines."

I asked a young mum who had chosen to breastfeed her child why, despite the weight of evidence, so many mothers are choosing to bottle feed their kids. She said that one factor was disapproval. For example it's taboo to breastfeed your child in some coffee shops. Perhaps the 'breastfeeding friendly' ones should put a notice on the door – they may even attract more business.

## **RUGBY INJURIES**

Lucy Sherriff writes in The Huffington Post "A row has erupted over whether contact rugby should be banned in schools after a group of more than 70 doctors wrote a letter calling for the government to remove the sport from school. The letter, addressed to ministers, chief medical officers and commissioners and published on Wednesday, said students should play touch rugby as tackling and scrums pose a risk of injury. Fractures, concussions, spinal and head injuries are among the consequences of under-18s playing the contact sport, with the health experts saying the conditions can have "short-term, life-long, and life-ending consequences for children". "The majority of all injuries occur during contact or collision, such as the tackle and the scrum," the letter read. "A link has been found between repeat concussions and cognitive impairment and an association with depression, memory loss and diminished verbal abilities, as well as longer term problems." They add that "Children take longer to recover to normal levels on measures of memory, reaction speed and post-concussive symptoms than adults."

Needless to say rugby professionals have rejected the calls for the ban. This is not the first time the medical profession has been involved in this sort of campaign. In the past the BMA has called for

an outright ban on boxing, including mixed martial arts. There is a point – these are ‘dangerous sports’ – but, providing people know the risks they run, let’s not forget the benefits. Indulging in a sport in which there is a little bit of risk is probably a whole lot safer in the long term than sitting at home in an armchair eating chips.

Here’s a risk you probably haven’t thought about. The BMJ (can’t get enough of the BMJ this week) tells us about “Unusual sporting injuries in young rugby players”. It goes on to say that acetabular fractures affect the socket of the hip bone, and are generally sustained after violent trauma, such as road traffic accidents. “But a group of doctors in Ireland describe these injuries in three young rugby players and say ‘we have not previously encountered these injuries in a juvenile sporting population’”

The injuries were sustained while playing rugby union. All four injuries occurred during the tackle phase of play, and occurred as a result of pressure exerted through a flexed hip with the knee on the ground. This position can be encountered during a two man tackle, as one tackler hits low and the other hits high. Three of these fractures occurred along with hip dislocations.

All the boys involved in the most recent report recovered following surgery and rehabilitation, without any major implications. There is a word of warning, however: “These injuries can have a potentially devastating impact on growth, sporting participation and lifestyle of young players.”

"In order to prevent the potentially devastating consequences of these injuries it may be necessary to implement rule changes or size restrictions in the juvenile game," say the doctors. Players may be of the same age, but can be different in size and stage of development. This is associated with an increased injury risk, they explain, adding to the problems linked with excessive force in an immature skeleton. “An evaluation of the rules at the breakdown and an emphasis on proper tackling could aid injury prevention," they explain.

## **POPPERS**

A 52-year-old man developed distorted vision after inhaling poppers for the first time – "on hospital admission he had been experiencing 10 days of blurring in his central vision and metamorphopsia, (a type of vision problem where the shape of objects seen are distorted). These problems were experienced immediately after a night of clubbing, during which he inhaled poppers", says the BMJ.

An examination revealed clear-cut evidence of damage to the retina. Doctors advised the man to stop taking the drugs, and after three months there was marginal improvement in his vision.

In the past there have only been a few published cases of poppers causing vision loss and damage, but “the actual incidence is likely to be much higher.” Disease progression can be prevented by stopping the use of these drugs, but recovery is variable.

Poppers are legal highs regularly used for their euphoric effects. If there are unintended consequences (such as damage to your vision) that seems a high price to pay for a transient beneficial effect. If I was offering to write you up for a drug and said in passing: "By the way, this can damage your vision" my guess is that you might politely decline.

## **Dr John**