

**9 February 2015**

## **AN EASY WAY TO CREATE MORE GP APPOINTMENTS**

Older GPs are retiring in droves to escape the 'perfect storm' that is battering general practice at present. Young docs are either not becoming GPs in the first place – there's a serious dearth of new blood – or looking seriously at emigration. (Australia seems to be the principle beneficiary.) Even well funded practices in pleasant areas are having difficulty in recruiting suitable docs to replace those nearing retirement and, as with the nursing profession, there is a need to recruit abroad. Doctor's appointments have been one of the casualties of this situation – so we need patients to help us provide as many as possible. The Telegraph recently ran an article which told us that “hundreds of surgeries are facing closure” - and in which an MP (John Howell) claimed that many surgeries are losing the equivalent of a doctor a week to patients who miss appointments. Presumably he includes those who call 20 minutes before their appointment is due to say they can't make it – it's nice to know this but, needless to say, there is no hope of filling that appointment slot. He says that around 12 million appointments are missed each year and this costs the NHS £160 million annually. As usual the NHS is doing nothing to improve the situation – although some surgeries do take it upon themselves to publish numbers of missed appointments week by week.

The same article (by Laura Donnelly, and Sarah Knapton) goes on to say that this “comes as a report from the Kings Fund accused the Coalition of wasting three years and billions of pounds in restructuring the NHS. The report likens the situation - at a time when demand on the NHS was increasing, and budgets getting tighter - to “rearranging the deckchairs” on the Titanic, instead of navigating past the iceberg.” Nobody was more pleased than yours truly to see the back of the PCTs, which did more harm in Woodham than any other healthcare organisation before or since, wasted shed-loads of cash, and set up discriminatory policies which are with us to this day. That said “The time spent on the restructuring, combined with the costs of making staff redundant – and rehiring some of them – amounted to “billions of pounds” which could otherwise have been spent on patient care.”

Needless to say, the opposition didn't fare any better - the Kings Fund “chief executive also criticised Labour's health policies, suggesting some of the pledges made by shadow health secretary Andy Burnham were “difficult to believe,” and accusing the party of “crying wolf” by claiming the Coalition's plans would result in widespread privatisation.”

What a way to run a health service!

## **MEDS FOR AFRICA**

Remember that any medication you take back to pharmacies is scrapped - that's the rule. So bring your unwanted medication (that's still in date) to Greenwood Surgery. We'll sort through it and send the useful and usable medication off to Africa where it is dearly needed.

## **MEDICAL ADVICE – A FAT LOAD OF GOOD?**

The British Heart Foundation tells us: “All fats are high in calories, so it's important to bear this in mind if you are watching your weight. In terms of your heart, it's important to think

about the type of fat you are eating. Swap saturated fats for unsaturated fats. Too much saturated fat can increase the amount of cholesterol in the blood, which can increase the risk of developing coronary heart disease. Where possible replace saturated fats with small amounts of mono-unsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.”

This is the orthodox view. There have been dissenting voices, however. In 2013, cardiologist Aseem Malhotra wrote in the BMJ: "Scientists universally accept that trans fats - found in many fast foods, bakery products, and margarines - increase the risk of cardiovascular disease through inflammatory processes. But 'saturated fat' is another story. The mantra that saturated fat must be removed to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease has dominated dietary advice and guidelines for almost four decades. Yet scientific evidence shows that this advice has, paradoxically, increased our cardiovascular risks.” He concludes: It’s perhaps instructive to note after a 2 year review of 16,000 studies Sweden has just become the first western nation to reject the 'low fat' dietary dogma advocating a diet that is high fat and low in refined carbohydrates as the best for cholesterol profile and weight loss. Promoting a Mediterranean diet to reduce CVD risk and cognitive decline whilst simultaneously reducing population processed food and added sugar intake (which unlike fat and protein has no nutritional value) is the single dietary contributor to dental caries, and is driving the diseases of the metabolic syndrome may offer the best dietary solution to improving public health”.

In The Guardian, Robert Lustig, paediatric endocrinologist at the University of San Francisco and author of Fat Chance: The Bitter Truth about Sugar, supported Malhotra's view: "Food should confer wellness, not illness. Real food does just that, including saturated fat. But when saturated fat got mixed up with the high sugar added to processed food in the second half of the 20th century, it got a bad name." And sugar is still very much in the firing line when it comes to singling out the principle causes of ill health.

Then in 2014, Nadia Kounang reported for CNN: “For the past four decades, we've been told to stay away from red meat, dairy and cheese - foods high in saturated fats - because saturated fat is bad for the heart.” But NK went on to point out that investigative reporter Nina Teicholz, author of the book entitled 'The Big Fat Surprise', disagrees. "When the dietary recommendations came out in 1961 saying that saturated fat causes heart disease, that was based on total cholesterol," Teicholz said. "But our understanding of heart disease has evolved enormously." She said the science condemning saturated fats just isn't there.

In the article, Teicholz explains the origin of the idea. In 1950s when America was in the throes of the heart disease epidemic "Dr. Ancel Keys, a scientist at the University of Minnesota, embarked on the landmark 'Seven Countries' study that examined the correlation between cholesterol and heart disease in nearly 13,000 men. What Keys found would become the basis for the nutritional guidelines that we have today: that countries with diets high in saturated fats had higher rates of heart disease. There were other ideas at the time, but Ancel Keys got that idea and planted it into the American Heart Association... and it's like, the rest is really history from there." But Teicholz pointed out a major flaw in the hypothesis – it's never been tested.

Kounang points out another stumbling block originally flagged up by Teicholz and other critics: “Keys cherry-picked the seven countries he visited: the United States, the Netherlands, Finland, Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece and Japan. Noticeably absent? Countries well known for their rich fatty foods but without high rates of heart disease, like Switzerland, Sweden and West Germany." The result, according to Teicholz has been:

“We've decreased the amount of fat we eat and shifted over. In the last 30 years we've decreased our saturated fat consumption by 11%, increased carbohydrates by 25%.” And sugar, according to some nutritionists, is the main reason for obesity in America.”

Rod Jackson, a professor of epidemiology, wrote an article published in the New Zealand Herald, in which he urges that these ideas should be viewed with caution: “Teicholz tells us she has no conflicts of interest, although a book entitled 'Shock, Horror, the Scientists were Right - Saturated Fat is an Important Cause of Heart Disease' wouldn't sell many copies. However, in addition to mixing up good and bad fats, every one of these books and articles glosses over or ignores one big, fat embarrassing fact. Heart disease rates have been plummeting across the developed world, with the greatest declines in countries like New Zealand - countries where saturated fat consumption used to be among the world's highest but has plummeted after people switched from butter, full cream milk and dripping to margarine, low-fat milks and vegetable oils, and from fatty red meat to lean red meat and chicken.”

This week, Jenny Hope writes in the Mail: “Guidelines that told millions of people to avoid butter and full-fat milk should never have been introduced, say experts. The experts say the advice from 1983, aimed at reducing deaths from heart disease, lacked any solid trial evidence to back it up ... However, now some scientists even say the advice is responsible – in part – for the obesity crisis because it encouraged an increase in carbohydrate in our diets.” The news is that: “A new review says evidence from trials did not support the advice. It says it is ‘incomprehensible’ that such advice was introduced for 56million Britons in 1983 and 220million Americans six years earlier ‘given the contrary results from a small number of unhealthy men’.” This 'new review' bases its conclusions on trial data that was available at the time the guidelines were introduced.

So far the case against saturated fats looks pretty strong. In fairness, though, Jenny Hope puts the other side of the argument: “Many public health and nutrition scientists criticised the conclusions of the review in the online BMJ journal Open Heart, saying wider evidence at the time and since has justified the advice and heart deaths have fallen dramatically.” She interviewed Prof Tom Sanders, of King's College London, who said that, in the 1970-80s, the UK and other Western countries were facing an epidemic of coronary heart disease. He said: “It was effectively a policy choice between sitting on the fence and doing nothing or opting to follow what the evidence suggested – that cutting total fat intake would help prevent obesity and reducing saturated fat would lower blood cholesterol. Anyway it seems to have turned out okay... between 1997 and 2007/8 cardiovascular disease mortality under the age of 75 years fell by 55 per cent.”

So the conclusion from all this seems to be: “Trans fats (found in biscuits and the like) are BAD ... as is sugar. Indeed there is now a view widely held by art historians that the subject of Edvard Munch's painting, 'The Scream', had just been told by his doctor that he mustn't eat any more Custard Creams (as they contain both sugar and Trans fats). Saturated fats are, seemingly, not quite as bad as we thought they were ... but (as with all these front page stories) let's wait for the dust to settle. In the fullness of time a consensus view will emerge.

**Dr John Cormack**