

## Masala

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Broken noses occur with a frequency of 2 per 4350 bouts, according to the British Boxing Board of Control. But if you are a cadet at the National Defence Academy, Pune you are more likely to get a crooked nose. This could be because of poor quality boxing gloves or the increase in the duration of bouts from 6 to 10 minutes in 1997. Unlike nasal fractures, septal injuries are not seen on X-rays nor classified as 'grievous'. Hence, they are referred late to the ENT specialist, a practice that should change, say the authors (*Indian J Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg* 2000;**52**:357–9).

How about bilateral prophylactic mastectomy to reduce the anxiety caused by fear of breast cancer? Doctors in London did just that in 79 of over 150 women identified as having a high risk of breast cancer on the basis of genetic studies and family history. The mastectomies resulted in considerable psychological benefits compared to the women who declined surgery (*BMJ* 2001;**322**:76–9).

Antiepileptic drugs are first 'tried' on adults and the results extrapolated to children. This is hardly scientific, more so because epilepsy syndromes are age-specific and what happens in adults may not happen in children. Stiripentol, another add-on antiepileptic drug, was found to be effective in severe myoclonic epilepsy of infancy (a condition difficult to treat) in a French randomized controlled trial (*Lancet* 2000;**356**:1638–42). The trial was designed to evaluate the drug in infants. Is it time for clinicians to extrapolate the findings to adults?

A sore throat due to streptococcal infection needs aggressive treatment with antibiotics, usually penicillin. How does one find out whether an everyday sore throat is due to streptococcal infection or something mundane? A scoring system based on clinical features (fever without cough, tender anterior neck glands, tonsillar swelling or exudates in a child under 15 years of age) has been found to be predictive in a meta-analysis reported in *JAMA* (2000;**284**:2912–18). Its value in real-life situations, however, was not tested.

Patients with post-herpetic neuralgia spend sleepless nights due to the pain they suffer. Thus, any treatment is welcomed by them. Japanese researchers used weekly intrathecal methylprednisolone and lidocaine for 4 weeks in a randomized controlled trial involving 277 patients (*N Engl J Med* 2000;**343**:1514–19). No complications occurred and 90% of the patients had long lasting improvement as compared to the other groups, one of which was given only lidocaine, and the other nothing. Giving 'nothing' was possible because the levels of interleukin-8 were tested in the cerebrospinal fluid of all of them. These levels dropped by half in those who received methylprednisolone.

Cystic fibrosis is the commonest autosomal recessive illness in white children with an incidence of 1 in 3000, and most patients die by the age of 30 years. A screening programme in France, which lasted for 10 years, detected 118 cases among more than 300 000 neonates screened (*Lancet* 2000;**356**:789–94). The

researchers then screened the parents and offered prenatal diagnosis for subsequent pregnancies. Eighteen affected foetuses were identified and their parents opted for termination. The cost of screening was US\$ 2.32 per test—equivalent to US\$ 6825 per case detected.

Extracts of *Ginkgo biloba* do not work in tinnitus, finds a randomized controlled trial on nearly 1000 patients in Britain (*BMJ* 2001;**322**:73–5). The extracts are commonly available in health food stores in the West and it is one of the top ten selling herbs in the USA. Self-medication for a variety of conditions including tinnitus is well known. Good to know that traditional herbal remedies are being subjected to the scrutiny of modern medicine.

Only breast milk is best for infants up to the age of 5 months, but who should be telling mothers that? Community-based peer counsellors were very effective in increasing breast-feeding rates in Dhaka, Bangladesh, according to a randomized controlled trial (*Lancet* 2000;**356**:1643–7). Only 6% of mothers exclusively breast-fed their child at 5 months in the control group compared to 70% in the intervention group. Peer counsellors were local mothers who received training for 10 days and US\$ 22.50 a month. Interestingly, although the counsellors enjoyed their job, they counselled only as long as they were being paid.

What if a woman is unknowingly pregnant when she comes for sterilization? As it is impossible to convince the woman later that the pregnancy occurred before sterilization, litigation could follow. The best option would be to do a pregnancy test on all women who come in for sterilization on the day of the operation. This is what doctors in Liverpool, England did in over 800 patients and found that 21 were pregnant. Certainly a wake-up call for those of us who do tubectomies (*Br J Obstet Gynecol* 2000;**107**:1407–9).

Smoking is bad for everyone and more so for pregnant women. However, a retrospective, case-controlled study from Norway finds that smoking is not a risk factor for pre-eclampsia. They identified previous pre-eclampsia, nulliparity and hypertension as risk factors. High maternal weight was a risk factor for mild pre-eclampsia. The lack of association between smoking and pre-eclampsia may be spurious, state the authors, because smokers are prone to have premature deliveries reducing the chances of pre-eclampsia later (*Br J Obstet Gynecol* 2000;**107**:1410–16).

After *JAMA* (referred to in Masala, *Natl Med J India* 2000;**13**:279) it is *N Engl J Med* (2000;**343**:1520–8) that has published a study funded by a drug manufacturing company on the advantages of a cox-2 inhibitor (rofecoxib) over naproxen in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. The rofecoxib group had significantly fewer gastrointestinal complications but similar efficacy. We are likely to see more such studies where competing interests are declared clearly to the readers.

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