Occupational eye injury is an important cause of blindness. Researchers from St John’s Medical College, Bangalore retrospectively reviewed 43 patients during 1994–98 (Indian J Ophthalmol 2001;49:43–7). Nearly 80% of them were young men and most of them were industrial workers. At the time of injury, 76.6% were not wearing the recommended protective eyewear and nearly 15% were under the influence of alcohol. At the end of six months, 67.4% had a vision of less than 6/60 and only those patients using protective eyewear had a good or fair outcome.

A retrospective analysis of death certificate data on almost 250 women of reproductive age in the state of Maryland, USA during 1993–98 (JAMA 2001;285:1455–9) found that homicide was the leading cause of pregnancy-associated death (20%) followed by cardiovascular disorders. An accompanying editorial points out that homicide was the fifth leading cause of death in non-pregnant women during the same period and suggests broadening the definition of pregnancy mortality. The American College of Obesitarians and Gynaecologists felt that the WHO definition of maternal death (within 42 days of delivery) was too restrictive. They, therefore, introduced the term ‘pregnancy-associated death’ to include death from any cause during pregnancy or within one year of termination of pregnancy.

Malaria is a huge problem in developing countries. Roll Back Malaria, a global campaign to halve the malaria burden by 2010, was launched 3 years ago. An editorial in the BMJ (2001;322:1191–2) points out that the campaign has not yet had the expected impact despite the impressive partnership of the United Nations, development agencies, governments of different countries, the private sector, researchers and non-governmental organizations. Fund disbursement has been a major stumbling block. The problem with huge global partnerships is that they end up being accountable to nobody.

More patients with AIDS are surviving longer now than ever before, according to researchers from the Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, due to new multi-drug regimens. They studied nearly 400 000 patients of AIDS from 1984 to 1997 (JAMA 2001;285:1308–15). The greatest one-year increase in median survival was from 21 months in 1994 to 46 months in 1995 for persons diagnosed with an opportunistic illness.

Accident victims would be better off in centres handling a large volume of patients with polytrauma. A multicentre retrospective study on nearly 1000 patients with severe trauma found that the relative odds of death were 0.02 for patients admitted with penetrating abdominal injury and shock at high-volume centres (> 650 trauma admissions per year) compared to others. The odds of death for patients with multisystem blunt trauma in coma were 0.49 when admitted to these centres. The length of hospital stay was also significantly lower in all the patients (JAMA 2001;285:1164–71). Unfortunately, not all accidents occur in the vicinity of such centres.

Atherosclerosis is now considered an inflammatory disease and interleukin-6 an important mediator. A German survey of nearly 800 men and 1000 women confirms that non-drinkers and heavy drinkers have a higher cardiovascular mortality. Drinking moderate amounts of alcohol (approximately 40 g of ethanol daily) inhibits production of interleukin-6 (Lancet 2001;357:763–7). The chef always believed that drinking moderate amounts of alcohol was good for his health (all along suspecting that he is not alone!)

Obesity predisposes you to hypertension and if you are obese you are better off losing weight even if you regain it. Over 1000 overweight Americans with an untreated diastolic blood pressure of up to 89 mmHg and systolic blood pressure of up to 140 mmHg were studied in the Trials Of Hypertension Prevention (TOHP) (Ann Intern Med 2001;134:1–11). The patients were divided into two groups, one assigned to weight loss and the other to usual care. Participants who lost at least 4.5 kg and sustained this decrease had the greatest reduction in blood pressure at 36 months. Participants who initially lost weight and subsequently regained it also had a lower blood pressure at three years.

If I had a chronic illness, I hope my colleagues would be kind to me. Unfortunately, this is a rare experience. The British Medical Association has taken the lead in helping such doctors with its stress counselling services, and has set up a joint project on the web with the BMJ called the Career Focus Chronic Illness Matching Scheme. It provides an opportunity for doctors with chronic illnesses to receive career advice from experts (BMJ 2001;322:1136–7).

Women using a barrier method of contraception had a higher return to fertility as compared to users of other methods. Over 1000 nulliparous women were studied in Oxford during 1982–85 and followed up till 1994 (Br J Obstet Gynaecol 2001;108:304–14). At 12 months after stopping contraception, return of fertility was the lowest among women taking oral contraceptives (32% had given birth), highest among those using a barrier method (54% had given birth) and intermediate for those using an intrauterine device (39% had given birth). Alarmingly, the study also found that fertility was markedly impaired when an intrauterine device was used by nulliparous women for more than six or seven years.

Caring for dying children and their families is a huge responsibility. Experienced physicians tend to handle these issues more sensitively. More than 100 physicians and nearly 100 nurses in 31 paediatric hospitals in the USA participated in a study regarding end-of-life care in paediatric intensive care units. The majority of health care personnel expressed views in strong agreement with the consensus on issues such as sedation, analgesia, and withholding and withdrawing life support. Clinicians with fewer years of experience were more likely to be erroneously aggressive in their approach (Crit Care Med 2001;29:658–64).

A high index of clinical suspicion is needed to diagnose Addison’s disease. Researchers from Srinagar in Kashmir retrospectively reviewed 142 patients with suspected Addison’s disease over a 12-year period. Sixty-six patients were confirmed to have the disease. They concluded that a combination of three or more signs and symptoms including postural hypotension had the highest predictive value (J Assoc Physicians India 2001;49:523–6).

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