LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Maternal diet and atopic eczema

I read with great interest the findings of Burr et al1 on the environmental factors and symptoms in infants at high risk of allergy. They have studied an exhaustive list of environmental factors. I would like to draw the attention of the authors to the role of mother’s diet during lactation on the development of atopic eczema in high risk infants.

Ranjit Kumar Chandra et al2 in their prospective randomised control trial showed that eczema was less common and milder in babies who were breast fed and whose mothers were on a restricted diet (exclusion of milk and other dairy products, eggs, fish, peanuts and soya beans). The omission of this variable of mother’s diet may lead to some amount of confounding bias in studying the association of breast feeding and development of atopic eczema. Burr et al have recommended a few precautions for mothers with the family history of eczema who breast feed their children. Based on our present knowledge regarding the role of mother’s diet during lactation these mothers should be advised to avoid allergenic food during lactation. Obviously the nutritional state of the mother should be closely monitored and she should be given professional dietary advice.


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The authors reply as follows:

I agree with Dr BadrINATH that the trial by Chandra et al shows that the incidence and severity of eczema in breast fed infants can be reduced if their mothers avoid certain foods. In our study the lactating mothers in the intervention group were advised to restrict their intake of milk to 1 pint (284 ml) daily, but we otherwise did not restrict their diet.

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Could natural killer cell activity be linked to the reduced incidence of cancer in schizophrenic patients?

In a recent issue of your journal (Vol 43: 43–7), Dr P B Mortensen reported on his findings of alterations in the incidence of cancer among schizophrenic patients.1 Of particular interest was his finding of the reduced risk of cancer among male patients in general, and reduced risk of certain types of cancer among females. Dr Mortensen very eloquently described a number of possible explanations for these findings, including: differences in lifestyle practices, altered exposure to carcinogens, reduced sexual activity of hospitalised female patients, and possible inhibition of tumour growth by neuroleptic medication.

I would like to suggest an additional explanation linked to possible intrinsic immune differences between schizophrenic patients compared to the general population. Wang et al3 have reported increased natural killer activity (NKA) in a group of forty non-medicated schizophrenic patients in comparison to matched controls.4 Natural killer cells are a type of non-B, non-T lymphocyte which directly attack and destroy tumour cells.5 An increase in NKA could play a role in protecting these individuals from neoplasia. DeLisi et al tested this hypothesis in 1985 by studying NKA in a group of schizophrenic patients. They found the mean NKA similar to controls; however, their results were difficult to interpret as the majority of subjects were medicated at the time of evaluation. Through Dr Mortensen’s points out that neuroleptics have been reported to inhibit tumour growth in animal experiments, they have also been shown to impair immune function by decreasing lymphocyte mitogen stimulation and NKA.6 Therefore the findings of Wang et al may more accurately reflect the status of NKA in schizophrenic patients.

As future psychoimmunological investigations study this patient population, perhaps research findings will further elucidate possible explanations for the reduced incidence of cancer among schizophrenic patients.

2. Wang QD. Preliminary study on natural killer cell activity in peripheral blood lymphocytes of schizophrenic patients. Chin J Neurol Psychiatry 1987; 20: 46–56

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BOOK REVIEWS

Social Dilemmas in Cancer Prevention.

There is little doubt that if the incidence of cancer in a local community might be drastically reduced by employment of a public health physician continuously to wave a magic wand, the career opportunities, prestige and even remuneration of such doctors would be immeasurably better than they are limited to. Yet, in many of our communities get from the public health physicians they employ is advice about smoking, drinking, diet and sexual activity, and the need to subject selected individuals from within the community to regular examinations of an uncomfortable and embarrassing nature.

This little volume examines very many of the issues relating to the screening of the general population, and to some extent, to individuals, in health services. The authors have drawn on the range of experts and professionals who are available, of their experience as health visitors and general practitioners, and of the available literature.

Almost every chapter stands alone and can be read by any interested reader. The first chapter, by Mark Chandra, examines many of the philosophical and moral questions raised by screening. He suggests that health services must redefine the roles of the health visitor and private practitioner, and introduces the reader to the idea of a "health promotion" approach to preventive medicine. The second chapter, by Dr J. A. Mortensen, examines the screening of cancer among women. There is much discussion of the screening of breast cancer, and, as this author is familiar with the screening of cervical cancer, there is a particular emphasis on this disease. The chapters by Brincum and by A. W. S. Man, discussing cancers of the colon and rectum, are also thoughtful and carefully argued. The final chapter, by Professor A. J. R. Smith, discusses the screening of cancer among men. There is a good deal of discussion of the epidemiology of cancer, and of the treatment of cancer, in addition to a discussion of the screening of prostate cancer.

The book is primarily intended for health visitors and primary care physicians, but it will also be of interest to all health professionals who are involved in the practice of preventive medicine. It is a valuable contribution to the literature on health services, and should be read by all who are interested in the practice of preventive medicine.

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Until recently, child health surveillance has been in some disarray. Responsibility for the service has been divided among general practitioners, health visitors and specialist medical officers; there has been little agreement about the tests that should be performed, by whom and when; and, perhaps reflecting this diversity of approach, remarkably little evidence has come to light about the advantages accruing to children who are screened regularly in the preschool years.

A measure of order began to emerge in 1989 with the publication of two important documents. The first was the report of the Joint Working Party on Child Health Surveillance, Health for Children. Reflecting the interests of the Health Visitors’