**Vitamin A - Important or Impotent?**

The most pernicious way of harming a cause (said Nietzsche) consists of defending it deliberately with faulty arguments. And what is true and what is not, in the unfolding saga of vitamin A supplementation, needs more examination. A gargantuan study was conducted on 1 million Indian children in Uttar Pradesh between 1999 and 2004. Half were given vitamin A and half were not. The death rates over five years were similar in the two groups (24.9 vs. 26 per 1000, respectively). Richard Peto, Professor of epidemiology in Oxford and a study coordinator admits to being flummoxed at the insignificant difference in the two groups. The study however, is yet to be published in a peer reviewed journal.

Vitamin A prophylaxis program started in 1970, as a short term measure to prevent childhood blindness. Then some thirty years ago, Scrimshaw, *et al.* documented the link between vitamin A deficiency and infections. The subsequent Indonesian interventional trial where 6 monthly supplements of vitamin A showed a 34% reduction in overall mortality, set the stage for a major role of vitamin A in public health arsenals. Results from different countries have been variable but a meta-analysis of 8 interventional trials have shown an overall mortality reduction of 23%. Now the new data from Uttar Pradesh is forcing policy makers and thinkers to wonder whether we need to relook the vitamin A prophylaxis program and do fresh cost benefit analysis studies (*The Telegraph, 19 April 2008*).

**Deaths after Measles Vaccine**

Four infants died within 15 to 20 minutes of measles vaccination in Tamil Nadu in the last week of April 2008. Another 20,000 children, vaccinated with the same drug, were unaffected. The Government has recalled 4 million doses of the vaccine manufactured at Indian Immunologicals Limited, Hyderabad. Vaccine samples have been sent to a national laboratory for testing and a team of experts is studying how the vaccine was stored and administered. The Tamil Nadu Government has temporarily suspended its measles immunization program ([http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20080425/ hl_afp/healthindiaavaccinemeasles, 25 April](http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20080425/hl_afp/healthindiaavaccinemeasles)).

**Hand Foot and Mouth Disease**

Hand foot and mouth disease (HFMD) caused by Enterovirus 71 has been reported in more than 20,000 children in 4 South East Asian countries (China, Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong) in the last 3 months. There have been around 40 deaths and India is on high alert to possible infections. Disease presents with fever, sore throat, oral ulcers and rash. Complications include dehydration due to lack of oral intake, viral meningitis and encephalitis. According to Dr Shiv Lal, the Director of The National Institute of Communicable Diseases, the EV-71 was last isolated in India from a boy in Haryana but there was no casualty or outbreak. “Under the Integrated Disease Surveillance Program, a national toll-free number 1075 has been in service. Healthcare workers noticing unusual fever cases or rashes in children can call and inform experts,” Dr Lal said (*The Times of India, 8 May 2008*).

**Future Call**

We are surrounded by electromagnetic clutter from a miscellany of electronic devices. India is the fastest growing mobile phone markets in the world. There are 263.23 million mobile phone connections as of April 2008. The moot question is whether electromagnetic radiation affects mental behavior when transmitting at appropriate frequencies. Two recent studies seem to suggest they definitely do.

Rodney Croft from Swinberg University of Technology, Australia connected a Nokia 6110 cell phone to the heads of 120 healthy adults. A remote computer intermittently put it in transmission mode or idle mode without awareness of the subjects. EEG data revealed that whenever the phone is transmitting, the alpha waves are boosted.
significantly. The increase was greatest just below the position of the cell phone which strengthens association of cell phone transmission and EEG wave alterations.

The second study was from Horne, *et al.* in Loughborough University, England. They connected a Nokia 6310e cell phone to the heads of 10 sleep deprived adults. Again a remote control computer switched the phones from idle to talk to standby modes for different periods. They found that after the talk mode was switched off, the delta waves remained dampened for more than an hour. The study subjects also had difficulty in going back to sleep for twice as long as controls. Obviously cell phone transmissions affect brain waves and also behavior. Health worries apart, scientists are excited to see whether different doses, durations and frequencies can be used to modulate brain behavior to our requirements. In mankind’s tumultuous history, it is always imagination which links the present to the future (*Scientific American*, 7 May 2008).

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**BOOK REVIEW**

**Understanding of Autism.** *Editor: Shabina Ahmed.*

Autism is one of the five pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), the others being Aspergers syndrome, Retts syndrome, Childhood disintegrative disorder and Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). To confound the issue of terminology further, Autism, Aspergers syndrome and PDD-NOS are together termed the Autism Spectrum Disorders.

This pocket size multi-author book has successfully brought order to this chaos. The authors have made a genuine attempt to guide the reader through the spectrum, revealing the mentally disabled child locked into a world of silence, rocking himself for solace to the socially impaired individual who has narrow interests.

All the chapters are written with a commitment. The historical note in the first chapter is followed by the clinical features and diagnosis in the next three. The chapter on neurobiology gives a panoramic view of the neurobiological theories offered by various workers in the field; and towards the end the author has coined a new name worth mention “Developmental communication dysfunction” to spare the child the stigma associated with the term “Autism”.

The discourse in the next chapter on plasticity of the brain is simplification of a complex concept done near perfection.

The boxed information and tables makes comprehension easy; however the book needs more meticulous editing in the next edition to correct errors in the use of punctuation marks, capital letters and grammar. Easy reading and reasonable price are positive features.

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