‘The prospect that vitamin pills may not only do no good but also kill their consumers is a scary speculation given the vast quantities that are used in certain communities.’ This quote from an article in *The Lancet* caught my eye — it was meant to — as it was on the cover of the journal. The vitamin and supplement market is enormous and, in many places, largely unregulated. The recent announcement by our Ministry of Health that they are to start some form of regulation of supplements and alternative and complementary medicines has brought the usual outcry from those who believe that anything ‘natural’ is safe and that people should be allowed to take what they want unfettered by rules and regulations. They may have a point in some instances. I understand that these new regulations will apply to powdered drink supplements such as Ensure and other similar products, which is probably going a bit too far. However, in the light of the hugely successful marketing around vitamins and other supplements, few of which have any proven worth, I am delighted to see some effort to control the purveyors of snake oil.

Antioxidants are heavily touted by the lay press and the people who market them as supplements as the cure-all for many ills, particularly cancer. Looking at the physiology and biochemistry behind the idea, it is intuitively appealing. Oxidative stress does seem to play a large role in many illnesses and it would make sense that something with antioxidant properties could prevent this. However, randomised trials set up to study prevention of lung cancer showed that beta-carotene actually increased the risk of cancer and a trial in patients with a high risk of cardiovascular disease showed no benefit after 5 years. A similar trial of antioxidants in gastrointestinal cancer also suggests that, at best, there is no beneficial effect of antioxidants and at worst, that they are positively harmful.

However, we are still exhorted to eat large quantities of fruit and vegetables for their health-giving (antioxidant) properties and I do feel that a simple, well-balanced diet is probably the start of a sensible approach to good health. But, the very people who are worried about the snake oil vendors are in danger of pushing something that has about as much clinical evidence for efficacy as a certain antioxidant supplement that gets double-page spreads in nearly every magazine I pick up these days. Where did the idea of 5 servings a day of fruit and vegetables come from? There is certainly reasonable evidence that the so-called Mediterranean diet seems to decrease the incidence of heart disease and cancers in those populations who have grown up on it. But there are many possible confounding factors. I used to spend a lot of time in Greece. It is more than a simple matter of 5 servings a day of fruit and vegetables. These people live on vegetables and fruit, eating more than a kilogram a day as a matter of course. The effects of olive oil are also possibly important. But to go from this to a widely disseminated recommendation, coming from some of the most respected medical and regulatory institutions in the world, is something else.

Yes, the rising incidence of obesity is a concern, as is the general trend towards eating processed foods, not least for the demise of the large and varied fruit and vegetable markets that we sadly lack in urban South Africa. But perhaps we should stop putting out formulaic messages and instead urge people simply to live better. A balanced diet that is not too high in calories, along with a moderate level of physical exercise, is probably all that is needed to keep quality of life well into old age — at which time of course cancers and heart disease will start to appear. After all, we have to die of something!

Bridget Farham

---

**ERRATUM**

We apologise for the unfortunate transposition of questions in the October 2004 edition of *CME*.

• Question 16 refers to the article ‘Social anxiety disorder in youth’.
• Question 17 refers to the article ‘Cognitive behaviour therapy for patients with generalised anxiety disorder’.
• Question 18 refers to the article ‘Anxiety disorders and quality of life’.

We will make the necessary adjustments on the CPD form when it arrives and anyone who has already sent in their answer will be credited with the correct answer to these questions.