

nature

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Every cow carries a government health warning

CORONARY heart disease (CHD) is a major cause of death in middle and old age in the UK and many other western countries. For instance, in the age range 45–54 years, 39% of all male deaths and 12% of all female deaths are from CHD. Since 1950 death rates from CHD have increased consistently for men; the death rate is 60% higher in that same age range now than it was 25 years ago. Strangely, there is no evidence of a similar trend for women.

In the light of these and similar figures many countries have looked at ways in which the incidence of CHD might be reduced. A working party of the Royal College of Physicians of London and the British Cardiac Society has just issued the latest assessment, which will be distributed widely to general practitioners (*Journal of the Royal College of Physicians*, 10, 213–275). It deserves to be read by scientists too, not just for the factual content but also as an example of a rather good blend of science and commonsense.

The report comes out unambiguously against major investment in more after-the-fact services which “cannot hope to achieve a major reduction in the overall burden of CHD in the community”. Preventive measures against a disease with palpable environmental factors are, however, spelt out in considerable detail. They include stopping smoking, monitoring blood pressure whenever possible, changing diet and increasing physical activity (including “getting breathless some time every day”). Probably the most controversial of these suggestions, all of which have been floating around for a long time, is the fairly explicit talk of dietary adjustments. The recommendations are made, the report says, because plasma lipid levels in the UK indicate a population generally at risk.

Fat in the diet, it is recommended, should be reduced from its present average contribution of 42% of the total calorie intake to around 35%. Saturated fats (which at present constitute half of this contribution) should be particularly reduced, to be replaced in part by polyunsaturated fats. What this means is less meat and egg yolks, more poultry and fish; less butter, more soft margarine high in polyunsaturated fats; corn oil, sunflower oil and safflower oil, not hard margarines and lard; cream and top of the milk are to be avoided, vegetables and fruit encouraged. In fact all that one’s instincts say, except in the case of dairy products.

Readers from overseas, particularly from the United

States and Australia, can be forgiven a certain wry amusement at this point that at last the UK is starting to publicise what has been common knowledge for many years. The word “polyunsaturated”, surely the most scientific word the layman will ever need to take into his vocabulary, was sufficiently well known as early as 1970 for the Massachusetts Heart Association to be distributing leaflets to all homes asking: “Will your children remember your tasty meals, low in saturated fats and cholesterol?”

Why has it not been possible for similar exhortations (perhaps a touch less ham-fisted) to be made in Britain, and why has a major manufacturer of polyunsaturated margarine had till recently to pursue publicity for his product by unconventional means? (Not, it should be said, that it took more than a day after the report’s appearance before perfectly explicit advertisements were appearing.)

Part of the answer may be in genuine scientific doubt, not so much about the role of unsaturated fats in raising plasma cholesterol levels, nor even about the correlation between cholesterol levels and the risk of CHD, but concerning the value of lowering plasma lipid levels by dietary change in trying to reduce CHD. The report itself cautiously concludes that there is “probably sufficient evidence . . . to make dietary recommendations in the hope of affecting a degree of prevention”. Not, it must be admitted, the most gripping of cases.

But it is not the medical science so much as the sacred cow that has held things up. The dairy industry could be hit hard by dietary changes if the nation took them seriously—less meat, less butter, little cream. Small wonder that the issue has been carefully skirted in Whitehall for as long as possible, and small wonder that the National Dairy Council was quickly out fighting.

The publication of this report must not herald the start of some form of public relations war between rival products each of which will doubtless (such is the nature of the scientific literature) be able to marshal cast-iron evidence for its own point of view. The onus is on the Department of Health and Social Security to ensure that knowledge is diffused into the community rather than thrown at the citizen by interested parties. What is needed is a clear statement of the meaning of the scientific words and a relatively low-key assessment of the risks, followed by a requirement that advertisers state the contents of their product simply. □