In the news

DIETING FOR THE LONG TERM

Does eating less fat reduce your risk of cancer? It depends who you ask. A recent study of nearly 50,000 women published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* showed that the overall risk of invasive cancer, and the specific risk of endometrial cancer, were not reduced in women who reduced their fat intake. The journal's website highlighted the paper with these words: "Low-fat diet mostly ineffective in lowering cancer risk for women" (<http://jnci.oxfordjournals.org> 9 October 2007).

However, one result in the paper bucked the trend, and it was this that attracted the mainstream media. Although the hazard ratio for ovarian cancer was not significantly reduced in the dieting individuals and there was no observable benefit in the first 4 years of fat reduction, in the second 4 years the incidence of ovarian cancer dropped to 0.38 per 1,000, compared with 0.64 per 1,000 in the control group. Moreover, "the evidence ... is strongest among women whose usual diet was relatively high in fat (e.g. more than 35 percent of calories) who made a comparatively large fat reduction if assigned to the low-fat diet group," said lead author Ross Prentice (<http://www.washingtonpost.com> 9 October 2007).

The effect might be due to reduced circulating oestrogen, but even though this remains uncertain, there is plenty of optimism. "We're pleased to be able to say something positive to American women that following a low-fat diet is quite likely to reduce their risk of ovarian cancer," said Prentice (<http://www.reuters.com> 9 October 2007). Jacques Rossouw of the National Institutes of Health welcomed the study, but emphasized the importance of perseverance — "This is really good news, but you have to stick with the diet" (<http://www.ap.org> 10 October 2007).

Patrick Goymer