by A. Mark Clarfield, MD

The Holiday Literature: A CRITICAL REVIEW

The holiday season has long been known to be a stressful one for many revelers, involving a (sometimes fatal) combination of free time, exposure to seldom-seen family members, inclement weather, gift-inducing and risk-taking behaviour and alcohol consumption.

To conduct a critical review of the holiday season literature, I carried out a MEDLINE search using the following key words: Christmas, New Year, Chanukah, Hanukkah, Ramadan, alcohol, candles, cookies, red-nose, reindeer, turkey, snow. The search yielded 17,422 citations. All articles in Arabic, Danish, English, French, Hebrew, Hungarian, Scots Gaelic, Swahili and Yiddish were examined with reference to the standard methodologic criteria of Sackett and colleagues. The 5 articles that satisfied the criteria are reviewed here.

An interesting study conducted in Denmark involved 15 volunteers (5 working in the same cactus nursery and 10 controls) who underwent skin-prick testing with 10 common inhalant allergens and with *Pityrosporum ovale* to evaluate occupational type-I allergy to Christmas cactus, known by the euphonious term *Schlumbergera*. The 5 cactus workers all had positive skin-prick reactions to the plants themselves as well as positive histamine-release test results. In fully 60% (3 out of 5), specific IgE to the cacti could be demonstrated by radioallergosorbent testing and immunoblot analysis.

This controlled study also found negative skin-test results in “most” atopic volunteers and negative histamine-release test results in all volunteers. Unfortunately, the study was not randomized, and neither subjects nor examiners were blinded. As well, there was no evidence of research ethics committee authorization. Of greatest concern was the lack of conflict-of-interest disclosures, given that one of the authors may well be of the Christian faith.

One criticism of this nonrandomized and nonblinded study (beyond the use of the nonspecific term “significant”) involved the lack of a standardized red-nose scale such as the one recently offered by Rudolf and collaborators in the *International Journal of Reindeer Studies*.

Examining a more pleasant subject, Charlton and Sawyer-Morse used a seasonally adjusted 9-point “hedonic scale” to rate chocolate chip cookies baked with 1 of 3 fat substitutes (Gerber prune paste, Wonderslim brand fat-and-egg replacement and Oatrim brand fat replacement). A model of its kind, the scale rated each cookie for appearance, surface colour, texture, tenderness, flavour and overall acceptability.

The study involved 93 untrained but randomly selected panelists from a small unnamed college in the American
southwest. The authors concluded that "by purchasing cookies made with the fat replacements considered in this study, consumers can reduce fat consumption by nearly 70%.” The question to which further research must be urgently addressed is whether the consumers enjoyed the cookies less to a proportional degree.

Out of Hungary’s Albert Szent-Györgi Medical University comes a fascinating paper on the effect of chronic alcohol ingestion on myocardial lipid and fatty acid composition in adult turkeys. The study was randomized, although it is not clear if either the investigators or the birds were blinded. Two groups of ten 7-week-old broad-breasted white (Saint?) Nicholas turkeys were studied, the first group of “alcoholic” birds receiving a solution of 3.9 mol • L\(^{-1}\) (18% wt/vol) ethanol in tap water as the only fluid source in the first 16 weeks after hatching. The rest of the diet was “an ideal one,” at least from the point of view of the turkeys. Results were encouraging in that “[s]pontaneous death did not occur during the experimental period.” If one has faith in cross-species extrapolation, this is good news for Homo sapiens who want to substitute alcohol for breast milk for their offspring.

One of the unhappy sequelae of this happy-hour diet for the birds involved cardiomegaly, with dilated atrial and ventricular chambers, and a higher ratio of heart to body weight. Unfortunately, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) levels and HDL–LDL (low-density lipoprotein) ratios were not reported.

In their discussion, the authors cite the suggestion of other authorities that an increased production of free radicals may be associated with the ethanol-induced myocardial lesions found in this work. The obvious next step, which, surprisingly, was not addressed in this paper, would be to randomize alcoholic turkeys into 2 groups, one receiving vitamin E and the other placebo. Perhaps only then will we have some good news for the tippling consumer would be to randomly assign members of the audience to seating in low and high chairs while controlling for age, the memory of the child or grandchild, and the actual and perceived length of the performance. It is sobering to note that of the 17 422 citations examined in this study, only 5 met the rigorous methodologic criteria set for article quality. Perhaps this review will serve to encourage not merely more but better holiday research.

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References

Dr. Clarfield is with the Sarah Herzog Hospital, Jerusalem, and the Division of Geriatric Medicine, Sir Mortimer B. Davis–Jewish General Hospital, McGill University, Montreal, Que.