New Orleans earns fat-cat label

Restaurant-rich New Orleans has the highest rate of adult obesity in the US, the US Coalition for Excess Weight Risk Education says. *American Medical News* reported in April that 37.5% of adult residents in the Louisiana city were obese; the lowest rate, 22.1%, was reported for Denver. Other cities with a weight problem included Norfolk, Virginia (33.9%), and San Antonio, Texas (32.9%); cities at the other end of the scale include Washington (23.8%) and Tampa, Florida (24.9%). Generally, cities with high unemployment, low per-capita income, high annual rates of precipitation and a large number of food stores tended to have higher rates of obesity, the report said.

Pharmacists get no respect!

Physicians are not the only health professionals who feel pressure from the public to produce a pill for every ill. An unnamed pharmacist, who admitted to being seriously disillusioned with the profession, recently sent this lament to the *Canadian Pharmaceutical Journal*.

"I am fed up with dishing out Tylenol #1s like candy, with any refusal to do so based on professional judgement leading to reprimand. I am tired of trying to provide pharmaceutical care to customers who refuse to [let] more than a minute of their time 'be wasted.' . . . I am tired of trying to explain why I cannot give out medication without a doctor's prescription, even if 'the other pharmacist does it.' I am tired of being yelled at, cursed at and in general regarded as nothing more than a well-paid cashier." Although the letter might sound like "the musings of a haggard old veteran in the dispensary trenches," the author only graduated last year.

Research Update • Le point sur la recherche

Lack of vitamin C linked to heart attacks

Vitamin C deficiency has been implicated in scurvy, the common cold and other maladies, but new evidence shows that it is also a factor in heart attacks.

In a study conducted in eastern Finland, researchers followed 1605 men, selected at random, from 1984 to 1992, and discovered that those with a clear vitamin C deficiency were 3.5 times more likely to have a heart attack (*BMJ* 1997;314:634-8). However, it appears that only a deficiency is harmful; among men with normal vitamin C levels, extra vitamin C from supplements did not reduce the risk of a heart attack.

Professor Jukka Salonen, academy professor at the Research Institute of Public Health at the University of Kuopio in Finland and one of the study's authors, believes that preventing vitamin C deficiency is important but that too much vitamin C can also be a danger.

"Vitamin C is an important water-soluble antioxidant in the human body," says Salonen. However, he cautions that vitamin C can also promote lipid peroxidation through iron-mediated reactions, which can lead to molecular and cellular damage. Previous studies by Salonen and colleagues showed that elevated body-iron stores may be a risk factor for heart attacks in men.

Therefore, Salonen supports the fortification of foods with vitamin C "but not in overly large doses, and not with iron," and adds that the screening of patients with a diet poor in fruit, berries and vegetables "makes sense."

"Pregnant women and elderly people may have low vitamin C levels. In countries that have seasons, vitamin C intake goes down in the winter and spring, so measuring plasma levels at those times makes more sense than in the summer or autumn." — *C.J. Brown*

Going on a hunch

Intuition, gut feelings, hunches — most people assume that these are irrational ways to make decisions. However, researchers in Iowa have found that a part of the brain — the ventromedial prefrontal cortex — allows us to make decisions unconsciously on the basis of previously experienced emotions (*Science* 1997;275:1293-5). Actually, people with lesions in that part of the brain often make poor choices in life. In an experiment, participants with and without these lesions played a game in which they gained or lost money when they selected certain cards from 4 decks. In fact, the decks were stacked, 2 in favour of winning money and 2 leading to losses. Normal participants began to exhibit skin-conductance responses, the microsweating associated with stress, before drawing a card from a "bad" deck. They soon said they had a hunch that 2 of the decks were riskier. By contrast, those with brain lesions had no skin responses or hunches and, even when they knew that some decks were riskier than others, continued to draw from the "bad" decks. — *C.J. Brown*