

Does religion speed recovery in mental illness?

Psychiatric patients who regularly attend church and pray recover more quickly than their nonreligious counterparts, a University of Saskatchewan study indicates. Results from the cross-sectional survey, which involved 88 clinically depressed inpatients from 2 Saskatoon hospitals, was presented during the annual meeting of the Canadian Psychiatric Association. It found that frequent church-goers had lower severity of depressive symptoms, shorter lengths of stay and higher satisfaction with life, and abused alcohol less than patients who didn't pray or attend church.

"I think the message is that perhaps we're not being as diligent as we should be in considering this need in our patients and the role that religion can help play in treating patients as a whole," said Dr. Marilyn Baetz, lead researcher and an assistant professor in the university's Department of Psychiatry. "In psychiatry, we've seen so many good new drugs introduced lately. Perhaps there is a tendency just to focus on that."

Baetz acknowledged that this type of research elicits scepticism among physicians, but added: "I've had doctors tell me that this confirms what they've believed all along, but that it's good to have the data." — *Greg Basky*, Saskatoon

Caution against ozone-depletion complacency

Many people think the problem of ozone depletion has been solved by more restrictive international agreements but "such complacency may prove fatal," an expert says.

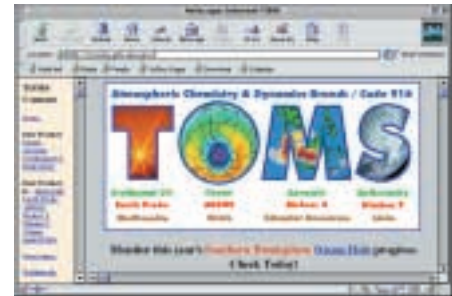
The 15-member European Union agreed in October to set strict limits on ground-level ozone pollution, but Dr. Frank de Gruijl, a professor of dermatology from the Netherlands, says such agreements must be scrutinized and policed with the "utmost vigilance."

That doesn't appear to be happening. One of the major existing problems, says de Gruijl, is illegal trade involving large quantities of ozone-depleting substances. And while developed countries are curbing use of these substances, developing countries have no such safeguards. Sources of ozone depletion include the loss of chlorofluorocarbons from air conditioners, fire extinguishers, foaming and cleaning products, and fumigants used to kill nematodes.

In a recent article (*CMAJ* 2000;163:851-5) de Gruijl advised consumers in developed countries to "remain vigilant and not purchase anything operating or produced with ozone-depleting substances when good alternatives are available."

The spectre of ozone-depletion came to the fore this fall when 120 000 Chileans were warned to stay indoors during prime sunlight hours. De Gruijl says these warnings are "understandable" in the face of a sixfold increase in the chance of sunburn and the possibility of a temporary depression of cellular immune responses, which could make people more vulnerable to infections.

The ozone hole over the Antarctic is the largest since scientists began measuring it 15 years ago: the UN reported more than 50% depletion throughout most of the hole. NASA (<http://jwocky.gsfc.nasa.gov/>) reports that the hole has spread over 28.5 million square km, an area 3 times larger than the continental US. — *Barbara Sibbald*, CMAJ



Obesity a heavy burden in Nova Scotia

Nova Scotians are packing on the pounds and it is costing the health care system dearly, an economic-impact study commissioned by Cancer Care Nova Scotia indicates.

Between 1985 and 1997, the rate of obesity in Nova Scotia more than doubled for adults between the ages of 20 and 64. More than 37% of Nova Scotians now meet the medical definition of obesity, a figure 31% higher than the national average.

"To turn around the increase in obesity, we have to recognize that junk food, physical inactivity and rising

stress rates are as toxic and costly as tobacco," said Dr. Ron Colman, lead researcher and director of GPI Atlantic, a nonprofit group developing a new economic index for Nova Scotia. Economically, he says, obesity is taking a toll: it costs the provincial government \$120 million a year in direct health care costs, including \$24 million for the treatment of hypertension, and \$140 million in indirect costs, primarily lost productivity. An estimated 1000 Nova Scotians die each year as a result of obesity.

On average, the provincial govern-

ment spends only 2% of its budget on disease prevention. Food manufacturers, on the other hand, spend billions advertising.

"In effect," says Colman, "our children are getting their education about diet from the food industry, and in particular the fast-food industry."

Recommendations in the report, *Costs of Obesity in Nova Scotia*, include requiring school cafeterias to serve more nutritious foods, putting high-fat warnings on junk food and taxing manufacturers of foods with little nutritional value. — *Donalee Moulton*, Halifax