

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The great delusion



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For years I have been telling patients (many years ago) and friends that vitamin supplements are nothing but a waste of money and probably the biggest marketing con trick of the 20th and 21st centuries. And finally, there is some evidence to support my common sense assertion!

A story caught my eye on the BBC website last week – Vitamins linked with higher death risk in older women – reporting on a paper in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. My assertion to people who insist that 'modern times' mean that we need vitamin supplements is that we only need them if we are deficient in them – and apparently I am not alone in this idea. The water-soluble ones simply go down the toilet and the fat-soluble ones can actually cause harm in excess.

The study was done on women in their 50s and 60s who were generally perfectly well nourished, but had decided to take supplements – no doubt as a result of the well-orchestrated marketing campaigns that constantly bombard us. It seems that multivitamins, folic acid, vitamin B₆, magnesium, zinc, copper and iron in particular appeared to increase mortality risk in a dose-dependent manner. The study was of 38 000 women in the USA who admittedly had to recall which vitamins and minerals they had taken over the past two decades – so

the results may not be all that reliable. The research team also say that other factors such as general physical health may have contributed. You might think that perhaps only people who were not very well would take supplements, but my experience belies that – in fact it is probably my fitter friends who seem wedded to the idea that their diet is deficient in vitamins and minerals.

The point, according to two commentators of the research from the Cochrane Database, is that the idea of supplementing diet to prevent deficiency has been replaced with the idea that supplements can actually promote wellness and prevent disease – all quite congruent with an increasingly unscientific modern world view. Dietary supplements are even mentioned in the latest round of Life Science curriculum changes in the Grade 11 syllabus. It is not clear exactly how the curriculum writers would like supplements portrayed, but I am pretty sure that the only textbook that will say that supplements are not necessary for someone with a normal diet – and go on to concentrate on studies of vitamin and micronutrient supplementation in children and pregnant women with HIV – will be the one that I am involved in.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-15238610>



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