

LETTER

USE OR MISUSE OF ANTIOXIDANTS

To the Editor: Congratulations on the new format — I was impressed with the former, yet the new is fresher and user-friendly!

To more serious business:

The January issue of *CME* devoted to cardiovascular disease has one glaring omission that is important to the general public's health: the use or misuse of 'antioxidants'. I refer to the relentless media campaign of various pharmaceutical manufacturers who continue advocating such compounds to delay, prevent or minimise coronary artery disease and carcinoma.

Specifically, a public target group is cigarette smokers. This group is vulnerable to such 'advice' as a result of the manipulation by fear. Offered a 'solution' such as the potential promise of antioxidants, smokers are encouraged to continue their habit! One such product is advertised to the medical profession with the endorsement of the Cancer Society of South Africa!

Tragically, the now accepted research fact is that antioxidants in smokers have the opposite effect — and very rapidly! Far from combatting the onset of coronary artery disease or carcinoma one large and scientific study¹ indicates that particularly in smokers there is a 26% increase in mortality from vascular events and a 28% increase in carcinoma of the lung! Hardly helpful — the adverse results were shocking enough for this trial to be cancelled. A report approved by the American Heart Association indicates no beneficial effects from antioxidant prophylaxis, but certainly potential 'deleterious' effects.² Our Medical Research Council reported this warning in a letter to the *SAMJ* in 2002.

A meta-analysis published in the *Lancet* in 2003 by Dr Marc Penn of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation (reported in the *Medical Chronicle*) found a 'small but significant increase in all-cause mortality' and no benefits. He states that the use of such compounds — beta-carotene and vitamin A — should be 'actively discouraged'. He does not support further vitamin E studies in patients with high risk. The latter of course includes smokers.

I note with interest in the *Sunday Times Business Times* of 8 February 2004³ an article reporting 'music heroes' and Knights of the Empire Sir Paul McCartney, Sir Cliff Richard and Sir Elton John have now assumed the role of experts in

matters of nutrition. They persuaded a referral of EC dietary restrictions in certain vitamins and minerals to the European Court. 'Heroes' they may be in their field of entertainment, yet their position is utilised to pander to popular emotional manipulation of a public that accepts them as the last word in wisdom.

This is almost as appalling a state of affairs as our government's attitude to AIDS has been in South Africa. The State has correctly banned smoking in public areas yet the use of antioxidants in smokers is a far more immediate threat.

The American FDA has been rendered almost powerless in this area by the politicians — Clinton's administration deregulated the supplement industry to the advantage of the state of Utah. Politics rules: the facts are denied or ignored and the population is put at risk.

It is intolerable that as a profession we are silent on this matter. If the figures quoted in the abovementioned papers are accurate — and the sources are impeccable — it is a significant public health problem. It must impact very negatively on an already overburdened and expensive health economy. People die. We should be vociferous in this regard via every available channel: radio, television, the lay and professional press, Internet.

We need to ask important questions:

- Why is the Heart Foundation silent?
- Why did the Cancer Society of South Africa endorse such a product?
- Why has the Medicines Control Council taken no action? Does this body act only after the fact, or are they proactive?
- Why do ethical and other manufacturers continue to promote this morbidity and mortality?
- Why are we silent?

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1. Tribble DL. Antioxidant consumption and risk of coronary heart disease: emphasis on vitamin C, vitamin E, and beta-carotene. A statement for health care professionals from the American Heart Association Science Advisory Committee, 1999. *Circulation* 1999; **99**: 591-595.
2. Omenn GS, Goodman GE, *et al.* Effects of a combination of beta carotene and vitamin A on lung cancer and cardiovascular disease. *N Engl J Med* 1996; **334**: 1150-1160.
3. The Economist. Health supplements get star backing. *Sunday Times Business Times* 8 Feb 2004, p.5.