

Good Questions

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New Year, new resolutions: what can we expect for healthcare in 2009?

Wishing you Health, Happiness, Peace & Prosperity in 2009

from everyone at
AHP Research

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What hope is there for our health and healthcare in the New Year? Can we expect great things of new administrations? Will the global credit crunch take a large bite out of healthcare budgets? Many of us will be making personal resolutions to get healthier while our national and global leaders also have resolutions to improve health - but will they be successful?

In the UK, the Queen's speech¹ confirmed that the Government will move towards legislating certain proposals from Lord Darzi's report on healthcare reforms. "High quality care for all: NHS Next Stage Review" includes extensive evaluation of and recommendations for overhauling the NHS, focusing on the development of a patient-centred service². It is thought that the proposed Health Bill mentioned in the Queen's speech will help change the way hospitals function financially so that they will be paid according to the quality, not quantity of services they provide. To this end, the government is planning to introduce measures that will enable the patients' perspective of their medical treatment to be taken into account. Health outcomes as reported directly from patients will be recorded and hospitals will soon be required to publish results alongside annual finance reports.

On both sides of the pond, speculation grows about how President-Elect Obama will influence and change healthcare policy; not only is healthcare a contentious issue for Americans but new healthcare initiatives and policies very much influence and effect health trends on a global level³. Three areas, in particular, are predicted to be affected by the new Obama administration: stem cell research, the pharmaceutical industry, and US international aid for health.



Within the pharmaceutical industry, it is thought that the democratic government under Mr Obama will push for the right to direct government price negotiations under the Medicare Part D programme. The Medicare programme in the US is the government's social insurance programme providing healthcare coverage for approximately 43 million people aged 65 and over. This number is expected to almost double by 2031 due to the baby boomer generation coming of age. Medicare Part D is the federal program that subsidizes the costs of prescription drugs for those under the Medicare programme. Any changes to price negotiations included in this area could have a very positive impact on availability of medicines for eligible patients.

Another initiative that has a good possibility of being brought in by the Obama administration is the expansion of health insurance coverage to include low-income children. According to a recent Unicef report, poverty remains a global issue with negative impact on children's development and future aspirations⁴. A cornerstone of President-Elect Obama's campaign was based on the promise to develop health insurance coverage to address this issue.

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...because good questions outrank easy answers...

In the news

■ [Costly campaigns ineffective in tackling 21st-century health epidemics](#)

In a new report, the King's Fund claims that unhealthy behaviours such as drinking, taking drugs, smoking and eating fatty foods will remain a part of the British lifestyle until more sophisticated techniques are adopted by the NHS to persuade us otherwise.

Although recent government initiatives have focused on encouraging people to take more responsibility for adopting healthier lifestyles, research has shown that information alone is not effective in promoting behaviour change.

Recent work has identified the benefits of practical help such as health professionals referring patients to healthy living programmes as opposed to government ad campaigns which are considered old-fashioned and disjointed (see In the Journals).

■ [Britons fear for their health as credit crunch bites](#)

In a survey conducted by Bupa in 10 of the UK's biggest cities, three in four people fear that the credit crunch will damage their health.

The survey showed that 8 out of 10 people expected more sleepless nights;

over 50% anticipated a worse sex life due to worry and stress and 60% expected to exercise less.

Health professionals have advised people to ensure that they spot the warning signs e.g. loss of appetite, sleepless nights, and turning to alcohol to forget about concerns as these could become serious health issues.

■ [Patient experience of NHS care is variable - improvements may lie in e-bay style reviews](#)

Research by the King's Fund has found that patient experience of care in the NHS is mixed.

Based on interviews with patients, staff and reviews of the literature, the findings showed that patients find NHS care unpredictable and unreliable.

In a move to increase standards of NHS care, patients are being asked to provide e-bay style reviews of NHS services. With future hospital funding predicted to be linked to patient experience, health officials believe that patient reviews can help improve quality of NHS care services and encourage patients to continue using these services.

Making the headlines

- [Women 'may face greater HIV risk'](#)
- [Hospital halves number of babies born with brain damage by implementing NICE guidance](#)
- [Obesity is determined 'by the time a child is five'](#)
- [Work gyms 'lift mood and stress'](#)
- [Pharmacists are to offer the pill in London pilot scheme](#)
- [Therapist uses Nintendo Wii in customized rehab therapy for injured reservist](#)
- [Diet foods 'little better than unhealthy choices' says Which?](#)
- [Messages on healthy eating and alcohol moderation not getting through](#)

Health Awareness

- dates for your diary

- World Braille Day: 4 Jan
- Hypoparathyroidism Awareness Day: 5 Jan
- Food Allergy and Intolerance Week: 19-23 Jan
- Be Loud (beating bowel cancer): 26-31 Jan
- Cervical Cancer Awareness Month
- National Glaucoma Awareness Month





In the Journals

Fear Appeals and Binge Drinking

1 Use of threatening messages or 'fear appeals' (focusing on mortality-related risks associated with the behaviour) followed by recommendations to take a particular course of action are often used in health promotion campaigns.

2 Researchers predicted that people who perceived binge drinking (BD) as beneficial for their self-esteem would report a greater willingness to BD when exposed to mortality-related risk information about BD.

3 Participants were allocated to one of three groups: a BD mortality salience group (given five facts about mortality-related risks of BD), BD control (five facts about binge drinking unrelated to mortality) or alcohol control conditions (five neutral facts about alcohol).

4 Data were collected about participants levels of alcohol consumption, BD, and BD self-esteem.

5 Individuals who thought of BD as beneficial for self-esteem reported greater willingness to BD after exposure to mortality-related information about BD.

6 The findings suggest that health promotion campaigns which focus on the mortality-related risks of performing a behaviour may conversely increase the willingness of individuals to perform that behaviour.

Jessop, D.C., Wade, J (2008) Fear appeals and binge drinking: A terror management theory perspective. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 13 (4); 773-788.

New Year, new resolutions...

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Greater coverage will mean that more people can afford necessary medicines, a positive outcome for both patients and pharmaceutical companies.

For stem cell research and international health aid (which could be affected quickly by the Obama administration in the New Year), it's a matter of restrictions on federal funding being removed. When the Bush administration took over, US aid to international family planning organisations was severely restricted (and in many cases halted) due to a moral political stance on acceptable family planning methods. The so-called Global Gag Rule has had far-reaching effects on women's health in many countries and has been highly controversial, based as it is on political ideals that are not US law. Continuing research has shown that the Gag Rule contributes to an erosion of family planning and reproductive health services for especially vulnerable people in developing countries⁵. It is expected that when Mr Obama takes office, he will reverse not only the Gag Rule but also the strict Bush policies which have severely limited stem cell research. With funding reinstated, it is hoped that stem cell research will continue progress towards a cure for diseases such as Parkinson's, diabetes and cancer.

With such grand policy ambitions in the UK and US, it is clear that the New Year will bring change to healthcare in one way or another - hopefully, such change will be longer lasting and more far-reaching than our personal New Year resolutions.

"the government is planning to introduce measures that will enable the patients' perspective of their medical treatment to be taken into account"

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Unicef (2007). Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich country. *Innocer Report card 7*. Florence; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

The Global Gag Rule Impact Project. Retrieved 18/12/2008 from www.globalgagrule.org.

Could giving up chocolate this New Year do more harm than good?

With many retailers reporting falling sales in the past months and total UK retail sales falling for the first time in 13 years, it may come as a surprise that chocolate manufacturers actually reported an increase in sales last year¹. It may be that many of us have chosen to comfort eat our way through the credit crunch but that could all change as the New Year brings with it many resolutions to eat healthily and/or lose weight. Typically, chocolate becomes public enemy in January. However, with much research highlighting the positive health benefits of a chocolate enriched diet, is it really such a good idea to give it up? Here we look at the many health benefits associated with chocolate and why you may want to redefine those New Year resolutions.

Cardiovascular health

Flavanoids are the natural antioxidants found in cocoa beans, the essential ingredient in chocolate. In particular, cocoa beans are rich in a class of flavanoids known as flavanols. Flavanols have been demonstrated to have important properties, such as reducing platelet activation, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activity². For example, a reduction in platelet activation can mean that the tendency for platelets to aggregate (leading to blood clots (thrombosis)) can be reduced. Thrombosis is a major factor in heart attacks and strokes. Furthermore, preliminary research has demonstrated that flavanols have the potential to reduce the cholesterol deposits in the arteries (atherosclerosis) due to its antioxidant properties².

Diabetes

Counter-intuitively, chocolate may even have benefits for people with diabetes due to the potential role flavanols may play in reducing atherosclerosis and improving circulation. Cardiovascular issues and impaired circulation are prominent issues for people with diabetes and therefore the specific benefits observed in these areas may potentially



lead to better outcomes for people with diabetes. Though this, of course, is not a signal for people with diabetes to eat chocolate without concern for regulating their blood glucose levels.

Cancer

The antioxidant properties of chocolate also have potential benefits for cancer prevention³. Antioxidants can neutralise potentially cell-damaging substances known as oxygen free radicals which can lead to cancer. The antioxidants found in chocolate are therefore beneficial in preventing or slowing down this process.

Conclusions

So, does all this mean we can tuck into those Xmas chocolate leftovers with renewed enthusiasm? Well, we must also remember that chocolate also contains fat and sugar. The process through which milk chocolate is processed means that many of the essential flavanoids are lost. Dark chocolate (containing more cocoa solids) retains the beneficial flavanoids. And, of course, the old adage "everything in moderation" comes to mind. So, if you do plan to start (or keep) eating chocolate for health reasons, the guilt-free pleasures come in small dark packaging!

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Forthcoming events

6-7 January 2009

UK Society for Behavioural Medicine
Exeter, UK

22-25 April 2009

Society for Behavioural Medicine
Montréal, Canada

16-20 May 2009

ISPOR 14th Annual International Meeting
Orlando, Florida, USA

**Abstract submissions due:
15 January 2009**