

TB deaths rising in Eastern Europe

Tuberculosis deaths are increasing in Eastern Europe after nearly 40 years of steady decline, according to a new WHO report. The increase is linked to the impact of recent political, social and economic changes on health systems. Three factors are mainly responsible, says the report: most Eastern European countries are using inappropriate tuberculosis control strategies; TB treatment programmes are vastly underfunded; and an increase in the average age of the region's population is contributing to the problem.

The report says about 29,000 people died from tuberculosis last year in the region, and over two million Eastern Europeans are believed to have been infected with the TB bacilli during the past five years. The most dramatic increases are in large cities: in Moscow, incidence has nearly doubled from 27 cases per 100,000 to 50; a recent study in the Siberian city of Tomsk reveals 200 cases per 100,000, a figure usually found in the regions most ravaged by the disease, such as Asia and Africa. The greatest increases in TB deaths are being reported in Armenia, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania and Romania.

Source: *Go Between*, No. 47, August/September 1994, UN-NGLS, Palais de Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland. Fax: (41) 22/788 7366

A Nation of Smokers

Besides being the world's most populous nation (about 1.18 billion people), China also holds the onerous distinction of being the largest producer and consumer of tobacco products. The country accounts for about one-third of all tobacco consumption, which explains why an estimated 1.17 million Chinese people died from tobacco-related illnesses in 1988 alone. The number is predicted to rise to two million

annual deaths by 2025. Of all Chinese alive today who are under 20 years of age, 50 million are predicted to die prematurely from smoking. (Asia-Pacific Tobacco News, Australia, Bulletin No. 7, March 1994).

Source: *Worldwide Consumer*, IOCU, No. 215, September 1994, Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, Casilla 9635, Santiago, Chile

(Unripe) Bananas Protect Against Bowel Cancer

Nutritionists in Cambridge say a diet rich in starch, not just fiber, may be a 'major protective factor' against bowel cancer. Green bananas, cold boiled potatoes and other sources of virtually indigestible starch may provide particularly strong protection against this type of cancer.

After analyzing diet and cancer rates from 12 countries, *Aedin Cassidy*, *Sheila Bingham* and *John Coamings* of the Medical Research Council's Dunn Clinical Nutrition Centre said they found a strong association between starch consumption and cancer of the large bowel, colon and rectum. On average, the more starch consumed in a population, the lower the incidence of these diseases.

Of all the populations studied, Australian men and women consume the lowest amount of starch (100 grams or less a

day), while the Chinese eat more than 370 grams each day. These striking differences are matched by a fourfold difference in the incidence of colon cancer - ranging from 6.3 cases per 100,000 men in China to 25 cases in 100,000 among Australian men.

Writing in the *British Journal of Cancer*, *Bingham* and her colleagues argue that the anticancer effect comes from starch that escaped digestion in the small intestines.

Bananas that are still green at the tips contain substantial amounts of resistant starch, the researchers said, whereas in ripe bananas with black spots most of the starch has been converted to sugars.

Source: *Health Alert*, August 16-31 1994, HAIN, 9 Cabanatuan Road, Philamlife Homes, Quezon City, Philippines

Fake Ginseng Widely Sold

How pure is a bottled 'natural remedy'? In the case of ginseng, not at all - many brands of processed ginseng sold are fakes! A Swedish study has found that commercial ginseng preparations marketed as natural ginseng contain little or no trace of the medicinal plant. 50 commercial ginseng products sold in 11 countries were examined, the products were bought from pharmacies and reputable stores for natural remedies.

The study found wide variations in the level of ginsenosides - the compounds taken from the plant root and credited with therapeutic properties - in the products. Six of the products sold in Britain, Sweden and the US contained only traces of ginsenosides, i.e. levels less than 0.01%. The other 44 samples analysed had between 1.9 and 9% of ginsenosides.

One product sold in the US was found to contain substantial amounts of the drug ephedrine, a mild stimulant, which is banned by sports authorities, the presence of the drug was not declared on the product. In 1993, a young Swedish athlete who took this particular ginseng preparation failed a doping test by testing positive for ephedrine. The above findings were reported in *The Lancet* medical journal (Vol. 344, 9 July 1994).

Source: *Utusan Konsumer*, No. 311, September 1994, Consumers' Association of Penang, 228 Jalan Macalister, 10400 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.