

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Brain Function and Stupid Studies”

Studies on brain function and risk of dementia are of considerable interest, but studies can be misleading or even worthless. All studies must be scientifically evaluated and one should never accept the "headline" without looking carefully at the integrity of the story it is associated with. An estimated 5.2 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease (AD) or some other form of dementia and since it is predicted to be on the increase and those numbers will jump to 13.8 million by 2050. And, 1 in 3 seniors dies with (not necessarily from) Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. So, related studies are of interest. A new study in the New England Journal of Medicine claims, "Higher blood-sugar levels, even those well short of diabetes, seem to raise the risk of developing dementia." These results challenge current thinking by showing that it's not just the high glucose levels of diabetes that are a concern. Yet, the investigators conclude, ""We don't know from a study like this whether bringing down the glucose level will prevent or somehow modify dementia." Then, why publish it under a heading entitled, "Study ties higher blood sugar to dementia risk"? Another worthless study found, "Older people with impaired blood flow to their brains saw improvements in thinking skills after drinking two cups of cocoa every day for a month." It was published under a title stating, "Cocoa tied to improved brain function in some elderly." Yet, the study went on to say, "There were no differences in blood flow or in scores on thinking tests between the two hot chocolate groups at the start of the study or after one month." They went on to conclude, "The new study cannot prove drinking hot chocolate boosted thinking or blood flow." And the third dumb study was under the headline, "Drinking water boosts your brain's reaction time." Investigators said new research has revealed that drinking water when we feel thirsty boosts our brain's performance in mental tests. But, the study also showed that drinking water can have negative effects on cognitive performance and participants who drank water before doing it, performed worse than those who drank no water. As you can readily see, please do not accept a so-called medical headline without carefully investigating the integrity of the supporting study. In my opinion, the above studies were a waste of space and only served to add to patient confusion and distrust of the reporting of so-called scientific studies over all.

In the America that I love, do not over react of every headline and alter our life style based on worthless studies. Credibility is the cornerstone of science and overblown headlines are the basis of false advertising and marketing.

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