

## **Journalism-Shock Horror, I'm Well (The Guardian)**

I'm dying. We all are. Eventually, the grim reaper will come calling on each and every one of us. But, with this being the 21st century, and with me living in a technologically advanced, first world, industrialised nation, the dying bit is likely to take a while yet. And that is true for all of us. We are fitter, healthier and living longer, more active lives than many of our forebears could have imagined. So why are we all scared witless? Of our food. Of our drink. Of the air we breathe and the ills we inflict on our children. Because we are constantly being frightened, that's why.

Having spent the past four weeks monitoring the media's coverage of health issues, I am now more or less convinced that I'm about to keel over, that antibiotics won't be able to help me once the superbug strikes, that the painkillers will be more dangerous than the pain and that when they finally ship me off to hospital I'll be awash in a sea of filth. And that if I worry about any of this, the negative thought patterns will make me ill. Always assuming the invisible radioactive gas doesn't get me first.

I realised early on that the only way to deal with the daily torrent of stories was to divide them into categories, from the apocalyptic to the downright silly, via what I like to think of as the "so now they tell us" stories. Stories such as the ongoing coverage of the siting of mobile telephone masts close to schools. First, the articles contain the usual slew of contradictory statements. "In January last year, an £18m government study dismissed fears about the safety of base stations, saying exposure levels were 1,000 times lower than using a mobile phone." Against: "But a Dutch government study found that people exposed to radio signals from 3G masts suffer 'significant' physical effects, including headaches and nausea."

Second, while the positioning of mobile phone masts is of genuine concern, the sad fact is that we all appear to own at least one mobile and thus rely on the widespread presence of said masts. This week it is the masts, but last week it was the phones themselves and next week it will be obesity, or over-zealous dieting. This is the pernicious effect of the constant drip of health scare stories; the genuinely serious get lost amid the background chatter of the hysterical, comical and blindingly obvious. And for the layman it is difficult to tell one from the other.

Having panicked over the phone masts issue, for instance, and its possibly harmful effects on my children, what should I do about the fact that the school whiteboards might be damaging their eyesight? There are about 200,000 hi-tech whiteboards in schools and it seems that pupils and teachers could damage their peripheral vision while using them.

According to Steve Walker, of the national Radiological Protection Board: "There remains a possibility that a viewer's peripheral retina could be overexposed even when he or she is not actually staring at the projector's apparent source." Although he did go on to say that the children's eyesight wouldn't be at risk as long as the guidelines are followed.

I've always considered not smoking to be rather a smart move, healthwise, but I do drink, and, apparently, "Alcohol [is] as destructive as smoking". The figures state that 4% of the global burden of disease is attributable to alcohol, as opposed to 4.1% to tobacco, which doesn't, of course, mean that drinking is precisely as bad for you as

smoking, which the scary headline might have led one to believe. And anyway "Red wine boosts good cholesterol". Yes, for every scare there's a story saying more or less the exact opposite, just to add to the confusion, such as "Sunburn role in cancer survival". Four cups of coffee a day, meanwhile, will simultaneously reduce the risk of liver cancer and increase that pertaining to heart disease.

Choices ... choices ... And what about the Big Baby, Little Baby syndrome? For years we've been told that babies with a low birth weight fare less well at school and go on, as adults, to suffer heart disease and diabetes, but now, apparently, babies weighing more than 8lb 13oz at birth could be more likely to develop some cancers. It is not just weight you need to worry about, however; according to a study from the University of Southampton and the National Public Health Institute in Finland, babies who are taller on their first birthday go on to earn more money later in life. "Once social background was taken into account, each 2cms was worth 3.5% in income ..."

Of course, the health of our children is a serious matter. We don't want them to be obese ("British children's waistlines growing by an inch each decade, study shows"), nor do we want them to suffer sudden death syndrome while taking part in sport. Although, speaking of obesity (and isn't everybody - all the time?) the latest report from the Social Issues Research Council claims that the childhood obesity problem has been "over hyped", that average weights have barely risen. and that we've all been panicking unnecessarily. Still on the frighteningly well-mined subject of children's diets I had, as a member of a vegetarian family, always felt rather smug as the latest dead animal-based food scare dragged its grisly way across the news agenda. How wrong could I be? Professor Lindsay Allen, from the University of California, has declared that depriving children of meat is "unethical". While reserving her fiercest criticism for vegans, she insists that there are benefits to eating meat that can't be found elsewhere.

All this pales, however, when put up against the biggest health scare of the entire four weeks, namely the Sudan 1 affair. There can be nobody in Britain still unaware of the fact that a dye more normally used in shoe polish and petrol found its way into chilli powder, thence into Worcester sauce and from there into a seemingly ever-expanding list of foods. So how dangerous is "the cancer dye" as it was dubbed? The advice from Dr Jon Bell of the FSA was as follows: "Sudan 1 could contribute to an increased risk of cancer. However, at the levels present the risk is likely to be very small, but it is sensible to avoid eating any more. There is no risk of immediate ill health." So there could be a risk, which is likely to be very small, and not immediate (although the only "immediate" cancer I can think of is that which you'd develop after spraying on a Uranium-based antiperspirant).

Confused? Who wouldn't be? Big, small, tall, short, fat, thin, breast, bottle, vegetarian, carnivore, coffee, tea, active, slothful - there's good or bad news (frequently both) depending on which day of the week you happen to have opened the papers. The serious point is that this blizzard of contradiction and hysteria threatens to blind us to the relatively simple steps we can take on behalf of our children and ourselves - a balanced diet, moderation in all things, a modicum of physical activity, stuff like that. But the temptation is to wonder "why bother?" when it seems that a new and ever more deadly nemesis lurks in the corners of just about every area of our day-to-day lives.

I have occasionally been confronted with genuinely serious problems (passive smoking, cannabis and its effects on mental health) but I have also had to cope with "Cosmetic injections can spread CJD" (or not); "Government may ban football matches during flu epidemic"; Doctors observe "Broken Heart Syndrome"; Parents should "Beware cherry tomatoes"; "Wearing headphones for one hour boosts ear bacteria by 700%"; Celebrity exercise DVDs "A Health hazard".

It seems we crave these stories, with their vague "perhaps causes" and their conflicting expert evidence. Once it was the plague, or consumption, now it is whether our swish new mobile is poaching our brain, or our children are failing to be born at the precise "safe" weight - not too light for diabetes, not too heavy for cancer and tall enough to earn a decent living. Of one thing I can be certain, however; reading too many headlines is not good for you.