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### **IT'S ALL BEEN SAID BEFORE**

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I remember our history teacher once telling us that one advantage of Queen Victoria's longevity was that whenever any of her ministers came up with a 'new idea', she was frequently able to inform them, 'We tried that years ago and it didn't work'. This memory now pops up in my mind with increasing regularity as the years roll by, particularly in relation to health fads and health scares.

My memory of the 1980s is that this was a particularly rich period for these issues. For example, at the present time there is some concern about whether aluminium may be a risk factor for the development of dementia (*note 1*). I recollect that there was a panic about this in the early 80s. Some people I knew even stopped using their aluminium saucepans and forewent their afternoon cup of tea, this beverage having a high concentration of aluminium. I also recall a similar panic in the media about mercury fillings, which were touted as being the cause of all sorts of illnesses (see the Wikipedia's 'Dental amalgam controversy'). In response to this, some people had their mercury fillings replaced by other substances. This was the intention of a patient I saw who had multiple sclerosis. He displayed an enviable fighting spirit but feared he was losing the battle and felt the need for some psychological support. He had read somewhere that mercury amalgam could be the cause of certain autoimmune diseases and next on his list after seeing me was a dental practitioner willing to replace his fillings (*note 2*).

Around this time there was also an explosion in the number of people claiming to have some kind of food allergy that accounted for whatever symptoms and problems they experienced in life. It was announced that many psychiatric conditions are not 'all in the mind' but are due to a reaction to certain foods. Often, claims like this are associated with a particular individual who makes a name for (usually) himself as 'a crusader for truth' (*note 3*). In this case it was the late Dr Richard Mackarness, then a psychiatrist at Park Prewitt Hospital in Basingstoke, who wrote a popular book in 1976 called *Not all in the Mind: How Unsuspected Food Allergy can Affect your Body and your Mind*. I have written more extensively about this in a previous 'Medicine on the Fringe' (*note 4*). Even psychologists were amongst those who attended training courses on recognising and treating food allergy or intolerance; suddenly their patients were being put on exclusion diets. Thus, almost overnight they stopped being psychologists and became dieticians.

As I noted in my 2012 article, food allergy and food intolerance have failed to establish themselves as serious considerations in the mainstream assessment and treatment of people with mental health problems. But overvalued ideas like this tend to have a habit of springing back to life and the media still occasionally feature some 'crusader' who has made it their favourite hobby horse, with headlines such 'Depressed? Have you considered your diet?' (Google search, for example, Dr John Biffra). Naturally (*Bad pun – Ed.*) the alternative medicine industry continues to push these claims by offering patients expensive but useless allergy tests.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies have often been suggested as possible causes of, or exacerbating factors in, many mental health problems and mainstream research continues to explore the evidence. Again, however, we see how such ideas can become overvalued and a crusade for some. In the 1980s a doctor who practised near Harley Street was heralded in the Sunday broadsheets when he proclaimed that anorexia nervosa should be treated as a zinc deficiency. I recall one consultant psychiatrist with whom I worked shaking his head in sorrow and telling me that some of his anorexic patients had opted out of treatment and joined the stampede up to London to be treated by this doctor. Ten years, later a biochemist came to give a lecture to our university psychiatric department, promoting (unsuccessfully) the claim that schizophrenia was more or less caused by ..... zinc deficiency.

Still in the 1980s, a number of my psychosomatically-minded medical colleagues became very taken with the idea that much physical and psychological malaise is caused by hyperventilation and they treated their patients accordingly, namely by instructing them in diaphragmatic breathing. During Q&A sessions at conferences they would often jump to their feet and ask the speaker, 'Have you considered that your patient(s) might be hyperventilating?' One of them got into trouble when he was covertly filmed offering an expensive course of therapy to an AIDS patient to correct his supposed habit of over-breathing, which the doctor had decided was

responsible for some of the man's symptoms. Hyperventilation continues to be recognised as an important feature of anxiety, though nowadays it is treated more by cognitive than physiological means. I have not noticed any reigniting of the claim that it could be the underlying cause of many patients' mental health problems. But if and when it does, please excuse me if you hear me saying 'Here we go again!'

### **Notes**

1. This is associated with similar - unverified - ideas about aluminium, vaccination and autism - see the medical section of 'Of Interest' in this issue.
2. In relation to the above note, there is now a scare that mercury in vaccinations is causing autism and various developmental brain disorders (see Wikipedia's 'Thiomersal controversy').
3. Mr Andrew Wakefield is a striking example of this.
4. *Skeptical Adversaria*, Autumn, 2012, pp 5-6. Available at <http://www.mheap.com/food.html>.