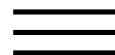


Some diseases characteristic of modern western civilization: a possible common causative factor.

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Some diseases characteristic of modern western civilization: A possible common causative factor

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SOME DISEASES CHARACTERISTIC OF MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION

1. THE SITUATION IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

A NUMBER of diseases of major importance are characteristic of modern western civilization. These diseases are rare or unknown in communities who have deviated little from their traditional way of life and a rise in their frequency follows adoption of western customs. Available evidence suggests that all these diseases were rare or uncommon even in the western world a century ago, and that they are rare or unknown in undomesticated animals. Some appear or increase in frequency within a few years of exposure to a new environmental factor, others not until several decades later. The diseases to be considered in this connection are listed below, with indications of their prevalence and importance as causes of death and morbidity in Britain and the U.S.A., countries which represent the type of civilization with which these diseases are most closely associated.

(a) Non-infective diseases of the large bowel

- (i) *Appendicitis* – one of the commonest abdominal emergencies. It has been estimated that over 300,000 appendices are removed annually in the United States.
- (ii) *Diverticular disease* – the commonest disease of the large bowel. It has been reported to be present in over one third of those over the age of 40 and in up to two-thirds of those over 80 years of age (Parks, 1968; Hughes, 1969).
- (iii) *Benign tumours* – reported to be present in one third of all autopsies on patients over the age of 20 years (Arminski and McLean, 1964).
- (iv) *Cancer of the large bowel* is, after bronchial carcinoma, the most common cause of death from cancer. It has been estimated that over 46,000 people would die from this form of cancer in the United States and that over 76,000 new cases would be recorded in 1972 (Silverberg and Holleb, 1972).
- (v) *Ulcerative colitis* – with a prevalence of approximately 80 per 100,000 in Britain (De Dombal, 1971).

(b) Some common venous disorders

- (i) *Varicose veins* – estimated to affect 10-17% of adults (de Takatas and Quint, 1930; Dodd and Cockett, 1956; Martin *et al.*, 1956; Davis, 1968). Alexander (1972) has estimated that over half of all urbanised western people would develop varicose veins if they lived long enough.
- (ii) *Deep vein thrombosis* – believed to occur in 20-30% of all surgical patients and in over 40% of those undergoing major surgery (Kakkar *et al.*, 1970; Lambie *et al.*, 1970).
- (iii) *Pulmonary embolism* – responsible for over 2,500 deaths annually in Britain (General Register Office, 1969) and believed to occur to some extent in half of all patients who develop ilio-femoral thrombosis (Mavor, 1969).
- (iv) *Haemorrhoids* – some degree of which are believed to be present in nearly 50% of people over the age of 50 years.

(c) Diseases associated with cholesterol metabolism

- (i) *Coronary heart disease* – the commonest cause of death.
- (ii) *Gall stones* – found in over 10% of autopsies (Farooki, 1971).

(d) Obesity and Diabetes

More than 40% of the people in Britain are said to be overweight, and obesity has become so common in the United States that a variety of intestinal by-pass operations are now sometimes being recommended for its relief.

It has been estimated that in affluent societies, 3-10% of the population eventually develop known diabetes, but that a much greater proportion have the disease undetected (West, 1972).

(e) Hiatus hernia

Zeppa and Polk (1971) and Polk (personal communication 1972) found hiatus herniae in 20% of 35,000 patients undergoing radiological examination of the upper gastrointestinal tract.

There are a number of other diseases, such as thyrotoxicosis, pernicious anaemia, rheumatoid

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