

FOCUS ON HEALTH WITH SIMON HOLLIDAY



OVER-DIAGNOSIS AND OVER-TREATMENT.

"First, do no harm" comes from the doctor's Hippocratic Oath. Why did the Ancient Greeks have to stress this principle?

A doctor's business used to mainly be treating people with diseases. These modern days we focus on treating risk factors aiming to prevent disease. But could such noble goals be in fact a wolf in sheep's clothing? Could we be causing harm?

The head of the Australian Medical Association and the consumer organisation Choice have targeted the most recent scam. Here a company visits towns and offers a range of tests to the over 50s. Those with the money and anxiety will probably find at least one positive test. Tests generate more tests, procedures and pills. The chief medical officer of an American hospital once pointed out that his hospital made around \$5,000 from each free prostate cancer screening, thanks to the ensuing biopsies, treatments and follow-up care.

Why should we screen blokes for prostate cancer? Surely the only proper reason would be if we could decrease the overall number of men dying of prostate cancer. Well, there have been some massive studies looking at outcomes over 10 and 20 years and the figures show little, if any, reduction in death for prostate cancer. Certainly many chaps are diagnosed earlier with disease before it has spread. Tests lead to more tests including the pleasure of a prostate biopsy (please don't ask) and surgery or radiotherapy. This leads to trouble in holding their urine or having an erection for 1 in 100 of those originally well men.

Another recent craze involved cancer screening with whole-body CT scanning. A

visit down to Sydney for the scan revealed cancer in this patient. Unfortunately it took his life within that year, and I suspect the early diagnosis and surgery meant he had wasted much of his last months and money in hospital.

Looking to another field: the diagnosis of mental health problems, we often rely on the United States. The American Psychiatric Association regularly updates the Diagnostic Standards Manual, most recently to DSM-5. Great concern has been raised at the number of experts writing this material who are on the payroll of pharmaceutical companies. All they have to do is shift the goal posts by relaxing the rules for diagnosing a disease and, bingo, more people suddenly have a disease. How convenient then that their drug company has a pill ready to sell for it. Cynics call this, "disease-mongering".

"Indication creep" is a term used to describe how a therapy proven useful in one disease is then assumed to be useful in another. Strong pain-killers have proven benefit in patients with short-term or terminal cancer pain. The single most prescribed drug in the USA is now an opioid, but not for the evidence-based reasons. About 97% is for non-cancer long-term pain, where we lack evidence for benefit outside a couple of months. Now, more Americans are now killed by overdose from them than are killed in motor vehicle accidents.

Often the best ways to prevent illness involve simple lifestyle change. This usually does not come in a pill or need a test. Stop smoking, don't drink over two standard drinks, exercise ¾ hour per day, carry a condom for a friend, keep active, and laugh and cry with your friends.

**24 hour Care, Bulk billing (Medicare) is available.
New Patients are welcome.**



78 Albert Street
TAREE

02 6552 5533



Shop 4 1-5 Caladonia Street
HARRINGTON

02 6556 1855

Please phone for an appointment.