

EM9412: The Globe and Mail, September 16, 1994, page A16

## HEALTH WATCH

# The attack on red wine's hearty reputation

*Try not to lose heart, all of you who like to keep your burgundy in the medicine cabinet. But here is some bad news from Bernard D. Kaplan, the Hearst News Service correspondent in Paris.*

**I**T has been called the world's favourite health theory: The claim that drinking red wine with meals, as the French do, helps to prevent heart disease.

But now a group of leading cardiologists has come along to debunk the idea as having no basis in fact.

An international cardiology convention, sponsored by the World Health Organization, has just released a study casting serious doubt on the notion that the French suffer fewer heart attacks than other people because of their liking for a carafe or two of wine with dinner.

The theory has gained wide acceptance in recent years, especially in North America, where it has been credited with spurring a surge in red wine consumption.

The trouble is that the statistics underlying the claim have been found to be unreliable, according to cardiologists from 21 countries meeting in Berlin.

They say the belief that heart ailments are markedly less common in France than elsewhere is a myth.

"The truth is not that heart disease is less prevalent among the French, but that many deaths in France from heart attacks simply aren't reported that way," says British cardiologist Hugh Tunstall-Pedoe, one of the report's authors.

The medical investigators discovered that, every year, thousands of fatalities caused by cardiac arrest are officially put down to "sudden death," with no further details given, on French death certificates.

"The law in most other countries requires a specific cause of death to be stated. Not so in France," explains Dr. Tunstall-Pedoe. "When French heart disease statistics are adjusted to take account of this discrepancy, the incidence (of heart disease) is not much different from that of other advanced nations."

However, subscribers to the red wine theory can, ah, take heart from the medical specialists' readiness to accept that consuming small amounts of alcohol on a regular basis helps to protect the ticker.

"Numerous well-documented studies have suggested this to be the case," says Dr. Tunstall-Pedoe. "But there's no real proof that red wine, as such, does a better job than other forms of alcohol.

The news deals a body blow to the French contention that their lifestyle is not only more civilized than other peoples', but healthier, to boot.

Many outside France were amazed by data seeming to suggest that a nation noted for its love of rich food and incessant smoking, coupled with an aversion to exercise, had such a low rate of heart disease.

Abroad, the belief arose that the French owed it all to red wine because, in fact, it contains a powerful variant of a chemical that keeps clots from forming in blood vessels. Blood clots are a leading cause of fatal heart seizures.

It was a theory that the French wine industry was happy to endorse.

French comic Patrick Marc, a noted bon vivant, says that he wasn't all that surprised when the physicians' findings questioned the therapeutic value of red wine.

"I myself was always doubtful," he explains. "It was too good to be true."

The article EM9412 reprinted above is used in Figure 8.8f of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Chapter 4 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and Figure 3.5f of the STAT 332 Course Materials.

Related articles are EM9416 and EM0208.