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The Cholesterol Myth

by Raymond Francis

Cholesterol does not cause heart disease. The French have the highest average cholesterol in Europe, around 250, but the lowest incidence of heart disease and half the heart attacks we have here in the U.S. In Crete, the home of the healthy Mediterranean diet, a 10-year study failed to find a single heart attack despite average cholesterol levels well over 200. There are as many heart attacks in people with cholesterol levels over 300 as those whose levels are under 200. *Half of all heart attacks occur in people with normal cholesterol levels.*

Lowering cholesterol does not improve health outcomes. In those cases where cholesterol-lowering drugs called statins appear to have had a beneficial effect, it is because they act as weak anti-inflammatories, and inflammation *does* cause heart disease. But there are much safer and more effective ways of addressing inflammation than using dangerous statin drugs.

Why then are more than 20 million Americans taking a statin drug to lower their cholesterol? The answer is a story involving the triumph of money and power over science.

Atherosclerosis—the main cause of heart attacks and strokes—is the accumulation of fatty plaque inside the walls of major arteries. As the disease progresses, arteries become increasingly narrow, making it easier for a blood clot or piece of dislodged plaque to completely block blood flow, resulting in either a heart attack or a stroke.

When cholesterol was found to be a major component of arterial plaque, the “cholesterol theory of heart disease” was born, thinking that high cholesterol levels cause atherosclerosis. The truth, however, is not so simple. Cholesterol is an anti-oxidant, a repair and healing molecule. The body produces more of it in response to stress and tissue damage, when repair and healing are needed. Remove the causes of the body’s distress, like inflammation and oxidation, and you lower cholesterol. It turned out that blaming cholesterol for heart disease makes as much sense as blaming the Red Cross for the disasters it responds to.

Drug companies responded to the cholesterol theory by investing millions in developing cholesterol-lowering drugs. Now, although unbiased science has disproved the cholesterol theory, these companies have an enormous vested interest in keeping the cholesterol myth alive and well, and they’re doing an excellent job of doing just that.

Pfizer’s Lipitor is the best-selling drug of all time. It brings in ten billion dollars a year and has quadrupled Pfizer’s net income. Up to 80 million Americans have elevated cholesterol according to new guidelines, making them eligible to receive statins. That’s 60 million potential customers not yet taking statins! Pfizer and other drug giants are spending millions to convince them and

their doctors that they need statins, which are taken for life. With insurance and government subsidies, we're all paying for these ineffective, unnecessary, toxic drugs. It is exactly this kind of "healthcare" that threatens to bankrupt our country!

And toxic drugs they are. Statins are loaded with nasty side effects. Some occur right away; others crop up after years. Some cease when medications are discontinued; others don't. By blocking the body's production of CoQ10, statins cause serious problems ranging from potentially fatal muscle inflammation and wasting to congestive heart failure. In all, they interfere with at least twenty biochemical pathways in the body.

Cognitive problems affect about 15 percent of statin users, including episodes of temporary amnesia called transient global amnesia (TGA). Statins have an adverse effect on tau, a protein made by brain cells that helps maintain their structure. Abnormal tau proteins are linked with neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and ALS. Statins also cause progressive cognitive decline, ranging from mild to severe, and anxiety, depression, inability to deal with stress, and violent behavior. Statin-takers are more likely to develop peripheral neuropathy, and to experience tremors and vertigo.

Other health issues linked with statins include cancer, suppressed immunity, cataracts and optic nerve problems, liver damage, impotence and loss of libido, hypersensitivity reactions that can lead to the autoimmune disease lupus, birth defects if taken by pregnant women, skin rashes and dryness, hair loss, gastro-intestinal problems, insomnia, and pancreatitis. Vitamin E is a key anti-oxidant protecting the heart. Statins decrease blood levels of vitamin E and interfere with E's anti-oxidant capabilities. Low levels of vitamin D are a risk factor for heart disease; statins decrease your ability to manufacture vitamin D from sunlight.

The real problem in heart disease is *oxidized* cholesterol. Normal un-oxidized cholesterol is harmless. This is why some people with normal cholesterol levels get heart attacks while others with high levels do not—the difference is in the amount of chronic inflammation in their bodies and whether or not their cholesterol is being oxidized. It doesn't matter whether your cholesterol is high or low.

Inflammation and oxidation are interrelated processes. Inflammation is the body's healthy response to injury, irritation or infection. It neutralizes harmful microorganisms, helps repair wounds (often by calling in cholesterol, which is a component of scar tissue), and cleans up debris. However chronic inflammation is an unhealthy condition which generates a constant supply of free radicals that overwhelm our anti-oxidant defenses.

Unchecked free radicals create further damage generating more inflammation, and a vicious cycle is underway.

Arteries work hard, see a lot of wear and tear and are constantly being repaired. In a healthy body, this repair work involves temporary inflammation and an influx of cholesterol that subside once the repair has been made. The problem is that most of us have a diet and lifestyle that

promote chronic systemic inflammation. We compound the problem by failing to get enough anti-oxidants from fresh fruits and vegetables and from supplements. This sets the stage for chronic diseases like atherosclerosis. In an unhealthy body, normal arterial damage is not fully repaired and leads instead to chronic inflammation and free radical damage. The body manufactures more and more cholesterol which is rushed to the scene, becomes oxidized and forms more and more plaque.

What are the components of our inflammatory diet and lifestyle? The deadly metabolic poisons sugar and white flour have an enormous inflammatory effect on the body. Transfats are a major contributor to heart disease and greatly increase both inflammation and oxidation. Refined oils lead to deficiencies in essential fatty acids like the omega-3s that prevent inflammation. According to a 2005 study in *Archives of Internal Medicine*, fish and flax oils, both high in omega 3 fats, have prevented more cardiac deaths and total mortality than statins. Dairy and grain-fed animal proteins contain an inflammatory balance of fats; avoid farmed fish that are grain-fed, and get meat from grass-fed animals.

Eating too much grain and animal protein versus fruits and vegetables creates systemic acidity, another cause of inflammation. A diet deficient in folic acid, B6 and B-12 causes an unhealthy accumulation of homocysteine, a pro-oxidant and pro-inflammatory that is linked to heart disease. Chronic infections are inflammatory and can damage arteries. For example, pathogens that cause gum infections are found in heart disease; for healthy gums, get plenty of vitamin C and CoQ10. Chronic stress, allergies, insufficient sleep, being overweight and lack of exercise all have inflammatory effects.

Many environmental toxins are pro-inflammatory and pro-oxidant. Chlorine, for example, is a powerful oxidizing agent capable of causing extensive damage to blood vessels—so we put it in our tap water. Heavy metals, such as lead and mercury, have been implicated in artery disease. Smoking is a major risk factor in heart disease.

On the other hand, a massive amount of evidence has shown that increasing consumption of anti-oxidants reduces the odds of getting atherosclerosis. The “French Paradox” refers to the fact that although the French have notoriously high levels of cholesterol, high blood pressure and most of them smoke, they have low rates of heart disease. The paradox can be explained by their better diets, containing more fresh fruits and vegetables, and their habit of drinking red wine with meals. Red grapes are especially high in anti-oxidant flavonoids. Flavonoids work synergistically with vitamin C and are found in abundance in many fruits and vegetables, especially grapes, apples, citrus, onions, tomatoes, squash, eggplant, parsley and berries, and in green tea—most of which have been studied and found to reduce heart disease substantially. The French also use garlic and olive oil liberally. Garlic prevents the oxidation of cholesterol and reduces plaque accumulation in the arteries. Those on a Mediterranean-type diet, who consume a lot of olive oil, have 20% higher levels of oleic acid in their cholesterol, making it more resistant to oxidation. Other phenol compounds in olive oil add to its anti-oxidant value (the higher quality the olive oil, the more phenols there will be).

Since each antioxidant has a somewhat different role, getting a wide range of antioxidant supplements is best. Linus Pauling considered atherosclerosis a vitamin C-deficiency disease. Not only is C one of our most important anti-oxidants, it is crucial for the production of collagen, needed to build and repair artery walls. Low vitamin E levels have been more predictive of cardiac mortality than any other single factor. This fat-soluble vitamin gets incorporated into cell membranes where it prevents oxidation of cholesterol and other fat particles. CoQ10 assists E. Beta carotene, vitamin D, lipoic acid, selenium and zinc are all important anti-oxidants to include.

Avoid ingesting oxidized fats—do not purchase the usual supermarket oils. Minimize cooking with fats, and when you do, use organic ghee, coconut oil or olive oil on low heat (don't let the pan smoke). Store olive oil away from heat and light. Refrigerate nuts, seeds, cod liver oil and flax oil.

Heart disease is both preventable and reversible. There is no need for drugs or surgery. Don't let the cholesterol myth confuse you. Exercise regularly and supply your arteries with excellent nutrition—eat a good, plant-based diet and high-quality antioxidant supplements. Keep inflammation down and you keep heart disease away.

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