Prevention of low back pain

Sir — Low back pain is one of the commonest complaints in the world, from a variety of causes. It affects both sexes in all age groups across a wide range of occupations, and is a major source of suffering and consequent restriction of activity.

With a view to initiating preventive activities in Jordan, we made a random selection of 500 patients who had been diagnosed with low back pain to see what conclusions could be drawn about their lifestyles and the course of their illness. Their files held at the King Hussein Medical Centre, Amman, were reviewed, and a questionnaire was administered to the patients, 75% of whom were men.

Most of the patients were adults in working life, mainly in the the 51–60 age group. However, 14% were over 60 years and 10% were under 20 (some were children). Half of the patients said their back problems had commenced at work. The onset was gradual in 15% of the cases, but the others could all remember a specific event or movement that triggered the pain. The duration of symptoms ranged from a few days to a number of years: 30% of incidents lasted less than one week but nearly all the other patients suffered for more than a month. A direct blow or a fall was responsible in only 12% of cases. A sudden muscular effort was the most common cause, and rotation, bending and over-reaching were also frequently mentioned. The same “triggering insult” was found to be the cause of subsequent attacks of back pain in 90% of patients.

As far as lifestyle causes were concerned, 75% of patients were at least 10 kg over their ideal weight, and only 10% practised sport or exercise on a regular basis. Very few were aware of the nature and causes of lower back pain and how to prevent it, so they did not attempt to correct their weight or to improve their physical fitness. Health education to draw attention to these aspects could be included in general health advice in all schools, workplaces and health centres, as a preventive measure.

Factories and workplaces could undertake the following actions aimed at preventing the onset of low back pain among their employees or the recurrence of pain among those who already suffer from it.

- Pre-employment assessment should be considered as the aptitude of the individual for the work in question, and not just general medical fitness.
- Where manual handling is involved, instruction should be given in good...
handling and lifting techniques, to avoid strain on the back.

- **Ergonomic principles should be applied to all daily tasks.**
- **Instruction should include advice on maintaining physical fitness and improving muscle strength.**
- **Strict regulations should be agreed upon in consultation with the workers, and adhered to, regarding the weight limit of objects to be lifted, their proper packing and distribution, and the team handling of heavy loads.**

Lower back pain is often the result of a long process of wear and tear. An acute attack can be triggered by an event or a movement that also provokes further episodes of pain, sometimes over a long period. Much lower back pain is preventable. The above recommendations, if made part of educational programmes by physiotherapists and ergotherapists in schools, factories and major work sites, could go a long way towards alleviating this common problem.

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**Spiritual help for getting older**

Sir—People everywhere, regardless of superficial differences, have a strong need for a value framework and philosophy of life, and they strive for transcendent meanings and experience. This spiritual need often finds expression in religious activities, beliefs and attitudes. Religion encourages people to seek meaning beyond their everyday existence, helps them cope with misery and provides comfort during crisis. Most religions foster an attitude of awe, respect and humility by emphasizing our place in the vast unfathomable universe, and exhorting people to look beyond their immediate personal desires.

Religion thus contributes to human well-being, and this is especially true for elderly people. Spiritual beliefs provide older persons with a protective niche and with ways to understand both social and cosmic events. Old people adjust to failing health, frailty and the fear of impending death by putting their faith in eternal life, the presence of a merciful higher being or the prospects of a better afterlife.

In India, religious beliefs and spiritual practices are extensively used by older people to cope with the physical, social and economic disadvantages that old age brings with it, and this helps them to maintain a sense of harmony. Though there is immense diversity in religious and cultural practices, most Indians, even when they worship different gods, believe in the unity of all religions and the underlying ultimate reality. There is a strong belief that the soul is immortal and is reborn again and again until a person can transcend this cycle of birth and death and attain “Moksha” or liberation. During this life, however, individuals must do their duty or “dharma,” while their good or bad actions, thoughts and emotions will generate good or bad “karma”. Unexplained sufferings in this life are often explained as due to bad karma in a past life.

These concepts permeate every aspect of Hindu life. Here is an example. A 62-year-