



NEWSLETTER

January 2000

THE EUROPEAN PROSPECTIVE INVESTIGATION OF CANCER

EPIC is taking place in 9 countries, from Greece, Italy and Spain, with lots of sunshine and diets of fresh fish, tomatoes and olive oil through to the northern countries of Germany, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. Here the diets are very different, so it will be easy to carry out comparisons of how certain diets may protect against some cancers and other chronic diseases of old age.

NEARLY HALF A MILLION PEOPLE TAKE PART THROUGHOUT EUROPE

30,446 men and women in Norfolk have participated in EPIC. 25,633 came for a health check which was performed by the EPIC nurses who were based either at GP surgeries or at EPIC clinics throughout the county. Over 400,000 people are taking part throughout Europe.

THE EPIC TEAM IN NORFOLK AND CAMBRIDGE

A number of nurses work in Norfolk, and most of you will have visited one of them for a health check.

What you probably don't know is that we also have a laboratory based at the Wayland Hospital in Attleborough. There, three technicians work hard processing the blood samples which you give when you come for your health checks. The first technician started in December 1992 and her first job was to paint and decorate the laboratory and build the benches and shelves which were necessary to get it up and running. It is the hub of the operation in Norfolk, where much of the planning takes place

In addition to this, in Cambridge there is a large team of nutritionists, computer programmers, statisticians, epidemiologists and data processors dealing with all the information you provide. When you fill in a Food Diary we need to work out the nutrient content of the food you listed. The nutrient content of something common, like a sausage, will differ between the various producers, so the detail is very important to us. The data base which handles all this information is enormous, and it takes a nutritionist more than two hours to enter the information you provide in a Food Diary.

RESULTS

Results will begin to emerge from the winter of 1999. The reason why this has been such a slow progress is given below.

WHAT MAKES EPIC DIFFERENT

Many of you may be thinking that there is already a lot of information available about diet and health, some of it conflicting. One day you may hear that bread is bad for you, and then a couple of years later that bread is good for you. The same thing happens with butter, sugar, spreadable margarine, red wine and so on, until you are so confused you think "Oh. I'm going to ignore all this and just do what I want".

Much of the research in the past has been based on people who had already become ill. The researchers might ask 20 people who were already ill what they were eating ten years before. The illness might make people feel sufficiently unwell that they wouldn't really like to think about the food they were eating, so they might 'under-report' what they had eaten ten years before. The same might happen if they were on treatment which might make them feel a bit sick.

Alternatively they might think "I know what it was. It was all that **** I ate." Then they might try to hide that they ate **** because they felt embarrassed that they ate so much of it. On the other hand, they might decide to tell you that they ate it

all the time, to 'over-report' it, because they are sure that was the reason they became ill. Beside this, if you ask me exactly what I was eating ten years ago, I would find it difficult to answer accurately.

What EPIC is doing is different. Throughout Europe we are asking a very large number of people (400,000) what they are eating now. You know how much detail we are asking for as many of you have, heroically, filled in Food Diaries. We are then following everyone up for many years. When we find out who becomes ill and who stays well, we will be able to compare very carefully collected information to see what is protecting the people who stay well.

This is one of the many features of EPIC which make it unique.

The pink patches on the map show the areas of Norfolk where we have been working. In those areas, 42% of the adult population has participated in EPIC.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has taken part in EPIC in Norfolk for the amazing contribution you have made. The study will be a very well known one, and you will slowly hear more and more about it over the coming years. None of it would have been possible without your major contribution.

If you would like to see a description of something particular about the study included in a future Newsletter (say, the sex and age groups and how they responded to the invitations we sent out, a description of what happens in the laboratory, or what happens in more detail in Cambridge) please leave a message on the answerphone at 0800 616911. We will include an article in future editions.