

### **Constipation and diet in a community sample of older Australians – a pilot study**

*WC Hunter<sup>1</sup>, GP Jones<sup>1</sup>, HM Devereux<sup>1</sup>, I Coles-Rutishauser<sup>1</sup>, D Jolley<sup>1</sup>, N Talley<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Deakin University, School of Health Sciences, Burwood, Victoria, 3125

<sup>2</sup>Sydney University, Department of Medicine, Nepean Hospital, Penrith, NSW, 2750

Many studies indicate that constipation is a common problem in older people and that it adversely affects their quality of life (1). Its prevalence in Australia is not established but in overseas community-based populations approximately 30% of people over 65 years of age report themselves to be constipated.

We are measuring the prevalence of constipation in a population of older people who live at home, using a postal survey and follow up interview, to collect data on bowel habit, laxative use, diet and fluid intake as well as quality of life measures. Here we report the results of a pilot study. Questionnaires (n=330) were mailed out to a random sample of persons (>65 years) living in the Federal Electorate of Chisholm, Melbourne. The response rate was 22% providing information from 71 subjects on bowel habit and 37 of these have been interviewed to collect data on food and fluid intake and quality of life.

The gender balance of our sample (n= 71) was more male (n=42) than female (n=29) whereas the population from which these subjects were drawn had a greater preponderance of females (58%). Constipation was determined either by self-report or by functional definition (a combination of two or more of the following symptoms on more than 25% of occasions in the previous 12 months: less than three stools per week, straining, passing hard stools, and a feeling of incomplete evacuation). Of the 17 subjects who were constipated, 9 experienced functional constipation.

The food intake of 37 subjects was compared with the recommendations of the Australian Guide to Health Eating for daily serves of cereals, vegetables and fruits. Sixteen of the 25 subjects who were not constipated consumed more than the recommended minimum of four serves of cereals each day whereas only three of the 12 constipated subjects reported eating more than this amount. A similar pattern was found with the intake of vegetables but the recommended daily serves of fruits (2/day) was met or exceeded by most subjects (n=30).

Regular use of laxatives was reported by 16 subjects as a result of medical prescription or self administration or both.

If these trends are confirmed in our larger study (n=320) the prevalence of constipation in our sample will be similar to that reported in similar groups in the USA and New Zealand and will confirm the importance of cereal and vegetable intake as protective factors.

1. O'Keefe EA, Talley NJ, Zinsmeister AR, Jacobson SJ. Bowel disorders impair functional status and quality of life in the elderly: a population-based study. *J Gerontol* 1995; 505:M184-M189.