



The proof of the pudding...

A cursory examination of the literature will quickly demonstrate that Scotland has one of the highest rates of cardiovascular disease in Europe.¹ In fact, one of the groundbreaking studies in the reduction of cholesterol was the University of Glasgow's West of Scotland Coronary Prevention Study (WOSCOPS).² In the past, whenever I thought of trials it was about the number of subjects and *p* values – until one day on a recent visit to Celtic Scotland I learned how science reflects the day-to-day lives of real people.

One Saturday afternoon I was invited to 'high tea' with people who had gathered from all over Scotland for a Gaelic language music festival in the majestic city of Perth in central Scotland. (Traditional Scottish eating patterns consisted of a big breakfast to prepare for a busy workday, a substantial lunch for the afternoon's labour, and a little snack in the late afternoon to ward off the evening hungers. 'High tea' is basically a more formal extension of the last meal of the day).

So, along with a group of 60 fellow fiddlers I was ushered into the Salutation Hotel in the heart of Perth. Many Scots and Gaels were already seated in the large reception room including a group of pipers who had just returned from playing at a rugby match. I noticed on their table huge plates of cakes and scones and was despondently thinking about their potential impact upon my arterial vasculature.

I asked Hannah, a young Scottish fiddler sitting opposite me: 'Is high tea scones and cakes?'

'Och, nae', she said. 'There'll be fish and chips too!'

I spent the evening with this group, and

wherever you turned there were potato chips, cheese, and party pies galore. I once thought I espied a vegetable, but found it was actually some plastic imitation lettuce on the bottom of a plate of sausage rolls!

My later suspicions on Scottish dietary hazards were confirmed upon a visit to the Isle of Skye. I stayed in a beautiful bed and breakfast run by a native Skye woman, Mrs MacDonal, who cooked the most magnificent breakfast that I had ever eaten in my life. After a healthy muesli breakfast, I indulged in eggs, bacon and white pudding. Healthy? No. Delicious? Absolutely!

I had first enjoyed black pudding, and its close relative the white pudding, while visiting the remote Gaelic speaking stronghold on the Scottish island of South Uist.

One Saturday lunch, this pudding appeared on my plate, and pointing to the fried delicacy I asked my kind hosts – in Gaelic:

'Dè tha seo?' (translation: what's this?) 'Marag gheal,' replied Anne MacMillan, the lady of the household.

Now, with my rudimentary Gaelic, I thought that Anne had said 'marbh' (pronounced MAR-AV) meaning 'murder'. I soon realised that she said MAR-AG, which means pudding (gheal meaning 'white').

Was this closer to the truth? In that moment, I gained a new realisation of the WOSCOPS.

As a GP, I often read the results of clinical trials from around the world and see the symbol 'n', which equals the number of participants. But what does this 'n' really mean in human terms?

For the WOSCOPS, n=6959, of which 135

people died from all causes compared to 106 taking pravastatin over a period of 5 years.² Each one of these numbers represents grief and loss for all of these western Scottish families, and yet these so-called 'numbers' have resulted in the saving of many lives throughout the world through the introduction of new treatments. Now whenever I look at the 'n' of a trial, I think about those souls who volunteer their time in the name of evidenced based medicine to help improve the lot of us all... all thanks to some Scottish white pudding!

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References

1. The Scottish Health Survey. Scottish Executive Department of Health, 1998. Available at: www.show.scot.nhs.uk/scottishhealthsurvey/sh8-00.html.
2. Shepherd J, Cobbe SM, Ford I, et al. Prevention of coronary heart disease with pravastatin in men with hypercholesterolemia. *N Engl J Med* 1995;333:1301-8.



