

Vitamin D conference - *report by Patsy Westcott*

- Dr Leanne Olivier introduced the Vitamin D Mission- set up to educate health professionals and parents about deficiency.
- According to Paediatrician Dr Benjamin Jacobs vitamin D is a hormone, rather than a vitamin, found only in limited quantities in food including breastmilk. We do not get enough sunshine in the UK to manufacture adequate levels from October to April. The result? A resurgence of rickets.
- Dr Robert Moy, retired senior lecturer in Child Health and consultant to the Feeding for Life Foundation described how a scheme, My Little Ray of Sunshine, set up to promote vitamin D supplementation to all women in Birmingham from when they first become pregnant until their child is a year old and for all children from birth to five, was helping to conquer rickets in the city.
- 80% of Scottish population is deficient in vitamin D, which is why Edinburgh-based specialist GP Dr Helga Rhein prescribes supplements to all adults and teenagers over 12. She described several patients who had benefited from supplementation (500 micrograms a week).
- Dr Adrian Martineau examined the role of vitamin D in evolution – how natural selection favoured darker skin closer to the Equator where the risk of vitamin D deficiency was low but the risk of skin damage high and lighter skin in northern climes where the opposite was true. He outlined how vitamin D may protect against TB and described trials he is involved in looking at whether supplementation may have a role in treating TB.
- Dietitian Jacqueline Lowdon looked at the pros and cons of food fortification, which she described as an attractive and cost efficient public health strategy with the potential to reach at risk groups, although further research is needed.
- Professor Zulf Mughal, consultant in paediatric bone disorders at Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, gave a whistle stop tour of rickets from Egyptian mummies to the present day. He stressed that not all rickets is due to vitamin D – calcium is also involved and phosphorous.
- Diabetes expert Dr Barbara Boucher argued that if we all had adequate levels of vitamin D the risk of type 1 and type 2 diabetes would be significantly reduced.
- Miss Robyn Shea, of Birmingham City Hospital, revealed the results of the test offered to health journalists. Levels ranged widely between 23.7 nmols per litre (deficient) and 223.1 (high). Even a small amount of supplementary vitamin D (such as found in a multivitamin) could push levels up into the adequate category (50-220 nmol/l).