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With this first issue of 2008, *Canadian Health* begins its third year of publication. It promises to be an exciting year, with upcoming coverage of genetic diseases, chronic pain, Alzheimer's, new initiatives in mental health and the impact of poverty on well-being. We're also planning an informal opinion poll of our readers on health issues.

In the meantime, I thought I'd kick off the new year with a roundup of interesting medical items from Canada and elsewhere that caught my attention over the past few weeks.



including pathogenic *Escherichia coli*, *Mycobacterium ulcerans* and methicillin- and penicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.

THE AMBER ALTERNATIVE From Russia with love comes an alternative remedy aimed at easing the symptoms of menopause. Amberen is based on succinate, a compound that occurs naturally in amber and the human body and appears to have hormone-like signalling properties. Its medical consultant in the U.S. is Dr. Jay Mahoney, a Texas

family physician specializing in difficult menopause. He says Amberen is designed to rejuvenate communication between a woman's brain and her hormonal system — the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis — to keep her producing natural estrogen. In a randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trial at Moscow's Institute of Theoretical and Experimental Biophysics, succinate-based treatment lowered menopausal symptoms and increased women's blood levels of endogenous estrogen. Classified as a nutritional supplement, Amberen has been used by many women in Mahoney's practice, with no ill effects noted so far, and will be tested soon in a U.S. clinical trial. Go to www.amberenonline.com.

CLOSED HEART SURGERY What if you desperately needed a new aortic valve but were too sick or elderly to endure having your chest cut open, your breastbone sawn in half and your heart stopped in conventional open heart surgery? A new technique pioneered by Dr. John Webb, a cardiologist at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, offers hope that you would get your new valve. The procedure uses a collapsed valve mounted on a pencil-size balloon catheter (the same instrument used to clear blocked arteries). Inserted into a leg vein via a small incision, it's then threaded up and into the heart. When the new valve reaches the old valve, it expands to push it out of the way and takes over. The tube is pulled back out and the leg incision is closed with one or two stitches. Patients require only a local anaesthetic and light sedation and return to normal quite quickly. The procedure has been done on about 100 patients who had no other option, but could soon be in regular use.

ON THE SPECTRUM Florida State University in Tallahassee has developed an online video glossary of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Parents and professionals can observe a variety of autistic behaviours in children under age two and compare them with those of their normal peers at www.autismspeaks.org (click on Video Glossary). As Lucie Turgeon tells us in her autism feature on p. 20, it's essential to recognize the red flags of ASD and get help early for affected children. And on another promising note, interpersonal skills in high-functioning autistic teens can be markedly improved by training sessions in social role-playing, according to a study led by Dr. Éric Fombonne, head of child psychiatry at McGill University Health Centre in Montreal.

HEALING EARTH In this era of antibiotic-resistant superbugs, U.S. researchers are taking a second look at an age-old remedy for killing stubborn germs: medicinal clay. For centuries, this fine-grained earth helped heal infections and kill intestinal worms but quit the therapeutic stage with the advent of modern antimicrobial and anti-parasitic drugs. With shape-shifting bacteria now outwitting antibiotics, microbiologists at Arizona State University in Tempe tested a clay against several strains of bacteria involved in many illnesses. In lab studies, the clay proved lethal to some very nasty bugs,

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