



Modern Day Scurvy – Eat your Greens

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A recent article in the Internal Medicine Journal (Volume 36; 393: 2006, the official journal of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians of which I am Fellow) shows two pictures of the legs of a 42-year-old Australian man who presented to the emergency department with a one month history of tiredness and bruising over his thighs and bleeding from his gums. He had severe bruising on his thighs and small pin-prick (petechial) haemorrhages on his legs. The take home message was that he lived in a hostel and his diet over the past five years had been entirely of sausage rolls, meat pies, wheat cereal, peanut butter, chocolate cake and milk with no green vegetables or fresh fruit for five years.

As a weekend sailor I found this article interesting as scurvy was the scourge of long voyages in the days of sailing ships. It was our sailing icon, Captain (then Lieutenant) James Cook, one of those more progressive skippers, who insisted on daily lashings of sauerkraut and lime juice (hence the word Limeys). I therefore exhort all those sailors who frequent the bar at the QCYC and who indulge in sausage rolls and meat pies to heed this warning and to eat lashings of sauerkraut and lime juice, particularly those who hate green vegetables. For the desperate who dislike limes and oranges, there is always the vitamin C tablet. I bring this to your attention as there is clearly a message here, particularly for those adolescent sailors who have an aversion to fresh fruit and who prefer a Breaka (a chocolate milk drink) and a meat pie for lunch.

Following this timely publication, I am going to recommend to the Commodore that it become compulsory for two dessertspoonfuls of lime juice be administered to each crew before any race as I have observed that some boats are considerably slower than some and such long passages in the bay may put their crews at risk of this dreaded malady which also may affect concentration and sexual drive. On Old Gaffers Day, I recommend sauerkraut supplementation as well.

May I also recommend a good read, "Scurvy" by Stephen R Bown, published by Penguin Books 2003, which provides an interesting overview of the role of scurvy in maritime history and also details its cure by the physician by Sir Gilbert Blane. It is also worth noting that the real explanation for scurvy, ie ascorbic acid and its discovery did not occur until 1933 by a Swiss and British team after the isolation of ascorbic acid by Albert Szent-Gorgyi the previous year.