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Special report | pages 8-9

Health



Dr Anoop Kuttikat

Bad bones: how to prevent and treat osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease that makes your bones weak and fragile. Your bones may break (fracture) with even a small trauma such as a simple fall or driving fast over a speed bump.

One in two women and one in five men above the age of 50 will break a bone as a result of osteoporosis. A broken back (spine fracture) causes sudden severe pain which can last for months. A broken hip is even more serious, needing hospital admission in nearly all cases, is fatal in one in five cases and permanently disables half of those affected.

Osteoporosis does not cause any symptoms until you break a bone. But your GP can send you for a test called DEXA (bone density scan) if you have risk factors for developing osteoporotic fractures.

Age is the greatest risk factor and your GP will check your fracture risk (usually using an online calculator called FRAX) if you are a woman above 65 years old or a man above 75 years old.

Your fracture risk is also assessed if you are younger than the above age cut-offs but have other risk factors, such as premature menopause in women, previous low trauma fractures, frequent use of steroid tablets, family history of hip fractures or frequent falls.

You can keep your bones healthy if you eat food with lots of calcium (milk, yoghurt and green leafy vegetables), get adequate vitamin D from sunlight exposure, exercise for 30 minutes a day, avoid smoking and limit the alcohol intake to less than a drink per day.

You can reduce the risk of falls by making sure hallways and stairs are well lit, electrical cords are tucked away, wearing comfortable shoes with good grip and watching out for slippery floors. You should also have your eyes tested.

There are several drug treatments for osteoporosis. Initially, a weekly tablet called Alendronate is recommended along with vitamin D and calcium supplements. If this does not do enough or causes side effects, other medicines are available. Your GP will take expert advice from a rheumatologist and work with you.

More recently, unusual (atypical) fractures of the thigh bone have been reported with long-term drug treatment for osteoporosis. This risk is extremely small, but after a five-year course of treatment, your doctor will usually reassess if you need to continue treatment.

■ Dr Anoop Kuttikat is a consultant rheumatologist at Mulberry Clinic, Hinchbrook Hospital, and at Kettering General. Visit cambridge-kettering-rheumatologist.com.

War heroes finally rewarded

After helping to rescue civilians from the 1939 Chillán earthquake – the worst quake in Chile's history, killing 28,000 people – two Cambridge war veterans have finally received medals for their bravery. ADRIAN CURTIS went to meet them and the Chilean ambassador.

They were sailing in the Pacific when a devastating earthquake struck Chile on January 24, 1939.

Frank Burton, now 98, and Basil Trott, now 97, were serving on the Royal Navy vessels HMS Ajax and HMS Exeter respectively when they were called to help rescue stricken Chilean civilians.

The earthquake – with a surface wave magnitude of 8.3 – hit the area around Concepción, killing more than 28,000 people and flattening the cities of Chillan and Concepcion. It remains the deadliest in Chile's history.

Thousands of people were rendered homeless. The Ajax and Exeter were sent to the area to assist and to help with evacuation.

Mr Burton and Mr Trott took part in the rescue operation but have never been acknowledged for their roles – until now. Last Friday, that was put right when the two Cambridge war veterans were awarded medals.

They are two of the four surviving members of HMS Ajax and the River Plate Veterans Association who assisted at the earthquake.

The Chilean government was extremely grateful for the prompt and effective assistance given by the Royal Navy's South American division.

The Commodore in the South Atlantic, Henry Harwood, was awarded the Grand Cross of the Chilean Order of Merit (Gold), the Captain of the Ajax was made a Commander (Silver) and another 41 officers and senior ratings were awarded the Order at Bronze level.

The association's archives revealed spare full medals and ribbons appeared to have been awarded to crew members.

However, inquiries also showed that Mr Burton and Mr Trott did not get theirs.

So, in 1990, the medals were re-struck by the Chilean



Frank Burton and Basil Trott with family and friends, including Jim London, 98, right. Below, Mr Trott with Cambridge MP Daniel Zeichner and Mr Burton with his granddaughter and great-granddaughter
Pictures: Keith Heppell

government and issued through the association to those crew members they could trace.

The Chilean ambassador to the UK, Rolando Drago Rodriguez, finally put the omission right when he presented medals to the two seamen in Cambridge – 78 years after their brave acts.

He said: "It is an honour for me to present the medals. It is a pleasure for me to meet Basil and Frank.

"When we have problems in Chile, it's important to have solidarity from friends.

"These men showed great solidarity with us during one of the most devastating events in our history in 1939.

"It is important to never forget those who helped us. It is a great honour for me to present these medals as a token of our gratitude."

“When we have problems in Chile, it's important to have solidarity from friends

Rolando Drago Rodriguez
Chilean ambassador to the UK

Daniel Zeichner, Cambridge's Labour MP, said: "It is a privilege to be able to welcome His Excellency, the Ambassador of Chile, to Cambridge to present awards to our veterans, who show that our armed forces have long performed hugely important relief and humanitarian work. It is wonderful that, nearly 80 years on, Frank and Basil will finally be commemorated for their bravery."

Malcolm Collis, of the HMS Ajax and River Plate Veterans Association, said: "On behalf of the association, we are extremely grateful to the ambassador for agreeing to present these medals to two of our veterans after so long."

After their help in Chile, both seamen found themselves involved in the Battle of the River Plate – the first major sea battle of the Second World War when the Royal Navy, in the shape of HMS Ajax, Exeter and Achilles, went after German pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee in December 1939.

Mr Burton, who was on HMS Ajax, recalled: "The Exeter was very badly damaged and all her turrets were out of action. She had lost 66 members of her crew. Commodore Harwood ordered her captain, Captain Bell, to break off action and return to the Falkland Islands to effect some repair work to improve her seaworthiness.

"The Ajax had received a direct hit, putting two turrets out of action, and two shells hit the bridge as well as her main mast, which brought down the wireless aerials.

"The Graf Spee headed for Montevideo in Uruguay, from where she moved to her final resting place to scuttle herself."

Mr Trott was a gunner on HMS Ajax at the age of 19 when the Battle of the River Plate took place. He said: "I was very pleased and surprised to get the medal in the first place. But the battle of the River Plate was the first battle we were involved in.

"For me, it was just like doing practice firing – I was in the gun

