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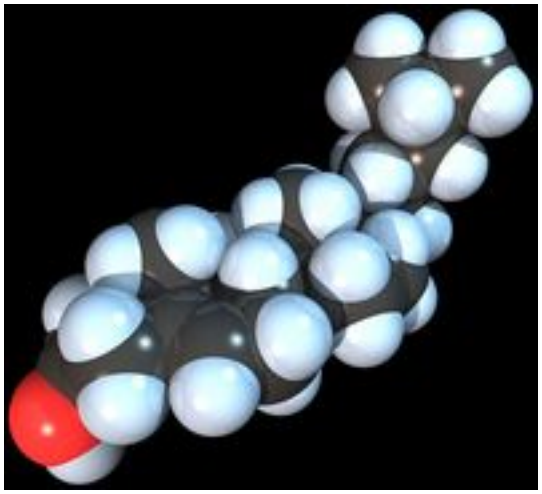
Beware of healthcare populism [1]

Written by **Dr Fred Hansen** [2] | Tuesday 22 January 2008



The temptation of politicians to twist public policies for short-term gains in order to win votes is well known. Policy on cholesterol (pictured) is one such example. It turns out, according to accumulating evidence, to be a rather simplistic public scare. Reducing 'bad cholesterol' has been the mantra for decades and statins, which are just doing that, have earned $27.8 billion in sales in 2006. Little wonder since 13 million Americans and 12 more millions worldwide are using them to prevent heart attacks.

Because it attracts large numbers of voters, politicians keep shifting health resources to disease prevention ? and thus draining away vital resources from the chronically ill, who are always a small minority. Yet new research shows that only one in 100 people, or according to some research even one in 250, who take statins over five years have any benefit whatsoever.

One reason is that healthy people have a different metabolism than chronically ill patients. Another is that bad cholesterol levels may no longer a reliable risk indicator for heart disease. For instance, Australian Aborigines have low cholesterol but high rates of heart disease. Spaniards have as much bad cholesterol as Americans but only half as much heart disease and the Swiss have even higher cholesterol but lower rates of heart disease. And now a different enzyme, called Rho-kinase, has been found that predicts heart disease much better.

This is just one example that exposes how government healthcare policies lag hopelessly behind science and are prone to blunder public health issues. And it will probably take much longer for government health programs to change course than the market would need to correct obviously biased research.

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