



Antioxidants – a health revolution

Carolyn Lister. Published by New Zealand Institute for Crop and Food Research, Ltd 2003. ISBN 0-478-10832-X. Contains 96 pages. \$19.95

At the same time as our bodies are being battered by free radicals, our minds are being bombarded with information espousing the health benefits of antioxidants. Damaging free radicals are implicated in many diseases, but definitive proof of protection by antioxidants is sparse. While scientists battle with the complexities of the field, the simplistic concepts of the 'bad' free radical and the 'good' antioxidant have been adopted by various alternative health and cosmetic industries. These disciples, with a gospel that promises to cure or protect against all ills, should make an intelligent person wary. However, it would also be unwise to ignore a promising field of research because of over-enthusiastic proponents.

For those seeking enlightenment, Dr Lister's book is an excellent place to start. It is clearly written and very well presented. The layout and style will appeal to a broad audience, and the boxes, tables and bullet-point recommendations all convey information quickly and in an easily digestible form. Dr Lister is particularly good at describing the different classes of antioxidants and their primary dietary sources. She also sensibly promotes the value of a balanced and varied diet, as opposed to supplementation. The majority of studies showing protective effects are associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption, while clinical trials with individual antioxidants have been consistently negative.

While Dr Lister's approach is generally balanced, the evidence of health benefits is overstated in some parts. The use of the word 'revolution' in the title is a case in point. I hope the proponents are right – after reading the book I went and bought a salad for lunch. If it triggers others to think about and modify their diet, then great. However, the evidence for antioxidants as the cure for or protector from all ills remains unconvincing. Overall, I would strongly recommend this book as a general resource for those with an interest in nutrition.

Mark Hampton

Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine
Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences