

'People always look for a reason'



Prof Adam Cohen gave a wide-ranging talk about medicines which delved into their history and brought us up to date with the latest research into performance-enhancing drugs. He pointed out that medicine still has many questions to answer. 'We know paracetamol works, but we don't know why,' he said. Adam took us back to the Roman times of Pliny to show society's use of medicine. The Roman scholar documented the use of Elaterium – from a cucumber – which was thought to aid some ailments, including gout. This type of attitude back then remains the same. 'Medically, we're not quite sure how it works, but we still have the same approach today,' says Adam. Similarly, the role of the foxglove was brought to the fore by William Withering in 1785, who followed up on an old woman's belief that the plant helped to combat the symptoms of dropsy (heart failure). The 18th century biochemist carried out extensive experiments for his time – he knew it worked, but he didn't know how. Adam also spoke about the controversy over vaccines and warned that some factions had tried to persuade others to stop using vaccines without them understanding the science behind the role of the medicines. He also spoke about the role of performance-enhancing

drugs in sport. He showed us footage from Lance Armstrong's confession on the Oprah Winfrey show when the American admitted using EPO in seven Tour de France victories. Armstrong felt he could never have won those titles without resorting to the use of EPO. But Adam said: 'Armstrong looked for a reason why he won those races. The EPO may not have helped him, but he had nothing to compare it with. People always look for a reason.' Adam has helped to run a series of experiments into the effects of EPO on cyclists taking part in endurance races. He outlined how some had been given placebo while others were given EPO. Results are due out at the end of the month. Maria Sharapova's use of meldonium could also have had no improvement on her performance, says Adam, because she has no real way of knowing if it had contributed to her matchwinning ways.