Reform of the Public Health Act

We agree with Richard Coker1 that the vast majority of non-compliant cases of tuberculosis can be dealt with by a mixture of directly observed therapy (DOT) and inducements. However, when DOT fails in a few cases each year, despite intensive team effort and carrots such as housing or food vouchers, the Public Health Act may have to be invoked. We have had recourse to this measure four times in the past six months, but, though providing value for money, it is extremely costly and proved ineffectual as a solution each time.

Once the patient is admitted there are still potential problems. Treatment cannot be enforced and patients can abscond. There have also been instances of patients assaulting staff, physically and sexually, issuing death threats, breaking hospital property, and terrorising other patients, even interfering with oxygen therapy. Dealing with such patients puts hospital staff and patients under unacceptable pressure and requires extra staffing for security purposes. NHS hospitals were not designed for, nor are they staffed adequately for, custodial purposes.

There is an urgent need to review the Public Health Act and make provisions for small specialist units staffed by nurses with training in and an aptitude for interpersonal skills. Admission to the unit would usually only be required for short periods of time until precipitating circumstances were resolved and alternative arrangements made. The threat of compulsory admission, or a short period thereof, may induce a behavioural change in the patient, allowing DOT to be successful after failing previously. In addition, a centrally based mobile unit of trained staff could be available to help tide teams over emergencies and could reduce the need for the specialist unit, enabling more non-adherent patients to be managed in the community.

We call upon the Department of Health to examine and implement these proposals.

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Pulsed dose oxygen delivery system

Dr Garrod and colleagues have described a pulsed flow oxygen delivery system for use during exercise by patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). They found the device to be four times as economical as nasal cannulae for the same increase in walking distance in patients with COPD compared with the other devices which were tested.2,3 The Haldane type mask fell out of use because, with a limited demand and low price, the manufacturer had little incentive to maintain a stock. Now, with greater likelihood of the benefit, there might be a case for trying again.

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Simian virus 40 and human pleural mesothelioma

Mulatero et al4 report failure to detect Simian virus 40 (SV40) DNA in 12 British mesotheliomas. Their negative results indicate that the previous positive findings are probably a consequence of PCR contamination; we listed laboratory contamination of samples as one of several possible explanations for differing results.

We refer Dr Jasani to our recent letter.5 We described the arrival of a pulsed dose oxygen delivery system. This system permits exercise at a cost of £410.


4 Jasani refers to our recent letter.5 He did not report sensitivity of more than one copy per cell, which is the case for our study.

5 Jasani refers to our recent letter.5 He does not identify any evidence to support his assertion. The studies which have identified SV40 in mesotheliomas have not published data on the samples identified. The samples may have been contaminated differently.

We refer Dr Jasani to our recent letter.5 Above all, we refer the authors to the many studies that have successfully diagnosed SV40 DNA in pleural effusions from patients with mesotheliomas.

Mulatero et al5 did not report sensitivity of more than one copy per cell.

The multi-institutional study to which Dr Jasani refers5 examined only 12 cases of mesothelioma from one hospital in New York, but the samples were analysed in four laboratories including one in Finland which had previously reported negative results for SV40 in local mesotheliomas. All laboratories rejected the possibility that the result may be correct, but he does not identify any evidence to support his assertion. The studies which have identified SV40 in mesotheliomas from Finland and other countries do not report sensitivity of more than one copy per cell.

We refer the authors to the many studies that have successfully diagnosed SV40 DNA in pleural effusions from patients with mesotheliomas.

Mulatero et al5 did not report sensitivity of more than one copy per cell.

We refer the authors to the many studies that have successfully diagnosed SV40 DNA in pleural effusions from patients with mesotheliomas.

AUTHORS’ REPLY Dr Jasani misquotes us when he says we suggested that the authors’ positive findings are probably a consequence of PCR contamination; we listed laboratory contamination of samples as one of several possible explanations for differing results.

We refer Dr Jasani to our recent letter.5 We described the arrival of a pulsed dose oxygen delivery system. This system permits exercise at a cost of £410.

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more widespread use of contaminated polio vaccine in the USA. However, epidemiological evidence indicates that the incidence of mesothelioma in the USA has peaked, whereas a continuing increase in incidence over the next 20 years is expected in Europe. These observations, together with evidence that so far there is no increase in the incidence of mesothelioma in individuals who received SV40 contaminated polio vaccine, do not suggest that SV40 is important in the causation of human mesothelioma.

R M RUDD
C MULATERO
on behalf of the authors
Medical Oncology Department, St Bartholomew’s Hospital, London EC1A 7BE, UK

3 Price B. Analysis of current trends in United States mesothelioma, of which I am one, are not involved.

4 Furthermore, abbreviations are prohibited in a title. Acronyms must be explained fully. But when first mentioned in any biomedical journals, acronyms must be explained fully. Furthermore, abbreviations are prohibited in a title. Specialists often take for granted that certain “trade terms” are so evident that they do not bother to define them. I thought that cachectic, for example, of which I am one, are not involved.

5 Acronyms are useful and often necessary because they simplify and accelerate modern communication. But when abbreviated, acronyms are prohibited in a title. Acronyms must be explained fully. But when first mentioned in any biomedical journals, acronyms must be explained fully. Furthermore, abbreviations are prohibited in a title. Specialists often take for granted that certain “trade terms” are so evident that they do not bother to define them. I thought that cachectic, for example, of which I am one, are not involved.

Acronyms

I write to protest against the use of unexplained acronyms in your editorial entitled “EUROSCOP, ISOLDE and the Copenhagen City Lung Study.” Acronyms are useful and often necessary because they simplify and accelerate modern communication. But when first mentioned in any biomedical journals, acronyms must be explained fully. Furthermore, abbreviations are prohibited in a title. Specialists often take for granted that certain “trade terms” are so evident that they do not bother to define them. I thought that cachectic, for example, of which I am one, are not involved.

65.

Author’s reply

I thank Drs Pirzada and Wales for their interest in our paper and would like to make two points in response. Firstly, I agree entirely with Drs Pirzada and Wales that the oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) should be the test of choice in the diagnosis of cystic fibrosis related diabetes (CFRD). The selective use of OGTT in the diagnosis of CFRD as described by us may indeed miss a few cases of CFRD, but it represents an alternative approach to the diagnosis of CFRD in large cystic fibrosis centres where it may not be practical to perform OGTTs on all patients. As stated in our paper, patients with CFRD missed by our selective approach are those with normal random blood glucose levels, glycosylated haemoglobin, and those asymptomatic of hyperglycaemia. We speculate that the clinical and metabolic consequences of these diabetes may not be as great as those diabetics with one or more of the abnormal criteria cited above. As most adult patients are reviewed at least three monthly, these patients are likely to be identified at a later date.

Secondly, whether the development of CFRD is associated with a deterioration of clinical status remains unresolved. The evidence in the literature on this issue is conflicting. CFRD may cause a decline in patients’ clinical status or it may merely be a marker of poor clinical and nutritional status. The latter may explain the apparent high mortality of CFRD patients as reported by the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. In the management of patients with CFRD, every effort should continue to be made to improve the clinical and nutritional status of patients so that the impact of the development of CFRD is kept to a minimum.

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Methacholine challenge and sputum induction

Spanevello and colleagues claim that a methacholine inhalation challenge carried out one hour before sputum induction in patients with stable asthma does not significantly alter the cellular, eosinophil cationic protein (ECP), or albumin constituents of sputum.1 These results, if correct, are important for both clinical practice and clinical trials where information regarding airway hyperresponsiveness and inflammation is needed. Being able to perform a methacholine challenge and sputum induction on the same day would be the same.

Sixteen subjects with asthma were studied on two days within a week. Sputum induction was performed alone on one day and one hour after a methacholine challenge on the other. Cell counts and the biochemical contents of the two sputum samples were compared using the Wilcoxon signed rank test and a value of p<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

The small sample size, variability in the data, and p values near significance for neutrophils (p=0.06) and macrophages (p=0.08) led us to determine the power of the study. The results of a power analysis for paired continuous data showed that the study only had a 36%, 29%, 10%, 6.6%, and 19.5% chance of detecting a difference in the number of sputum neutrophils, eosinophils, lymphocytes and epithelial cell counts, respectively, and a 6.0% and 15.3% for ECP and albumin. Hence, while methacholine may not influence sputum cell counts, this study is too underpowered to reach this conclusion.

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rhDNase in cystic fibrosis

Cystic fibrosis is a disease that is relatively rare but expensive for patients, families, and carers. The introduction of rhDNase has been associated with controversy as to its benefits and costs. Milla describes the experience in a centre that prescribed this drug to patients, 60% of whom had an FEV1 of more than 80% predicted at the time of prescription. Overall, the group had an accelerated decline in lung function following its introduction. This study illustrates the importance of patient selection and follow up in the prescription of rhDNase.

Paediatricians and chest physicians from the South & West Region of the UK have audited their use of DNase as part of their contribution to the South & West Cystic Fibrosis database. In 1995 78 (12%) of the 664 patients receiving care within the region had been prescribed DNase. This had risen to 143 (22%) in 1996. We subsequently defined criteria for its use: patients over five years of age, FEV1 <70% predicted, and more than one course of intravenous antibiotics during the previous year. In 1995 12 (17%) of patients receiving DNase did not appear to meet these clinical criteria. A further 36 patients who were eligible under these criteria were not receiving the drug.

Innes’ rightly emphasises the responsibility of carers to target this treatment effectively—it is also important that treatment is seen to be equitable and not dependent on postcode. Our experience illustrates that a regional cystic fibrosis database can be a clinically relevant and cost effective device for targeting appropriate treatment. The annual cost of DNase for two patients would be sufficient to fund a regional audit to monitor and influence this and other expensive treatments in patients with cystic fibrosis.

BOOK REVIEW

Up to Date in Pulmonary and Critical Care, Steven E Weinberger. USA: American Thoracic Society.

Up To Date in Pulmonary and Critical Care, a product from the stable of the American Thoracic Society, is one of a rising tide of PC based medical texts. The programme is based on the concept of providing quick and authoritative answers to common specific questions that arise during specialist clinical practice but not as a resource to use when faced with a rare disease.

Presented on CD-ROM for Windows or Macintosh and supported by clear installation instructions, it ran efficiently on a 266 MHz based laptop from the hard disc or CD-ROM drive. The search functions were easy to use with helpful cross referencing links and section content outlines. The initial cost is approximately £300 for the first year with the CD-ROM being regularly updated throughout the year.

Have they succeeded in their aim? Overall, the answer is yes.

Useful practical advice is given on simple but irritatingly difficult questions to answer—for example, provision of oxygen during air travel, the choice of agent for chemical pneumothorax, the role of inhaled steroids in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, etc. However, the programme is slanted toward the American market, as highlighted in the section on long term oxygen therapy (LTOT) which gives, in detail, the billing mechanism. Similarly, nasal calcitonin suggested for the treatment of steroid induced osteoporotic bone pain is not licensed in the UK.

Its functionality makes it a valuable tool in the outpatient setting, being described by one trainee as “really helpful”. This programme would be best suited to hospitals and practices with adequate provision for computing facilities in the clinical area, ideally over a local area network and not located away in the library. The added bonus for the chest physician with a commitment to general medicine is that the disc also has sections on cardiology, gastroenterology, and other main stream disciplines of similar quality.

The programme is slanted toward the American medical market, is one of a rising tide of PC based medical texts and is one of the first products of this kind to succeed where others have failed. It is a commercial success, giving an indication of the potential for a national clinical database. The added bonus for the chest physician with a commitment to general medicine is that the disc also has sections on cardiology, gastroenterology, and other main stream disciplines of similar quality. This programme sets a formidable standard for the UK government’s proposed NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) clinical information system.—SPH

NOTICE

MICRO 2000

Following the success of MICRO 98, the Royal Microscopical Society has announced that a MICRO 2000 international microscopy exhibition and conference will be held on 11–13 April 2000 in London. Further information will be available shortly from the Exhibition Organiser, Royal Microscopical Society, 37/38 St Clements, Oxford OX4 1AJ, UK. e-mail: exhibitions@rms.org.uk
Pulsed dose oxygen delivery system

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