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. The Haldane type mask fell out of use because of the low 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 al report failure to detect Simian virus 40 (SV40) DNA in 12 British mesotheliomas. The possibility that 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.

Authors’ reply Dr Jasani misquotes us when he says we suggested that 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.

Dr Jasani suggests that our failure to identify SV40 may be due to inadequate sensitivity, and he states that the sensitivity of our assay, which we reported at one copy of SV40 per cell, is below the threshold for detecting SV40 in human mesotheliomas. All laboratories reject the possibility that he may be correct, but he does not identify any evidence to support his assertion. The studies which have identified SV40 in mesotheliomas of DNA-negative tumours referred to by him include one in which he was a co-author, did not report sensitivity of more than one copy per cell.

The multi-institutional study to which Dr Jasani refers 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 identified SV40 in 10 of the 12 New York cases. However, in their discussion the authors stated that the Finnish group subsequently confirmed the absence of SV40 in mesotheliomas from Finland and speculated that this was because SV40 contaminated vaccines had not been used in Finland. This evidence points to demographic differences rather than lack of sensitivity as a more likely explanation for differing results from different series.

It appears from the collective results of various studies that the prevalence of SV40 in mesothelioma may be greater in the USA than in Europe, possibly as a consequence of
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.

Acronyms
I write to protest against the use of unexplained acronyms in your editorial entitled “EUROSCOP, ISOLDIE 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 certain “trade terms” are so evident that they do not suggest that SV40 is important in the causation of human mesothelioma. These observations, together with 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. 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 one potential advantage.

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 properties 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 cell counts and biochemical properties.

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Cystic fibrosis and diabetes
Yung et al present important data on cystic fibrosis related diabetes (CFRD) and suggest a selective approach for screening and diagnosis. Although the majority of patients with CFRD may be identified using this approach, over 8% would remain undiagnosed.

CFRD is associated with substantial morbidity and mortality. Analysis of 21,000 patients followed by the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Registry shows a sixfold increase in mortality for CFRD with more severe pulmonary disease.

Once insulin treatment begins, FEV1 and FVC increase and are comparable to non-diabetic patients. In CFRD, the number of pulmonary infections with Haemophilus influenzae and Staphylococcus aureus fall and body mass index increases sharply within three months of starting treatment. Consequently, many may judge the risk for patients undiagnosed by the selective approach to be too high.

Recommendations from the 1998 Consensus Conference on CFRD® state that the fasting glucose and oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) should be performed in all patients with symptoms of diabetes, particularly as measurement of glycosylated haemoglobin (HbA1c) has been shown to be unreliable in the diagnosis of new CFRD. The major discrepancy between the findings of Lang et al and the Brompton group® emphasises this point.

Clear distinction needs to be made between screening and diagnosis. Many tests of glucose control in CFRD lack the sensitivity and specificity to identify most new cases. The approach used by Yung et al may prove to be a suitable screening test since the majority of cases were identified.

The OGTT is currently recommended as the test of choice in the diagnosis of CFRD which aids in prompt and accurate identification of the disease. Otherwise, an entirely treatable cause of pulmonary decline may be missed.

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Letters to the editor
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.1 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 who 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.

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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 pleurodesis, 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 locked 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. 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
Simian virus 40 and human pleural mesothelioma

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