LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BCG vaccination by multipuncture method

I write in response to the article by Al Jarad et al1 on this topic. The first study to compare the efficacy of BCG vaccination and its side effects using the Bignal multipuncture device with the reusable handle and disposable heads was the pilot study of neonatal BCG vaccination carried out in 1992 for the Department of Health in our health authority.2

In previous studies in neonates and children under two, referred in the paper by Al Jarad et al,3 an 18–20 needle percutaneous head gave approximately the same degree of tuberculin conversion as did intradermal vaccination but, to achieve this in older children and adults, 36–40 punctures were required. This would require either a 40 needle head or a double vaccination with two × 18–20 needles. This is why percutaneous BCG is currently only licensed for children aged under two years. Although in neonates4 and in Al Jarad’s study5 in older children the rate of tuberculin conversion was lower with percutaneous than with intradermal vaccination, tuberculin conversion does not necessarily equate to lower efficacy. In the early studies only intradermal BCG the protective efficacy of the vaccination was related to the presence of a scar after vaccination, but not to the tuberculin test result after vaccination. Those with a BCG scar but a negative post vaccination tuberculin test—that is, no tuberculin conversion—had the same degree of protection against tuberculosis over the 15 years following vaccination as did those with a scar and a positive post vaccination tuberculin test.6

The multipuncture method is undoubtedly easier to use in neonates because their very thin skin makes intradermal vaccination difficult, and also in nervous teenagers. Further, long-term studies on large numbers of subjects would be required to determine whether the technique using only 18 needles in older children is as effective as intradermal vaccination. Such studies may well prove to be unnecessary. The PLHS system for enhanced tuberculin surveillance begun this year should, with sufficient cooperation, be able to give the relevant information by the end of 2001 to show whether England and Wales meet the internationally recommended criteria for discontinuation of unselective BCG vaccination in low prevalence countries.1 BCG vaccination of selective at risk groups, however, would still be required.

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AUTHORS’ REPLY To our knowledge our study3 was the first to compare the Bignal device with the conventional device in the multipuncture technique in schoolchildren. We were interested in assessing its efficacy in this particular group as we felt that the multipuncture technique would allow us to protect more schoolchildren of London where it is difficult to access this population. The studies by Cundall et al5 and later by Ormerod and Palmer6 made the same comparison in neonates and small children.

We agree (and stated) that the 18 needle device may not be sufficient to convey a similar conversion rate of the tuberculin test. The manufacturers were unable to produce 40 needle heads as they would require an unacceptably high pressure on the handle to release the needles. We felt that applying two successive punctures with an 18 needle head on the same skin area would not be practicable as the head comes off and would need to be changed after each application. In addition, schoolchildren (and the operators) would not appreciate two applications.

Dr Ormerod’s statement on the BCG scar being a predictor of protection may be appropriate for the intradermal method. In our study the BCG scar in children who received the multipuncture method was not visible in under one fifth of children.

Dr Ormerod is in agreement with our statement that the conversion of the tuberculin test does not equate to protection from tuberculosis, but it is frequently used as an indirect measure of the efficacy of BCG vaccination.

We strongly support the PLHS system for enhanced tuberculin surveillance in the UK, but unfortunately we do not hold out Dr Ormerod’s optimism that it will indicate that unselective BCG vaccination can be discontinued in boroughs and setting where notification rates of tuberculosis are high. Further studies on the protective values of multipuncture BCG may still be appropriate.

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Respiratory care units for non-invasive mechanical ventilation in motor neurone disease

We read with interest the review by Polkey et al1 pointing out the need to use all means possible to enable patients with motor neurone disease to achieve the best quality of life.

The authors state that, in order to maintain 24 hour ventilatory support, nasal ventilation must be complemented with alternative strategies during the day that are not suitable for widespread use in district general hospitals. We consider that it is possible to maintain 24 hour non-invasive ventilation in patients with motor neurone disease if nasal ventilation is combined with other non-invasive techniques such as mouth piece ventilation or a pneumobelt, and with manual or mechanical expiratory muscle aids to clear secretions in those patients whose weakness makes spontaneous coughing ineffective.2 It is important to provide these techniques because they can delay tracheostomy and additional problems in most patients with motor neurone disease and are the only way for those patients who reject tracheostomy but require ventilatory support. However, we agree in agreement with Polkey et al that this treatment must be performed by trained staff in respiratory care units. Moreover, these units are the best place to prevent respiratory morbidity and mortality, to enhance cooperation between patients, relatives and caregivers, and to manage clinical and psychological problems during the terminal phase of the disease.

In our experience the care of patients with motor neurone disease outside respiratory care units needs to be improved. These patients must not be negatively discriminated against compared with other chronic patients receiving even more expensive but socially accepted treatment. We must therefore try to ensure that all patients with motor neurone disease outside respiratory care units in order to receive standardised quality care both in hospital and at home.

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AUTHOR’S REPLY We thank Dr Servera and colleagues for their interest in our paper. We agree that patients with motor neurone disease should have access to specialist expertise where this is necessary. However, we are also conscious that travel can be difficult for some patients with advanced disease and our experience is that, in many cases, satisfactory palliation can be achieved using non-invasive positive pressure ventilation alone. This treatment could theoretically be
Asthma deaths in Scotland and in Wales

It is surprising to say the least that, although the two inquiries into asthma deaths published recently in Thorax1 made the point that most asthma deaths occurred outside hospitals, we are aware of the work to develop a self-admission scheme for patients known to the unit to be subject to life threatening attacks of asthma, whereby the often long delays inherent in conventional admission procedures were bypassed with the willing cooperation of their general practitioners. The scheme was more fully described in 19752 and reports on 10 year and 15 year reviews of its progress were published in 19813 and 1987.4 These showed that the death rate in patients admitted under the scheme was only 0.3%, substantially lower than that recorded in asthmatic patients admitted to other Edinburgh hospitals which rely on conventional admission procedures.

The asthma self-admission scheme was widely welcomed as a measure which could save lives and was copied in many other schemes throughout Wales, but there was no evidence that this important initiative was accepted standards for a major medical journal. There are insufficient details for these papers to be properly scrutinised. They have not been subject to proper peer review and should have no place as the sole references for a new treatment for asthma in the editorial of a major medical journal.


Nebulised fluticasone

The place of nebulised inhaled corticosteroids in the treatment of patients with asthma is difficult to assess, but Dr J M Hill’s editorial in Thorax was inaccurate and below accepted standards for a major medical journal.

Nebulised fluticasone is frequently referred to, yet all the studies referenced5 have only been published as abstracts (sponsored by the manufacturers of fluticasone) in supplements to journals. There are insufficient details for these papers to be properly scrutinised. They have not been subject to proper peer review and should have no place as the sole references for a new treatment for asthma in the editorial of a major medical journal.


References


3 Grant IWB. Deaths from asthma. BMJ 1986:1:575.


3 Grant IWB. Deaths from asthma. BMJ 1986:1:575.


7 Dose of CFC-free inhaled beclomethasone (Qvar), CSMA/MC Carr Prod. Pharmacoecon 1999;25–5.

AUTHOR’S REPLY The author thanks Dr Todd for his constructive comments on her review article.1 There are few published randomised controlled trials of nebulised fluticasone or budesonide in the treatment of asthma. Despite this, these agents are being actively marketed by the pharmaceutical industry so it is vital that the debate about the place of these agents in the treatment of asthma should continue. The author therefore thinks that it is justifiable to review what evidence is available, accepting its limitations in abstract form.

The author apologises for incorrectly quoting a paper comparing the potency of budesonide and fluticasone. The correct reference is cited below. However, the author had presumed that the readers of Thorax would be well aware that data comparing different inhaled corticosteroids apply only to the type of inhaler used in any comparison, and that this basic principle did not require explanation.

Dr Todd’s comments about different nebuliser systems and drug solubility are well taken. However, this was a short review of the available clinical evidence for the use of nebulised corticosteroids in the treatment of asthma. It was not possible, nor did Dr Todd, review nebuliser pharmaco kinetics and, as Dr Todd states, there are no comparative studies of the potency ratio of nebulised budesonide and fluticasone.

Finally, neither Dr Hill nor her spouse has shares in any pharmaceutical company manufacturing asthma treatments. She has received payment from GlaxoWellcome, Boehringer, Bayer, Abbott Laboratories and Astra for presentations/lectures and for attending meetings in the last three years.

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2 Barnes NC, Hallet C, Harris TAJ. Clinical experience with fluticasone propionate in asthma: a meta-analysis of efficacy and systemic activity compared with beclomethasone and beclomethasone dipropionate at half the microgram dose or less. Respir Med 1998;92:95–104.

Pycoderma gangrenosum

Wang et al report an interesting case of systemic pycoderma gangrenosum (PG) with associated lung injury. They recognise the importance of excluding Wegener’s granulomatosis (WG) in patients with respiratory symptoms and cutaneous ulceration, but in their case seem only to have done this on clinical and histopathological grounds. A more complete assessment should include testing for ANCA and anti-protease 3 (PR3).2

We are currently treating a 54 year old ex-smoker who presented for investigation of haemoptysis and who subsequently developed episcleritis and skin lesions resembling PG. Initial investigations were Hb 11.5 g/dl, WBC 9.4 × 10^9/l, platelets 310 × 10^9/l, ESR 86 mm/h, and CRP 181 mg/l. Renal function was normal. The chest radiograph showed alveolar shadowing in the left lower zone and an HRCT scan confirmed pulmonary infiltrates. Fibreoptic bronchoscopy and transbronchial biopsy specimens were normal. Skin biopsy specimens showed epithelial cell necrosis and acute inflammatory changes with no evidence of vasculitis or granulomas, consistent with PG. The ANCA assay was positive with a cytoplasmic distribution and was directed against the proteinase 3 epitope. Despite the absence of histological evidence, the clinical features and positive ANCA supported a diagnosis of WG. One month into treatment with pulsed intravenous methylprednisolone and cyclophosphamide the patient is clinically better with resolution of haemoptysis, healing of the pycoderma-like lesions, and a fall in the CRP to 21 mg/l. Patients with WG frequently present with non-specific signs and symptoms and a high index of suspicion is important. This case highlights the importance of testing for ANCA in patients with PG and respiratory tract symptoms as the treatment of WG requires prolonged immunosuppression for at least a year. Whilst PG itself may be associated with PR3-ANCA, the presence of cANCA directed against PR3 is highly suggestive of WG. The histological features of WG are often patchy in distribution and the absence of the characteristic findings of vasculitis, granulomas, and necrosis does not exclude the diagnosis.3

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AUTHOR’S REPLY I would like to thank Dr Perk ins and colleagues for their interest in our article and for their suggestions. The ANCA assay was only introduced in our hospital in 1997 so we could not use this method to distinguish between WG and PG before that time. The diagnosis of WG in our hospital depends mainly on histopathological examination. In September 1999 the patient came for re-examination. All drugs had been stopped for more than four months, she had no symptoms, and all investigations (including chest radiograph, ESR, and CRP) were normal.

Hereman et al reported the treatment outcome of 158 patients with WG.4 One hundred and thirty three patients received standard treatment of daily low dose cyclophosphamide (2 mg/kg/day) plus prednisone (1 mg/kg/day). This protocol produced marked improvement or partial remission in 91% of recipients; 75% experienced complete remission with a median time of 12 months. Less than 10% of patients so treated experienced remission as late as six years after beginning the protocol. However, 10 cases received corticosteroid only. In this group only two of six cases with limited WG (without renal injury) achieved sustained remission. The authors concluded that the course of WG had been dramatically improved by daily treatment with cyclophosphamide and corticosteroid; other treatment regimens had not achieved such high rates of remission and successful maintenance.

Comparing with Hoffman’s standard protocol, the dosage of cyclophosphamide and duration of treatment in our patient were lower and shorter, respectively. We feel it is unlikely that the clinical picture would have improved so significantly within 10 days if the diagnosis was WG. Of course, the best way is to perform an ANCA test and we intend to do so.

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Therapeutic equivalence of inhaled salbutamol

The meta-analysis by Hughes et al was hindered by difficulties in comparing trials that were often flawed and of varied design.1 The authors correctly pointed out that, in most of the studies, the use of equivalence rather than non-inferiority as the null hypothesis was invalid. In addition, all but two of the studies looked at the bronchodilator effects in the presence of basal airway tone, when the top of the dose response curve for bronchodilator response occurs in mild to moderate asthma at a salbutamol dose of approximately 200 µg for chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) or hydrofluor-alkane (HFA) pressurised metered dose inhalers (pMDIs).2 To construct a proper dose response curve to estimate relative bronchodilator potency would therefore necessitate the use of doses much lower than 200 µg or evaluation of patients with more severe asthma. Two of the cited studies evaluated functional antigenic against histamine induced bronchoconstriction in patients with mild to moderate asthma. However, in such patients the dose response curve for broncho-protection is relatively shallow. For example, in a recent study of 72 patients with mild to moderate asthma a fourfold increment in the dose of formoterol Turbulator (from 6 µg to 24 µg) only resulted in a shift in methacholine hyperresponsiveness of one doubling dose.3

One simple way of evaluating bioequivalent doses of inhaled salbutamol is to evaluate the relative respirable lung dose, which can be quantified as lung bioavailability.4 Early lung absorption profile in the first 20 minutes after inhalation, expressed as the maximal plasma concentration (Cmax), for the same nominal dose.

We have therefore reviewed eight studies performed in our laboratory using an identical design in which a nominal dose of 1200 µg salbutamol was administered via different devices in healthy volunteers. Where the same device was evaluated in two or more
A significant difference between devices was assumed where respective 95% confidence intervals did not overlap. The results are shown in Fig 1.

There were no differences in lung dose between CFC-pMDI, HFA-pMDI, and the dry powder inhalers, although the Accuhaler produced lower levels than the Diskhaler. As expected, the addition of a Volumatic spacer increased the lung delivery for both CFC-pMDIs and HFA-pMDIs. When used in combination with a Volumatic spacer there was greater delivery with HFA than with CFC. The Sidestream nebuliser resulted in a lower relative lung dose than any of the other devices. However, if an adjustment is made to reflect the usual 2500 µg nominal dose administered by nebuliser ($C_{\text{max}} = 2.52 \text{ ng/ml}$), the lung dose is similar to the adjusted value for a 400 µg nominal dose from a Nebulizer spacer with HFA-pMDI ($C_{\text{max}} = 2.96 \text{ ng/ml}$).

Although decreased airway calibre in asthmatic patients will reduce the lung dose of salbutamol from a given device, the relative difference in lung bioavailability between devices will remain the same and is related to the bronchodilator response. Measurement of the lung bioavailability of salbutamol in healthy subjects may therefore represent a simple in vivo method for preliminary quantification of the relative lung dose from different inhaler devices to select rational doses for subsequent clinical equivalence studies in asthmatic patients.

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NOTICE

**International Pediatric Respiratory and Allergy Congress**

The International Pediatric Respiratory and Allergy Congress will be held on 1–4 April 2001 at the Prague Congress Center, Prague, Czech Republic. For further information contact the Congress Secretariat at the Congress Centre, Czech Medical Society, JEP Sokolská 31, CZ-120 26 Prague, Czech Republic. Telephone +4202 296889 or +4202 297271; fax +4202 294610 or +4202 2416836. Email: lonekova@cls.cz
Asthma deaths in Scotland and in Wales

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