LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR

Inhaled fluticasone

I read with interest the article on the effects of inhaled fluticasone propionate and oral prednisolone on markers of airway inflammation in asthma recently published in Thorax by Meijer et al. In particular, it was interesting to read that the magnitude of reduction in airway hyperresponsiveness after fluticasone was more pronounced for adenosine 5'-monophosphate (AMP) than for methacholine. Kettch et al have recently reported that sensitive prediction of the AMP response to inhaled corticosteroids is already apparent as early as 48 hours. Taken together, these findings further support the use of adenosine challenge as a sensitive and convenient non-invasive test of asthmatic inflammation for potential use in diagnosis, monitoring disease activity, and evaluating treatment efficacy.

In asthma the ability of this test to discriminate the changes in airway reactivity with anti-inflammatory treatment better than histamine or methacholine has also been validated with inhaled budesonide and the new anti-inflammatory treatment better than discriminate the changes in airway reactivity after treatment


AUTHORS’ REPLY We have read the letter by Dr Polosa with great interest. We support his view that adenosine challenge appears to be a sensitive non-invasive test of asthmatic inflammation with potential use in diagnosis, monitoring disease activity, and evaluating treatment efficacy in asthma. We have previously shown the latter in a head to head comparison of treatment with 250 mg fluticasone and 50 mg salmeterol twice daily for six weeks. In that study the mean (SD) improvement in PC20 AMP with salmeterol had decreased to 2.2 (0.9) DC, while for fluticasone it remained 5.0 (1.1) DC.

Treatment with fluticasone produced a significantly larger bronchoprotective effect to AMP than salmeterol, whereas both drugs had a comparable effect to conventional parameters—that is, PC20 methacholine and FEV1—12 hours after stopping treatment. Given these observations, the results of our study would have led to the conclusion that salmeterol produces effective asthma control after six weeks of treatment, even when given as monotherapy. This would be in accordance with the international guidelines which state that efficient asthma therapy should be related to symptoms and airway obstruction. Yet, a considerable treatment difference was detectable in favour of fluticasone when the effects were tested with AMP.

AMP is more specific in assessing changes in different components of airway wall inflammation than methacholine. Improvement in PC20 AMP might therefore be a better predictor of efficient anti-asthma therapy

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Figure 1 Improvement in PC20 methacholine and AMP with salmeterol (solid bars) and fluticasone (open bars) both during active treatment and 12 hours after stopping the drugs. *p<0.05, fluticasone versus salmeterol.
than changes in the conventionally used parameters, as advised in current guidelines.

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Gender differences in airway behaviour

We were surprised to read in the exhaustive and, some might say, exhausting review of gender differences in airway behaviour by Becklake and Kaufmann that the most common respiratory symptom—namely, cough—deemed only a single sentence and was then dismissed. In fact, the most dramatic gender difference in airway sensitivity is seen with the cough reflex. We studied 163 consecutive, healthy, non-smoking volunteers (90 women, mean age 32 years) with an inhalation cough challenge of five one-second inhalations of 10% citric acid delivered from a Mefar dosimetre in postmenopausal women. We attributed these changes to the higher rates of asthma incidence in women, with reversal of these differences resulting from larger perimenopausal than in postmenopausal women. Our review would have predicted the opposite, based on the higher incidence of asthma in women during their reproductive years than in men, with reversal of these differences after the menopause. We attributed these changes to the hormonal effects on the airways of women. This paradox is one that invites further study.

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Cell and cytokine markers in COPD

We read with interest the letter paper by Dr Wedzicha and colleagues on cell and cytokine measurements in exacerbations of COPD.1 We feel there are two factors which are worthy of comment. The authors described their patients as being predominantly those with chronic bronchitis. This may explain an exacerbation that consisted of the cardinal features described by Anthonissen and colleagues—namely, combinations of increased breathlessness, increased sputum volume, and increased sputum purulence.2 In view of the fact that increased sputum purulence is a feature of exacerbations, we are surprised at the lack of increase in neutrophils seen in the exacerbation paper. Even if half the patients did not have purulent sputum, we would have expected to have seen an overall increase in the number of neutrophils in the samples obtained.

In addition, the authors stated that sputum induction when most of the patients must have presented with spontaneous sputum production in order to have increased sputum volume or sputum purulence. Surely the use of sputum induction in such patients would lead only to dilution of the bronchial secretion obtained, and this may explain some of the negative neutrophil results. Indeed, in our own studies of approximately 140 exacerbations in a similar setting, two thirds of them were purulent in nature and were associated with increases in cytokines in the spontaneously expectorated sample. The purulent samples were associated with an increase in myeloperoxidase concentration and in neutrophil numbers seen on Gram staining. We would have expected the same findings in the paper by Wedzicha and colleagues if the exacerbations were similar.

We consider that it may be appropriate to stratify exacerbations, particularly when trying to assess the role of intervention treatments and the nature of the cytokines present.

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AUTHORS’ REPLY We appreciate the comments of Professor Stockley and Dr Hill that neutrophils should increase during COPD exacerbations and their hypothesis that this was not found in our study because of a possible dilutional effect of the induced sputum technique on lower airway secretions.

Eleven of the 37 sampled exacerbations (29.7%) in our study1 were associated with purulent sputum, whereas 24 (64.7%) were associated with increased sputum volume and 10 patients had no sputum production at exacerbation. This indicates that 62% (33% of COPD exacerbations are not associated with sputum production.

We have shown previously that the number of viable cells was greater in induced sputum than in spontaneous sputum (65% versus
41.2%, p = 0.001). In the latter study we found no difference in total or differential cell counts between spontaneous and induced sputum. There is therefore no evidence for a diluting effect of induced sputum relative to spontaneous sputum in patients with COPD. Rather, the use of the induced sputum technique allowed us to obtain standardised samples from all our patients at exacerbation, whether or not they were sputum producers. In this study there was a tendency for patients with purulent sputum to have a greater increase in neutrophils at exacerbation (rho = 0.416, p = 0.068) but there was clearly no significant overall change in neutrophils (p = 0.771). Furthermore, there was great variability in the neutrophil counts at COPD exacerbation (IQR 1.18–4.67 × 10^6 cells/g sputum). We sampled our patients early in the course of the exacerbation (median of three days after onset), so a later rise in neutrophil count may not have been detected in our study.

Examination of induced sputum has been used for some years as a diagnostic technique to investigate lower airway inflammation. In asthma this technique is now well established as a relatively safe, non-invasive, repeatable, and valid method and we have shown that it is useful and safe in patients with COPD. It is unlikely that a dilutional effect of induced sputum is important in patients with COPD. The variability in neutrophil counts may reflect heterogeneity in the exacerbations sampled as well as the timing of sampling in the course of an exacerbation.

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Diagnosis and assessment of DPLD

In this excellent report the transfer factor (TL) in untreated cryptogenic fibrosing alveolitis is reported as reflecting the extent of fibrosis; it is noted that Kco (TL/VA) does not. Given more space, the authors might have added that Kco can mislead by being normal or increased when alveolar volume is restricted. This is because Kco is based on a proportional model that does not make valid allowance for alveolar volume. An alternative linear model is available and should be used instead.

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BOOK REVIEW


This book represents the ninth publication in the Clinical Physiology series published for the American Physiological Society and provides a comprehensive review of the multiple facets of lung growth and development in both health and disease. Particular emphasis has been placed on recent advances at the cellular and molecular level with respect to the complex series of controlled interactions involving genetic, hormonal, and cell-cell interactions that are required for lung development. Each chapter is extensively referenced and presents a succinct review of selected topics relevant to lung development by experts in the field.

Inevitably with a multi-author book such as this, there is considerable variability in presentation style with some chapters more accessible to the non-specialist than others. The inclusion of a glossary would have been beneficial in view of the increasing use of abbreviations in this field. Nevertheless, most of the authors have provided an excellent review of their topic and have clearly indicated, not only the current state of knowledge and the clinical significance of recent research findings, but what still needs to be investigated.

The first part of the book is devoted to lung branching morphogenesis, development of the lung elastic matrix and the importance of elastin in lung structure and function, differentiation of airway epithelial cells, and gene expression in alveolar development. Lung development and angiogenesis, including sections which emphasise the importance of postnatal microvascular maturation and the potential impact of exogenous risk factors such as impaired nutrition and glucocorticoid therapy on lung development and alveolisation, are the subject of an important chapter. Other authors have reviewed the developmental aspects of the pulmonary vasculature and circulation, cellular host defence mechanisms, lung epithelial ion transport (including a fascinating overview of its dysfunction in neonatal lung diseases), cell growth and tissue repair, and the role of bioactive peptides.

The last part of the book concentrates on the pathophysiology of neonatal and paediatric pulmonary disease, including discussions of new treatments for surfactant deficiency, the role of nutrition in lung development, the development of lung hypoplasia, and the effects of oxygen toxicity. The final chapter is devoted to a review of current knowledge regarding growth and development of the lung following lung transplantation, including the fact that lung growth can continue when an immature lung is transplanted into either an immature or adult recipient.

The strength of this publication lies in the eclectic mix of topics that are not always covered in books on lung development, and it provides a succinct summary of recent advances and new research in the field. There is now increased awareness that adverse influences on lung development during pre-natal and early postnatal life may have lifelong effects. This book should therefore be of potential interest, not only to paediatric pulmonologists, neonatologists, ICU physicians and obstetricians, but also to chest physicians and surgeons dealing with older patients.—JS

NOTICES

COPD: New Developments and Therapeutic Options

A course on “COPD: New Developments and Therapeutic Options” organised by Professors Peter Barnes and Neil Pride will be held on 26–28 September 2000 at Imperial College School of Medicine at the National Heart & Lung Institute in collaboration with the Royal Brompton Hospital, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY. Enquiries to: Postgraduate Education Centre, Imperial Heart & Lung Institute, Imperial College School of Medicine, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY, UK. Telephone: 020 7351 8172. Fax: 020 7351 8246. Email: shortcourses.nhi@ic.ac.uk

Pharmacology of Asthma

A course on “Pharmacology of Asthma” organised by Professor Peter Barnes will be held on 20–23 November 2000 at Imperial College School of Medicine at the National Heart & Lung Institute in collaboration with the Royal Brompton Hospital, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY. Enquiries to: Postgraduate Education Centre, National Heart & Lung Institute, Imperial College School of Medicine, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY, UK. Telephone: 020 7351 8172. Fax: 020 7351 8246. Email: shortcourses.nhi@ic.ac.uk
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