LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COPD exacerbations

We read with interest the paper by Coton and associates on early discharge for patients with exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and the accompanying editorial by Killen and Ellis. In both publications the 1991 study of our RespiCare home care programme was referenced, and both asserted that our programme was not cost effective. In fact, our study reached the opposite conclusion—namely, that the RespiCare programme was shown to be cost effective.

Actual direct care charges in US dollars were used in our calculations of both pre-programme and on-programme costs. Additionally, administrative costs of operating RespiCare were added into the on-programme costs. Our findings showed that, while hospitalisation costs substantially decreased during the programme, home care costs increased. However, the decrease in hospital costs more than offset the subsequent increase in home care costs, with a total cost savings of $328 US dollars per patient per month or $3936 per year being realised for those on the RespiCare programme. Although the emphasis of the work was on improvements in clinical outcome, the cost savings were significant and an important aspect of our study.

I hope this clarifies any misunderstanding created by the recent articles.

M CAMPBELL HAGGERTY
Pulmonary Nurse Practitioner, Coordinator, RespiCare, Norwalk Hospital, Norwalk, Connecticut 06856, USA


CFC transition

The editorial by Mark Everard found that eight of the 14 clinical studies included in the review cited papers showing poor pMDI technique, including two citing the same paper as Everard by Crompton. The British Thoracic Society asthma guidelines also stress such problems: “Many patients are unable to use MDIs correctly...addition of a spacer device will reduce coordination problems.” Another aspect of the review was inhaler technique. Analysis of studies in which more than one type of inhaler device was assessed (six studies) showed that the “ideal” inhaler technique was found in 59% (95% CI 51 to 67) for DPI, in 43% (95% CI 36 to 50) for pMDI alone, and in 55% (95% CI 49 to 61) for pMDI with spacer. If the same outcome is considered after a period of inhaler technique teaching (20 studies), then the results are 65% (95% CI 59 to 71) for DPI, 63% (95% CI 60 to 67) for pMDI alone, and 74% (95% CI 53 to 88) for pMDI with spacer. There is marked heterogeneity within these studies and thus selective citation could show any one to be better than another.

We agree that clinical testing of all inhaler devices is critical in informed decision making, but the editorial by Everard may imply that pMDIs are worse than other devices thus encouraging the use of perhaps even less effective devices and at a greater financial outcome—we are sure was not intended by the author.

D BROCKLEBANK
Leighton Hospital, Crewe CW1 4QJ, UK
brocklebank@freeuk.com

J WRIGHT
Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Bradford Royal Infirmary, Bradford BD9 6BJ, UK


Hyperventilation syndrome

I have recently come across the paper by Malmberg et al and the accompanying editorial by Gardner of orthostatic increase of respiratory gas exchange in hyperventilation syndrome. Gardner concludes that “the physiological basis for the responses requires investigation and may provide useful insights into mechanisms by which postural changes can influence control of breathing and respiratory sensations.” Should the work of Yates et al have not yet come to your notice, I present it to you for your consideration. I have found it to be fascinating and relevant work with regard to altered breathing patterns in patients with changes of posture, and also it has found an understanding of why many patients with ventilatory and balance disorders also hyperventilate. The rehabilitation of these patients appears to be improved when the hyperventilation component is recognised and the breathing pattern re-educated.

D M INNOCENTI
27 Kennington Palace Court, Salford M6 9YF, London SE11 5UL, UK


Obesity and lung function

The paper by Schachter et al in the January 2001 issue of Thorax is interesting in that it has a number of unusual and, it is suggested, inexplicable findings that appertain to various indices of ventilatory capacity. With all due deference, we would suggest that there is an explanation for these unusual findings.

Firstly, mild, moderate and severe obesity are all associated with an incremental reduction in both the forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV1) and the forced vital capacity (FVC). Secondly, in normal subjects and those who have pure restrictive impairment, the FVC and FEV1 are within 2–3% of each other when expressed as a percentage of predicted. The FVC cannot be significantly smaller than the FEV1, when expressed as a percentage of predicted except in certain neurological diseases. It is noted that the criterion for acceptance of the spirometric volumes was “two measurements of the FEV1, within 100 ml of each other”, suggesting the FVC was ignored. Table 3 in the paper by Schachter et al shows that when expressed as a percentage of predicted, the FVC in every instance is less than the FEV1. In most groups there is a relatively small difference except for those who are moderately obese.

The reason for the disparity in the FEV1, and the FVC is that the FVC manoeuvre was likely to be incomplete, especially in those who are overweight. Some normal large men over 74 inches in height take 12–16 seconds to complete their FVC manoeuvre. Unfortunately, these days few physicians spend any time doing routine spirometric testing themselves as they rely on their technicians. “Shoe leather” epidemiologists such as those from the Cochrane and Jan Higgins have been replaced by computer addicted statisticians who are thrown into ecstasy by what they can do with a computer, but who fail to realise that their original data may be flawed. We marked the paper by Dr Schachter and her colleagues to review their tracings, we suspect that they would find that at least some of the FVC manoeuvres had been aborted prematurely. Only flow-volume loops are reliable in such cases; they are not meant to be borne in mind that it is difficult—and, indeed, usually impossible—to know whether the FVC manoeuvre has been completed.

The other surprise in the study is that the smallest the FVC when expressed as a...
percentage of predicted, the higher the FEV₁. What is abundantly clear, however, is that, when the FVC manoeuvre is incomplete, then the FEF₉₋₂₅ is “pushed” further up the steeper portion of the FVC curve so that the FEF₉₋₂₅ is artefactually increased—that is, the more premature the termination of the FVC, the higher the FEF₉₋₂₅.

The findings of wheeze in those who are obese is not surprising, especially in cigarette smokers. When a markedly obese subject exercises on the treadmill wheezes are frequently heard, providing he can continue to do so. In my experience, obese patients who are otherwise healthy do not usually have any obstructive symptoms or a need for prolonged expiration times to complete their FVC manoeuvres. Their spirometric tracings show that the expiration reaches a clear plateau within 2–3 seconds in the same way as is seen in non-obese subjects.

It is unlikely that our results are due to a systematic underestimation of FVC in the obese groups. In my experience, obese patients who are otherwise healthy do not usually have any obstructive symptoms or a need for prolonged expiration times to complete their FVC manoeuvres. Their spirometric tracings show that the expiration reaches a clear plateau within 2–3 seconds in the same way as is seen in non-obese subjects.

The technical staff involved in the collection of the data are extremely well trained and the measurement methods are well standardised. The same two senior researchers performed all the studies and trained and supervised all other staff involved. Our senior researchers and technicians are very experienced, having performed many large epidemiology studies involving thousands of subjects. The FVC manoeuvre was performed to a minimum of 3 seconds. The criterion for acceptance of the spirometric volumes included both FEV₁ and FVC and required both parameters to be repeatable to within 100 ml. These procedures are stricter than the ATS guidelines which allow for 5% variability between blows. If it appeared that the patient was obstructed, then FVC was performed until expiration was complete.

In reporting our results we did not attempt to draw any conclusions from the very small differences between the percentage predicted FEV₁ and FVC values. Instead, we limited our discussion to the more substantial differences between groups based on body mass index—the hypothesis that we set out to test.

P GRIME
Department of Occupational Health & Safety, King’s College Hospital, London SE5 9RS, UK

AUTHORS’ REPLY The Joint Tuberculosis Committee has not changed its view on the re-vaccination of health care workers with BCG. In 1994 BCG vaccination was only recommended for those without a prior BCG vaccination (usually with absence of a typical scar) who were tuberculin negative. In the 2000 evidence based guidelines BCG vaccination was again recommended only for those who did not have a definite BCG scar (as recorded by an experienced person) or documentary evidence of a prior BCG and were tuberculin negative. These recommendations are consistent. There is no evidence that re-vaccination in health care workers or others who have been given BCG vaccination effectively gives any additional protection. The only issue is what is to be taken as evidence of BCG vaccination. A typical scar is a typical scar, but documentary evidence is also accepted. In the absence of either, in someone who states that they have been vaccinated, a risk-benefit assessment is effectively made.

The risk of vaccination in someone who has been vaccinated already is that they have an accelerated BCG reaction. Conversely, if a health care worker has not actually been vaccinated, they have no protection against tuberculosis if tuberculin negative, with an increased risk being shown. The Joint Tuberculosis Committee’s judgement of this risk benefit analysis in 2000— as in 1994—was that, if BCG vaccination had been shown to have been given, it should be given to tuberculin negative health care workers.

PETER ORMEROD
Chant Clinic, Blackburn Royal Infirmary, Blackburn, Lancashire BB2 3LR, UK


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Chant Clinic, Blackburn Royal Infirmary, Blackburn, Lancashire BB2 3LR, UK


Reliability of PEF diaries

The paper by Kamps et al reported that peak expiratory flow (PEF) diaries kept by asthmatic children were unreliable. They found that about 25% of readings recorded on an electronic meter were not identical to those written in the diary. The Vitalograph 2110 meter was used for this study with subjects reading the best of three blows on each occasion. However, the 2110 meter does not necessarily record the highest value indicated. Rather, it records the highest value for good quality blows in preference to poor quality blows, even if the poor blow is a higher value. A good quality blow is one in which PEF is achieved between 40 and 290 ms of starting, a poor blow being one in which the time to achieve PEF is outside this window. Thus, the value recorded by an electronic meter is not necessarily the best value as observed by the subject.

Several members of our department staff have reliably kept serial PEF records using the Vitalograph 2110 electronic meter. We found that, even though the observers were “experts”, 6–20% of readings recorded by the electronic meter were different from the maximum value recorded in the written diary. In one instance the value recorded by the meter was 146 l/min lower than the highest value recorded by the observer. In instances where the electronically stored reading was different from the maximum recorded written value, the value recorded by the meter was still among those noted by the observer. Furthermore, as blows are performed in quick succession, some subjects have reported occasional difficulty in recalling the last one or two digits of the best value. Inaccuracies can also arise when the clock of the logging meter shows the wrong time.

Of the 25% or so recordings that were reported as being incorrect in the study by Kamps et al, it is possible that a significant proportion could have genuinely been observed by the subjects but not recorded as such by the meter. It is wise to be as critical of electronically stored data as the traditional hand written record.

Lung cancer survival

We read with great interest the article by Gregor and colleagues on the management and survival of patients with lung cancer in Scotland diagnosed in 1995. The results were disappointing, but we congratulate them for their recognition of present conditions and for reporting the scientific analysis. In the 1990s several new chemotherapeutic drugs for lung cancer emerged, although the results of the large phase III studies were disappointing. It is fair to say that standard treatment for advanced lung cancer, especially for non-small cell lung cancer, is not yet established. Several well designed clinical trials have been reported in first class medical journals, but the prognosis of lung cancer is still poor. Published regimens for selected patients to define new study protocols may be inappropriate for use in clinical practice. Many of our patients are ordinary people who have several underlying illnesses and may be too sick to be enrolled in clinical trials, and it is they who need treatment which can be applied in common practice. There is no disagreement on the point that the level of evidence obtained from the retrospective study of heterogeneous patients is low; however, we believe that a study with well analysed data of patients who are otherwise not eligible for randomised control trials also has clinical significance and would benefit such patients. We hope that the first class medical journals such as Thorax continue to encourage, not only randomised control trials, but also retrospective studies to complement the area where strong evidence is unobtainable.

NOTICES

Respiratory Medicine

A conference on Respiratory Medicine will be held at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh on 26 October 2001. For further information contact Ms Eileen Strawn, Symposium Coordinator. Telephone 0131 225 7324. Fax 0131 220 4393. Email: e.strawn@rcpe.ac.uk. Website: www.rcpe.ac.uk.

Pharmacology of Asthma

A course on the “Pharmacology of Asthma” organised by Professor Peter Barnes will be held at the Imperial College School of Medicine at the National Heart & Lung Institute in collaboration with the Royal Brompton Hospital, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY, UK on 26–29 November 2001. The course is suitable for physicians or scientists with an interest in the pharmacology and therapeutics of asthma. For further information please contact the Postgraduate Education Centre, Imperial College School of Medicine at the National Heart & Lung Institute, Dovehouse Street, London SW3 6LY. Telephone: 020 7351 8172. Fax: 020 7351 8246. Email: shortcourses.nlh@ic.ac.uk
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W ANEES, V HUGGINS and P S BURGE

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