Revision of BTS guidelines for treatment of asthma

The paper by Ward et al confirms the findings of Laitinen et al showing that airways inflammation, even in patients with mild asthma. This emphasises the importance of using anti-inflammatory drugs (steroids) as soon as the diagnosis of asthma has been confirmed, even in patients thought to have only “mild asthma”. Without anti-inflammatory treatment, symptoms resulting from bronchial hyperresponsiveness are never controlled and optimal lung function is never attained. Over time, structural changes (remodelling) occur leading to a progressive decline in lung function and the risk of fixed obstruction (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).

The present widespread dependence on bronchodilators in the UK may contribute to the fact that we have one of the highest respiratory death rates in Europe. The use of bronchodilators alone as in step 1 of the BTS guidelines should be discouraged, and treatment started at step 2 with regular inhaled corticosteroids to control symptoms and maximise peak flow rate. Bronchodilators should be used only as necessary for breakthrough wheezing. These principles have been used in Finland since 1994 with remarkable success in treating asthma. The new BTS guidelines would do well to follow their example.

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Authors’ reply

We would like to thank Dr Strube for his interest in our recent paper and his stimulating letter which is topical given that the new BTS guidelines on asthma management are currently in preparation. Our study was an attempt to investigate the interrelationships between airway inflammation, airway structural change (remodelling), lung function, and bronchial hyperreactivity to methacholine in patients with mild to moderate symptomatic asthma.

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The editors will decide as before whether to also publish it in a future paper issue.

Our paper is supportive of a further point, adding to work from others, which we feel is potentially substantive, of possible importance to future guideline considerations, and which relates to some of Dr Strube’s concerns. The potential paradigm shift is that determining appropriate treatment only by reference to symptoms and lung function, as in current international and draft BTS guidelines, or even against indices of inflammation, may be oversimplistic, with prolonged treatment necessary to benefit airway remodelling reflected by improvement in BHR. It should be recognised that this remains a hypothesis and, pragmatically, it is of interest that the inclusion of BHR as an asthma management tool in the UK is not resourced and is not currently practicable.

We also realise that the demanding and detailed preparation of the BTS asthma guidelines has followed a due process of public consultation on the available evidence base with “levels of evidence” leading to “grades of recommendation” and, in turn, to “recommended best practice”. If appropriate pathophysiological research relevant to the clinical questions does not exist, it cannot be included. We feel that longitudinal data that seek to integrate information on airway inflammation, airway remodelling, lung function, and bronchial hyperreactivity and the effects of treatment are required. Such work, though demanding, is possible and would require multidisciplinary cooperation, dialogue, and appropriate support.

Chris Ward is a European Respiratory Society long term research fellow. The work was also supported by Australian NHMRC and a grant in aid from Glaxo Smith Kline.

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PostScript

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Richard CM, Medford AR, Green RH.
Chronic respiratory failure

The recent case report by Smyth and Riley describes an extremely uncommon chronic respiratory failure due to hypoventilation secondary to brainstem stroke, and documents a new treatment option with medroxyprogesterone acetate.

We recently saw two patients also with central hypoventilation resulting in chronic type II respiratory failure and treated both with, among other things, medroxyprogesterone acetate (30 mg twice daily) with good results.

The first patient, a 69 year old man with a medical history of glomus caroticum resection due to malignancy with postoperative respiratory failure, was referred to our outpatient clinic with polyglobulia. Arterial blood gas analysis revealed marked hypocapnia (Paco, 4.8 kPa) and hypercapnia (Paco, 6.9 kPa). An intensive search for the cause showed no abnormality and lactic acidosis function indicated only marginal chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (FEV/VC 68%) but his hypoxic ventilatory response was markedly decreased and his hypcapnic ventilatory response was almost absent. The patient was treated with acetazolamide, theophylline, and medroxyprogesterone acetate and his blood gas tensions improved within days to normal values (Paco, 10.3 kPa, Pao, 5.1 kPa).

The second patient, a 38 year old woman, was known from birth to have a hypothyroid gland deficiency with (stable) adipsia (moquelet index 53). She had complete absence of hypoxia and hypoxic ventilatory responses and normal polysomnographic measurements will be performed shortly, but she also has a complete absence of hypoxic and hypcapnic ventilatory responses. Again, treatment with theophylline, acetazolamide, and medroxyprogesterone acetate normalized her arterial blood gas tensions within days. Furthermore, she now follows an intense weight reduction programme and has lost more than 10 kg in weeks.

Acetazolamide has been shown to augment both the hypoxic and hypcapnic ventilatory response and to decrease Paco levels significantly in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The mechanism of the effect is possibly due to a direct effect on the peripheral chemoreceptors (carotid bodies) as well as an effect on cerebral blood flow regulation. It has been shown that medroxyprogesterone acetate also acts on the peripheral chemoreceptors (directly) as well as on the central chemoreceptors (indirectly) and progestrone receptors in the hypothalamus in cats. This was also found in hypercapnic COPD patients, indicating that medroxyprogesterone acetate acts centrally on the respiratory centres. This suggests that use of medroxyprogesterone acetate in central hyperventilation. Furthermore, the combined treatment of acetazolamide and medroxyprogesterone acetate increases ventilation and improves arterial blood gas values—that is, it decreases Pao, to normocapnic values and increases Paco, to almost normocarbic values in hypcapnic and hypoxic patients with COPD.

In conclusion, we agree with Smyth and Riley that medroxyprogesterone acetate can be used in patients with central hyperventilation disorders.

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Caffeine and exhaled nitric oxide

We read with interest the paper by Bruce et al which reported a significant decrease in exhaled nitric oxide (NO) levels 1 hour after caffeine consumption. However, we do not believe that this study has fully clarified the relationship between caffeine consumption and exhaled NO levels.

When ascertaining the normal ranges for offline exhaled NO measurements we observed that some individuals had raised NO levels at baseline and after consumption of the coffee which was consumed in the morning. However, the significant increase in NO levels after caffeine consumption was less than predicted.

We confirm that caffeine consumption may affect NO levels. From our results we also suggest that levels of exhaled NO are lower in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) than those of Warke et al.

We thank Warke et al for their interest in our paper and for publicising their results. This disparity in the effect of coffee between the two studies is not easy to explain. Although the sex ratio was similar, our subject differed in the following ways: it was measured online, it was placebo controlled, showed that caffeine alone was the active ingredient, and our subjects had less heterogeneity in baseline levels of exhaled NO than those of Warke et al. In addition, we used freshly brewed coffee, measuring both the caffeine content and the serum plasma caffeine levels. Warke et al did not estimate the caffeine content of their coffee which would have been important, especially as instant coffee can have very low levels. We eschew instant coffee, and this may account for the difference. Whatever the cause of such a difference, it appears that coffee consumption can affect exhaled NO levels at either of the antipodes, perhaps in opposite directions.

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References

Morbid obesity and hypersomnolence in several members of an ancient royal family

Recent studies have described an inherited basis for the sleep apnoea syndrome, as suggested by reports of families with multiple affected members. We present evidence indicating that several members of the Ptolemy family, the royal family that ruled Egypt from 305 to 30 BC, suffered from obesity and sleep disordered breathing. Most of the information was reported by the Greek philosopher and historian Athenaeus (170–230 BC).

The family's pedigree with all affected members (shaded) is shown in fig 1. Magas I (case 1) was morbidly obese. Athenaeus reported that Magas “was weighted down with monstrous masses of flesh in his last days; in fact, he choked himself to death.” Magas II (case 2) and his sister Arsinoe III were extremely obese. Ptolemy II was not an energetic man and he disliked physical exertion. Although he lived to the age of 62, he was troubled by ill health throughout most of his life. Ptolemy IV the Philopator (case 3),

was described as licentious even by the standards of his contemporaries. Calvin Wells reported that he was obese and he languished in habitual lethargy, perhaps because of chronic illness. Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II (case 6) was morbidly obese. Apart from naming him Evergetes (benefactor), Alexandrians labelled him Kakergetes (malefactor) and—because of his obesity and large belly—“Physkon” (large bubble). Ptolemy VIII’s belly was so large that it was referred to as “Physkon, and due to gluttony somnolent observed: wise poet your verses are somewhat exaggerated…… And from obesity heavy as a stone, and from veracity somnolent the unalloyed Macedonian could scarcely keep his eyes open.”

From these descriptions it is clear that obesity was present in all of them and, in at least four of the seven kings, there were reports of daytime somnolence. This dynasty was probably the first reported family with sleep disordered breathing that had a familial predisposition.

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Thorax 2003 58: 281-282
doi: 10.1136/thorax.58.3.281-b

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