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

Transoesophageal echocardiography and lung cancer staging

Cardiac involvement by tumour is found in 25% of patients who die from lung cancer and, in the majority of these patients, the involvement is asymptomatic.1 With a significant proportion of patients subjected to lung cancer surgery dying from disease progression within 6 months of surgery, the British Thoracic Society guidelines on the selection of patients with lung cancer for surgery may help to reduce this number.1,2 These guidelines acknowledge the excellent staging potential of PET scanning but only mention echocardiography in the context of valvular or ischaemic heart disease. Echocardiography is an excellent modality for detecting cardiac malignancy.3 An increasing number of anaesthetists are joining the already large number of cardiologists able to perform transoesophageal echocardiography (TOE). We suggest that patients presenting for lung cancer surgery who have either ECG abnormalities or poorly differentiated paracardiac tumours should undergo TOE before thoracotomy. The TOE examination would add little to the total operative time but would add contemporary information to existing older information regarding disease stage. Moreover, there would be a small number of patients who would be spared thoracotomy.

A recent case in which left atrial extension of a lung cancer was demonstrated by intraoperative TOE but missed by preoperative PET scanning and the standard staging methods lends anecdotal weight to our argument. Not only did our patient suffer an unnecessary thoracotomy, but also left papillary arterial tumour embolism. This is not the first time a patient has had a thoracotomy abandoned because of tumour involvement of the left atrium revealed only by intraoperative TOE.1 In both cases TOE in the anaesthetic room would have prevented thoracotomy and, in our case, distant tumour embolisation may not have occurred.

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Asthma guidelines

We read with interest the new British guideline on the management of asthma, published recently as a supplement to Thorax.4 The evidence review groups and guideline authors are to be congratulated on the production of a document of exceptional clarity and ease of use. There is no doubt that adherence to the guideline could contribute substantially to the better management of asthma in the majority of adults, including most elderly patients. However, we feel moved to point out the lack of reference to the difficulties of diagnosis and treatment in patients with abnormalities of cognition, praxis, dexterity and executive function, most of whom are elderly with varying degrees of dementia and/or cerebrovascular disease. This is a retrograde step as earlier versions of the asthma guideline referred to some of these issues. We see this as a missed opportunity to improve the detection and management of asthma in this group of patients who are known to have a high level of morbidity from that condition (class 2 evidence), and in whom the asthma mortality curve is not falling (class 1 evidence). Some of the most recent published work in this domain will not have been included in the evidence trawl for the guideline.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence in the literature relating to the quality of clinical information (class 2+ and 3) in such patients, including spirometry (class 2+) and on the issues of inhaler device competence (class 2+ and 3) or learning and training (class 2+). There is also class 2+ evidence that elderly subjects are less able than younger subjects to detect changes in airflow resistance, which has implications for reliever therapy at steps 1 and 2 of the guideline. We strongly advocate that future revisions of the guideline should take account of this evidence, probably as a grade C recommendation or good practice point.

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Self-management of asthma in general practice

We welcome the paper by Thoonen and colleagues on self-management of asthma in general practice as we firmly believe that self-management of chronic diseases is a promising area for innovation in general practice.

We wondered whether differential withdrawals—specifically, the difference between groups in the number of patients for whom successfully treated weeks could be calculated—may have affected the outcomes. As reported, 92% of the patients in the usual care (UC) group provided data for this primary outcome compared with 85% of the self-management (SM) group. The mean percentage of successfully treated weeks was 72%
and 78% for the UC and SM groups, respectively, a difference reported to be statistically significant. As we do not expect that these specific outcomes were analysed on an intention to treat basis, non-random withdrawal might have biased the findings—for example, when most patients who withdrew from the SM group did so because they were not able to comply with the SM programme and their asthma was badly controlled, this would affect the outcomes, inflating the differences in favour of the SM group.

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Authors’ reply
In their letter van der Wouden and colleagues question the issue of selective withdrawal of subjects from the two study groups which may have had consequences for the validity of our conclusions. As a possible source of bias in calculating successfully treated weeks this might be an important issue which was not discussed in depth in our original paper.

To address this question we performed an additional analysis of the study records of all subjects excluded from the calculation of successfully treated weeks. We divided all these subjects into two categories: (1) those excluded from the calculation because of side effects to inhaled steroids, poor asthma control, referral to a pulmonary physician, or non-compliance with the study protocol (categorised as “unable to comply”), and (2) subjects excluded because of a change in address or GP, pregnancy, or unknown reasons (categorised as “other reasons”). The number of subjects in the “unable to comply” subgroup was four out of 15 in the self-management group (4% of all self-management subjects) and five out of eight in the usual care group (5% of all usual care subjects). The number of withdrawals for asthma related reasons (including poor asthma control) was therefore relatively small in both study groups and was, in fact, relatively higher in the usual care group. We therefore believe that the impact on the number of successfully treated weeks must have been limited and, if present at all, was in favour of the usual care group rather than the self-management group.

We conclude that, even if there were differences in the withdrawals between the two groups, this does not change our conclusion that self-management of asthma is at least equally as effective as the asthma treatment usually provided in Dutch primary care. This conclusion supports the view of van der Wouden and colleagues that self-management of asthma is a promising innovation in general practice.

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Reference

Bronchoscopy in patients with suspected PCP: supine or sitting?

We read with interest the case report by Newton et al describing plathyponyoxia and orthodeoxia in a patient with pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP) who failed to respond to the usual therapy and progressive dyspnoea. A chest radiograph showed bilateral diffuse lung shadowing, maximal in the perihilar regions and lower zones, but with relative sparing of the lung bases. PaO2 breathing air was 8 kPa. PCP was suspected and fibroptic bronchoscopy and BAL performed. Sedation was with 2 mg midazolam. The bronchoscopy, which was performed with the patient sitting, was complicated by a fall in SaO2 to 85% which was only partially corrected by supplemental oxygen. Pneumocystis was identified in the BAL fluid sample and treatment commenced with high dose co-trimoxazole. PaO2 breathing air markedly improved 96 h after bronchoscopic examination, while supine and breathing air, the patient had an SaO2 of 98%. Rising to the sitting position led to a steady fall in SaO2 to 94%, which rapidly corrected to 99% when the patient returned to the supine position.

Our patient showed orthodeoxia similar to that described by Newton et al. This became clinically important when bronchoscopy was performed in the sitting position. Predominant mid and lower zone shadowing is a common radiographic feature in PCP and we wonder whether the phenomenon of platypnoea and orthodeoxia may be widespread in such patients. A study to identify the frequency of this finding would be worthwhile and easy to do. We suggest that supine and sitting SaO2 measurement should be routine before bronchoscopic investigations in such patients and that bronchoscopy in the supine position might be the approach of choice for patients with suspected PCP.

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Atopic cough: little evidence to support a new clinical entity

A cough is by far the most common reason for a patient to seek medical advice.1 Most of these consultations are for acute cough caused by a myriad of respiratory viruses. In practice, we do not attempt to differentiate rhinovirus infection from adenovirus because no important consequence arises from this diagnostic precision. In chronic cough numerous studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of patients are suffering from one of three conditions: a form of asthma, gastro-oesophageal reflux, or rhinitis.2 The question is whether any further subdivision is justified or merely muddies the water.

In their recent paper published in Thorax Fujimura and colleagues, by inventing a diagnosis of “atopic cough”, have succeeded in adding further unnecessary complexity to the area.3 There are many aspects of this paper which cannot be left unchallenged and we have outlined these below.

The evidence to support a new clinical entity “atopic cough” is tenuous and is further hampered by the extremely vague term “probable atopic cough”. This point is well illustrated in their table 2 which outlines a variety of diagnostic permutations possible after interpretation of a series of investigations. We suspect the authors have, in a significant number of these “probable” patients, merely described atopic individuals with cough predominant asthma. Certainly the demonstration of bronchial hyperreactivity (BHR) in 15 such patients (median PC20 2.5 mg/ml, range 1.25–5.0), many of whom had airway eosinophilia and all of whom appear atopic, is suggestive. Such diagnostic imprecision may yet have therapeutic consequences, but the authors do not provide sufficient information in the paper to conclude that these patients failed to respond to steroids, and have indicated that response to bronchodilators was tested in neither a randomised nor a controlled way.

The authors have relied heavily on the “absence of transformation to typical asthmatic symptoms” to differentiate atopic cough from asthmatic cough. Such a conclusion can hardly be supported by a telephone follow up which relies on patient recall and subjective assessment of symptoms. In some series up to one third of patients with cough predominant asthma may have transformed.3,4 This phenomenon is well documented in the literature and we wonder whether the phenomenon of platypnoea and orthodeoxia be widespread in such patients. A study to identify the frequency of this finding would be worthwhile and easy to do. We suggest that supine and sitting SaO2 measurement should be routine before bronchoscopic investigations in such patients and that bronchoscopy in the supine position might be the approach of choice for patients with suspected PCP.

We strongly contest the suggestion that patients identified as having cough variant asthma may have been misclassified. In this study steroid efficacy was not a sole criterion for the diagnosis of cough variant asthma as all 10 patients had BHR (mean PC20 3.44 mg/ml, range 0.04–8). Only two of these patients were atopic. We believe our clinical understanding of asthmatic cough is enhanced by the recognition that an individual patient may show different features of the disease process. The unnecessary subdivision into arbitrarily defined “diseases” such as atopic cough (or, indeed, eosinophilic bronchitis) is not helpful either diagnostically or therapeutically.

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Bronchoscopy in patients with suspected PCP: supine or sitting?

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Since we proposed atopic cough as an aetiological entity in 1992, a number of Japanese chest specialists have used the same arguments as McGarvey and Morice to criticise the concept. They insist that, because corticosteroids are effective in atopic cough as well as in asthma and cough variant asthma, all of these should be categorised as "asthmatic cough". They continue to suggest that such insistence runs counter to the progress of medical science. It is very important to recognise that there are different clinical manifestations of eosinophilic airway inflammation, and cough sensitivity is non-specific to the actual cough mechanism. We continue to suggest that subdividing eosinophilic airway inflammation into asthma, atopic cough, and eosinophilic bronchitis without asthma are as well known that cough sensitivity is increased in patients with cough variant asthma and asthma (asthmatic patients), as reported by McGarvey and Morice. Our opinion is that increased cough sensitivity is a complication in asthmatic patients but it is not a fundamental aspect of the asthmatic airway.

The data presented in our paper showing that six of 20 patients with cough variant asthma not taking long term inhaled corticosteroid therapy developed typical asthma are consistent with previous reports. Although Orejas et al. reported that typical asthma occurred in only 6% of 63 patients with cough variant asthma during a 3 year follow up period, there exists an important problem in the diagnostic criteria for cough variant asthma. Orejas et al. and many other investigators have diagnosed cough variant asthma based on BHR without assessing the efficacy of bronchodilator therapy or measuring cough sensitivity, resulting in the inclusion of non-asthmatic patients who, in fact, have atopic cough.

McGarvey and Morice and other investigators feel that subdividing eosinophilic airway inflammation disorder caused by non-specific corticosteroid therapy or measuring cough sensitivity, resulting in the inclusion of non-asthmatic patients who, in fact, have atopic cough.

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References

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Transoesophageal echocardiography and lung cancer staging

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