LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Pulmonary infiltrates following bone marrow transplantation**

I enjoyed reading this paper by Campbell and colleagues (1994;48:777P), which reviewed their experience of fibroptic bronchoscopy and bronchoalveolar lavage in the investigation and management of pulmonary infiltrates following bone marrow transplantation. The conclusions they drew were valid given the data presented, but I suggest that they should have emphasized that the impact on overall survival was disappointing poor when the investigation was carried out after failed empirical therapy.

The essential point here is that in this series the practice was to bronchoscope and lavage only those patients who had not responded to empirical therapy. By definition, therefore, there was a delay from presentation to investigation. It would be helpful to know whether or not there was a standard approach to empirical therapy in the patients reported in this series, and some idea of the length of delay between initial presentation and subsequent investigations.

Although I agree that there are no published data showing a clear benefit from open lung biopsy in such patients, when patient survival is taken into account as the outcome, the review of these papers suggests an unacceptably high morbidity and mortality relating to the procedure itself. The situation with regard to usefulness of early fibroptic bronchoscopy and bronchoalveolar lavage will not be resolved until a randomised prospective clinical trial is carried out to assess the impact of making a specific microbiological diagnosis early in the course of the disease. Such clinical trials would have to be conducted within different subgroups of immunocompromised patients to produce data of clinical value.

**Guidelines on management of acute asthma**

In the revised Guidelines on the management of asthma (March 1993;48:Supplement) the statement "sedation is contraindicated outside the intensive care unit" has been changed to "any sedation is contraindicated" in patients with acute asthma. Enquiry of colleagues has confirmed that I am not unique in the view that sedation is sometimes appropriate in the management of acute asthma. It has always seemed illogical to me that sedation may not be tried in a situation where one does not know whether anaphylaxis is frightening the patient with asthma, or has severe asthma because he is frightened. It is the practice in both the units in which I work, with the full cooperation of the anaesthetists, that such patients are transferred to the ITU. Sedation is tried. All parties accept that the patient may require ventilation as a result and are prepared for this.

Admissions in the last five years recorded in the ITU registers for asthma have been reviewed. Twenty nine subjects (30 admissions) were transferred to ITU where it was felt that ventilation was probably indicated. On 10 occasions (nine subjects) sedation was used before possible ventilation. In one instance sedation was clearly inappropriate in a patient in the terminal stages of chronic airway obstruction with carbon dioxide retention. Five patients did not improve and were ventilated without any problems. Three other patients did improve, with improvement in blood gases. One of these patients also improved on a different occasion, but blood gases were not measured after sedation. Sedation may have saved three patients the trauma and expense of ventilation on four occasions in all. I accept that the first patient mentioned illustrates the necessity for this decision to be taken by senior staff, experienced in the management of acute respiratory problems.

Guidelines and protocols are proliferating and will be increasingly used as reducing working hours inevitably reduce continuity of care. In an increasingly litigious atmosphere they will also be increasingly used by lawyers. I have taken informal advice from a senior member of the judiciary who, as a barrister, has wide experience in medicolegal work.

In his opinion it is extremely unsafe to make unqualified statements where there is a significant minority of opinion which disagrees. In this specific example the implications are particularly serious, as litigation might concern the death of a young person with respiratory problems. I have already shown that regular bronchodilators are used by 70% or more of patients attending hospital clinics, very much higher than one would have suspected from the guidelines for chronic asthma. One wonders if the same may be true of the use of sedatives in acute asthma, at least in the ITU.

**REFERENCES**

2 Lund Asthma Information Agency. Seasonal variations in asthma. London: Department of Public Health, St George's Medical School, St George's Medical School, Factsheet 93/4.

**AUTHORS’ REPLY**

We agree that the associations reported in our study should not be taken to infer a causal relationship between pollutants and health. At the time of this study, which took place in 1990–1, software for full time series analysis was not available to the authors. With regard to confounding by meteorological conditions, temperature was included in regression models for winter, spring and autumn, but not for summer admissions where it had no relation with hospital admission. Relative humidity was significantly associated with hospital admissions during the summer and was included as it was significantly and independently associated with hospital admissions.

We agree, however, that there may be potential confounding factors which remain unaccounted for by the published analysis. Although influenza was excluded specifically from the hospital admissions, it is likely that some admissions for other respiratory complaints were precipitated by influenza. Although it may act as a confounding factor, particularly for weekly hospital admissions, we would require an association between influenza virus infection and air pollution levels to exist for it to be a major confounder for daily hospital admissions, otherwise it would simply have the effect of raising the baseline levels of admissions during one of the winters studied.

In order to address this issue a further study is currently under way which will also address some of the other points raised. Analysis using autoregressive time series and Poisson regression models, on an extended data set from Birmingham, together with additional health outcome measures is underway. This employs complex adjustment for temperature, seasonality, linear trend and day of the week. Although the estimates of effect differ slightly, preliminary data suggest that the conclusion is not altered and that hospital admissions for respiratory disease are significantly and independently associated with black smoke levels.

**SARAH WALTERS**

**JON AYRES**

Institute of Public and Environmental Health, The University of Birmingham Medical School, Birmingham B15 2TJ, UK

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**PAUL CORRIS**

Department of Respiratory Medicine, Royal Infirmary, Newcastle upon Tyne NE7 7DN, UK

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