LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PEF versus FEV1

The assertion by Dr Thiadens and colleagues1 that identification of airflow limitation and estimation of its reversibility by a bronchodilator is less reliable when measured by peak expiratory flow (PEF) than by forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. They measured both values with a Microlab 3300 turbine spirometer, disregarding the fact that, in primary care, PEF is almost always measured by peak flow meters of variable orifice type which employ an entirely different principle and give considerably higher values. Jones and Mullee,2 who compared a similar Microlab turbine spirometer with a turbine flow meter, found that values of PEF measured by the latter were, on average, 87 l/min higher. Hence, the values reported by Thiadens et al would have been much higher if they had been measured by the peak flow meter discussed in the paper.

To compare the reliability of PEF and FEV1, for estimating magnitude of airflow limitation, Thiadens et al expressed observed values of each as percentage predicted, using the reference values for each sex recommended by the European Respiratory Society (ERS).3 Those for predicting PEF were derived from regression equations which describe a linear fall with age and give predicted values much lower than curvilinear regressions such as those of Nunn and Gregg,4 which an ERS Working Party on PEF5 subsequently judged to be the most satisfactory reference values for prediction. The difference in l/min between predicted values derived from the latter and those from the ERS regressions was roughly equal in each sex (fig 1) to the difference between the turbine and observed values and the values which would have been obtained with a peak flow meter. Since they are of opposite direction, they obscure the spuriously low absolute values measured by the turbine spirometer. Nonetheless, Thiadens et al considered that, in 19.2% of their patients, low values of PEF were associated with normal values of FEV1, whereas in only 3.3% of patients was a normal value of PEF associated with an abnormally low value of FEV1.

To evaluate the relative merits of FEV1, and PEF as indices of bronchodilator reversibility Thiadens et al compared changes in PEF, expressed as percentage differences in predicted values, with changes in FEV1 as percentage differences in absolute values. The dissimilar manner in which the values were expressed invalidated their comparison and, hence, any conclusions drawn from it; it also underlines the authors’ prolix discussion of the sensitivity and specificity of their findings wholly irrelevant.

There is no justification for stating that a cut off value for a rise in FEV1, after a bronchodilator is “useful and valid in separating asthma from COPD” since a bronchodilator reveals only immediate reversibility. Moreover, true irreversibility does not necessarily signify COPD since it may be present in patients with longstanding asthma in whom structural damage of the bronchi has occurred. The most convenient and reliable test in primary care for distinguishing between potentially reversible and truly irreversible airflow limitation is still twi- or thrice daily monitoring of PEF during a course of corticosteroid treatment.

The conclusion by Thiadens et al that PEF is more reliable than FEV1 for assessment of airflow limitation and reversibility is not supported by their findings. Although I am very reluctant to criticise their study, attention needs to be drawn to its faults because the prominence given to their study by Thorax is likely to persuade general practitio- ners that its findings are valid and its conclusions are authoritative.

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Authors’ reply

Dr Gregg’s remarks on our paper concern four major points: (1) the differences between the Micro medical spirometer and the mini-Wright peak flow meter; (2) the choice of predicted values; (3) the “dissimilar manner” in which changes in PEF were compared with changes in FEV1; and (4) the use of changes in the FEV1/FVC ratio.

(1) It is true that there are differences between the two devices based upon the different principles—turbine flow measurement and variable orifice peak flow measurement. As we stated in the discussion part of the paper, the turbine flow meter yields slightly lower values than a pneumotachograph;3 and the variable orifice peak flow meter yields significantly higher values (200–300 l/min) than a pneumotachograph in the mid region.1 In both cases the pneumotachograph value is considered the reference value. Without pertaining to the brand of the portable spirometer used, it appears that the turbine values generally meet the criteria for monitoring a reversible airflow limitation in ATS.1 In any case, the differences between the devices are systemic and should not interfere with the results of the study, provided that the same device is used throughout it.

(2) In the discussion this issue has also been questioned. The choice of the predicted values depends in part on the equipment used. The ERS predicted values for PEF are obtained from a mixture of pneumotachograph and mini-Wright peak flow data whereas the values proposed by Dr Gregg are obtained from mini-Wright peak flow meters. The values produced by the turbine spirometer come closest to the pneumotachograph values. In fact, the ERS values are probably the best choice.

(3) This issue was referred to in the discus- sion of our paper. We did not only compare the changes in FEV1, expressed as percentage differences of predicted values, with changes in PEF, both expressed as percentage differences in absolute values; we also compared changes in FEV1, as percentages of the initial values (including absolute improvement of 200 ml) with changes in PEF, both expressed as percentage differences, to the initial values (see table 3). We agree that measuring longitudinal reversibility with a corticosteroid is the best method, although we prefer to use the FEV1 value at the start and the FEV1 after some weeks of corticosteroid treatment as outcome parameters. This issue was also discussed in the editorial by Professor Jones.

(4) Generally, the FEV1/FVC ratio is a reli- able indicator of bronchial obstruction pro- vided the manoeuvre is carried out correctly. This is a problem with hand held spirometers, and the recommendations are that the expiratory curve be followed in this part of the testing to ensure that a true beginning and end of the forced expiration is detected. This is not pos- sible with hand held spirometers and inevita- bly leads to falsely low FVC values. In our opin- ion, therefore, it is wise to exclude this parameter from analysis.

Although Dr Gregg is very definitive in his opinion about the value of peak flow measurements, especially using the mini-Wright meter, he has not been able to convince us, nor has he referred to validity studies about the accuracy of this device in demonstrating (reversible) airflow limitation.

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Differentiation between mitral stenosis and coexisting PPH

I read with great interest the case report by Langleben et al of a woman with coexisting mitral stenosis and primary pulmonary hypertension (PPH) or plexogenic pulmonary arteriopathy (or primary pulmonary arteriopathy) who succumbed to operation for relief of her mitral stenosis. The failure of the patient's pulmonary hypertension to decrease postoperatively led to her fatal outcome because the coexisting primary pulmonary hypertension was not recognised preoperatively.

I would like to call attention to the fact that the diagnosis should have been suspected preoperatively because her pulmonary artery wedge pressure was only modestly raised (16 mm Hg; normal = 12) and her pulmonary vascular resistance was extremely high (1823 dynes s cm⁻¹; normal = 67 (30)). In the presence of severe mitral stenosis the pulmonary artery wedge pressure, which reflects the left atrial pressure, is usually substantially increased whereas the pulmonary vascular resistance is usually normal or mildly raised in the presence of “reactive” as well as “passive” pulmonary hypertension. On the other hand, in primary pulmonary hypertension the pulmonary artery wedge pressure is usually normal and the calculated pulmonary vascular resistance is extremely high.

Case reports like that of Langleben et al illustrate the importance of careful analysis of the haemodynamic data obtained at cardiac catheterisation in order to identify plexogenic pulmonary arteriopathy (or primary pulmonary hypertension) obscured by or masquerading as other disorders such as mitral stenosis.

AUTHORS’ REPLY Dr Cheng’s analysis of the patient we presented is somewhat superficial from several aspects. Firstly, by current convention and by definition, a mean pulmonary capillary wedge pressure of more than 15 mm Hg is not consistent with the diagnosis of primary pulmonary hypertension. With that finding one must begin to suspect other diagnoses. The detection of severe mitral valvular disease on an echocardiogram also precludes a diagnosis of primary pulmonary hypertension. Secondly, we agree that most patients with mitral stenosis have increased wedge pressures making the diagnosis obvious and easy. However, there is a subset of patients with severe mitral stenosis who present with a “markedly reduced cardiac output and a low pulmonary artery pressure gradient”—that is, a relatively low wedge pressure. Thus, the absence of a very high wedge pressure does not preclude the diagnosis of mitral stenosis, particularly when the cardiac output is low. Conversely, a modestly decreased wedge pressure gradient is consistent with the presence of severe mitral stenosis. This finding one must begin to suspect other diagnoses.

Thus, this case was much more complex than Dr Cheng implies. Had we ignored the echocardiographic data and initially assumed, as he does, that she obviously had primary pulmonary hypertension, then administration of currently accepted therapy for that disease—that is, vasodilators—would probably have killed her by producing pulmonary oedema from an inability of the lung to drain through a stenosed mitral valve.

That potential outcome suggests that, while careful analysis of haemodynamic data obtained at cardiac catheterisation is, of course, essential, a superficial perusal of the subtleties of pulmonary vascular disease is equally dangerous.

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Caring for indigenous Australian children with asthma

We applaud Dr Partridge’s recent thought provoking editorial which is timely with recent articles focusing on medicine, poverty, and marginalisation. We wish to add that the issues raised by Partridge are also highly relevant in Australia with respect to indigenous Australians who have unacceptably high levels of morbidity and mortality compared with non-indigenous Australians. Also, in addition to the influence of the doctor/patient relationship on health care, we wish to question the model of care used by doctors and other health care providers when serving minority groups.

We have had the privilege of providing a paediatric respiratory outreach service to remote indigenous communities in far north Queensland over the last three years. In these children we found a high rate of persistent asthma and non-optimal use of asthma devices as well as poor asthma knowledge. Also, by using the community controlled primary health care model instead of the standard practice of servicing through the hospital system, we were able to achieve very high attendance rates (95%) (unpublished). Although high attendance rates may not necessarily equate to better care, they do provide a greater opportunity for addressing important elements of health maintenance such as health education and preventative medicine in contrast to an “acute medicine” approach.

It is easy for doctors to revert to a defeatist approach when providing care to minority groups—put the onus on the patients and blame culture and language differences. It is harder to examine and question one’s interaction with one’s patients and critically to examine how best to provide a genuine service. As stated by Richard Smith: “they deserve the best, not the poorest, care.”

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Intravenous montelukast in acute asthma: expensive aminophylline?

We read with interest the recent paper by Dockhorn et al comparing the effects of single doses of intravenous and oral montelukast on forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) in patients with chronic persistent asthma. We agree with the accompanying editorial, that a study of montelukast in acute severe asthma is now warranted. Indeed, few
published studies have examined the use of leukotriene receptor antagonists in patients with severe persistent asthma.3

There are several good reasons why an intravenous leukotriene receptor antagonist might be effective in acute severe asthma, including evidence that high dose oral steroids do not affect leukotriene synthesis in vivo, and that induced sputum cysteinyl leukotriene concentrations are significantly higher in subjects with severe acute asthma than in patients with milder asthma and normal controls which suggests that leukotrienes may be more functionally important in patients with acute severe asthma.3

The question is what most clinicians wish to answer is whether adding an intravenous leukotriene receptor antagonist will produce further improvements in patients with acute severe asthma who have already received conventional first line treatment including nebulised high dose salbutamol, ipratropium bromide, and systemic corticosteroids. In other words, is an intravenous leukotriene receptor antagonist any better as second line intravenous treatment than aminophylline or salbutamol? The results of such studies are awaited with keen interest. It is behoven upon the pharmaceutical industry to sponsor such studies, asking clinically relevant questions regarding the role of leukotriene receptor antagonists as second line intravenous treatment.

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Conflict of interests: The Asthma & Allergy Group of the BMJ have no undisclosed interests.

6 Lipworth BJ. Treatment of acute asthma. Lancet 1997;350(Suppl 2):8–23.

AUTHORS’ REPLY We would like to thank Drs Dempsey and Lipworth for their concise thoughts on the topic of the additive effects of antileukotriene drugs in acute asthma.

In chronic asthma antileukotriene drugs have been shown to have additive benefits with β agonists,1 corticosteroids,2 and theophylline.3 Since acute asthma episodes are included in the spectrum of the asthmatic response, it is highly likely that antileukotriene drugs will provide at least similar additive effects in this setting.

Adult studies with antileukotrienes in acute asthma in addition to usual treatment will be required. Once safety and efficacy have been demonstrated in adequately controlled trials in adults, paediatric studies or trials with active comparators can be considered.

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TB guidelines

We read the BTS guidelines on the management of tuberculosis4 with great interest. For the most part the paper is an excellent summary of best practice and a good reference for a number of difficult situations. We were, however, less happy about the recommendation to move to a four drug regimen for most patients. We wonder if it is legitimate to generalise a practice which may be sensible in London with a significant refugee problem but which may be unnecessary in other parts of the UK.

The recommendation for a four drug regimen is graded as A (requires at least one randomised control trial). Two references are given for the statement. One, a conference report, lists ethnic risk factors for single and multidrug resistance drawn from the UK reference laboratory reporting service for tuberculosis. The other4 is the report on the 1993 tuberculosis survey in England and Wales and draws attention inter alia to the small but rising incidence of drug resistance between 1988 and 1993. Neither is a controlled trial.

Single drug resistance has been with us from the earliest days of chemotherapy and three drug regimens have been found wanting in the succeeding 50 years. Thus, the statement justifying a four drug regimen to counter this problem is surprising.

Multidrug resistance (to isoniazid and rifampicin) is another matter. However, data from the UK reference laboratory reporting system for tuberculosis (Mycobnet) give reason to pause. Of 93 isolates of multidrug resistant bacteria for 1997, 23 were also resistant to ethambutol and pyrazinamide, and 15 to both. Thus, a four drug regimen for all these patients would either have been ineffective or would have led to further resistance developing in about half of the patients. Data for 1998 and 1999 (which notifies about 200 cases each year) indicate that isolates from all seven cases of multidrug resistant tuberculosis identified in 1993–8 were resistant to at least one other drug. In view of these results, it seems better to concentrate on obtaining bacteriological proof of resistance whenever possible, the use of more rapid methods for detecting resistance, and even withholding treatment in well non-infectious patients until sensitivity tests are available. A wholesale move to a four drug regimen will increase side effects, decrease compliance, and may not do much to counter the problem of multidrug resistance.

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The scientific and evidence base for short course chemotherapy was set out in detail in the recommendations4 in the section immediately preceding the detailed treatment recommendations commented on by Cookson et al. References 13–19 of the recommendations were controlled trials largely with a four drug initial regimen, although giving evidence that a three drug initial phase is satisfactory in those with a history of prior treatment (irrespective of ethnic group), in ethnic minority groups, and in those who are HIV positive (irrespective of ethnic group).

These data show that drug resistance is not confined to London but occurs in many geographical areas, with significant rates of isoniazid resistance in defined groups—that is, those with a history of prior treatment (irrespective of ethnic group), in ethnic minority groups, and in those who are HIV positive (irrespective of ethnic group).

AUTHORS’ REPLY Dr Cookson and colleagues question the recommendation to move to a four drug initial phase regimen for patients in the 1998 guidelines on the management of tuberculosis.1 A four drug initial phase regimen has been advised in the UK since 1990, with the omission of ethambutol from the initial phase recommenda- tion to cater for the significance of isoniazid resistance.2 The 1998 recommendations were made with the knowledge of the drug resistance rates and epidemiology from Mycobnet, both published in an unpublished letter to the editor.

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found more often, for instance in 3–10% of untreated patients, a fourth drug, usually ethambutol but sometimes streptomycin, is added”. There is also no evidence from published national audit studies or from programmatic data to support the statement by Cookson et al that a four drug regimen will “increase side effects or decrease compliance”. The recommendations make explicit the need to obtain bacteriological confirmation and hence drug susceptibility whenever possible, and the need to be aware of rifampin resistance and the use of molecular methods for detecting its presence. In this part, the recommendations meet the comments of Dr Cookson and colleagues.

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BOOK REVIEWS


In 1955 the first edition of Donald Hunter’s book Diseases of Occupations was published. He said that he wanted to emphasise the clinical aspects of occupational disease and this remains true in the ninth edition of “Hunter’s”. The five main editors of this edition and the majority of contributors are UK based. However, given that its primary focus is clinical information, its contents ought to be valid worldwide. Clearly, for issues relating to country-specific health legislation, you may need to look elsewhere (although UK readers are catered for reasonably well).

The 1001 pages of this edition of Hunter’s are divided into 11 chapters (parts) with each part being divided into further subsections. Five of the parts are covered sufficiently with one or two subsections (‘Reproduction at work’, ‘Occupational cancer’, ‘Occupational diseases of the skin’, ‘Diseases associated with microbiological agents’, and ‘Diseases related to environmental and occupational hazards’), but the chapter on ‘Diseases associated with physical agents’ requires nine subsections. The larger chapters include ‘Diseases associated with chemical agents’ (over 200 pages), ‘Diseases associated with physical agents’ (170 pages), and ‘Occupational lung disorders’ (132 pages). This edition adds in a chapter on ‘Nephrotic, neurotoxic, hepatotoxic and haemopoietic effects of workplace exposures’ that is useful in compiling a differential diagnosis list for work related possibilities. The index itself is a healthy 74 pages with a reasonable amount of cross referencing but, if the book was available as a CD-ROM, it would be even better; reference books should embrace this useful technology.

Hunter’s has some particularly readable sections which give the salient facts and information embellished with nuggets of background or historical data on the condition or disease. For example, the section on ‘Hand-arm vibration’ covers diagnosis, treatment/management, current techniques for objective testing with comments on specificity and sensitivity, and just enough on the physics of vibration. It also points out that the adverse health effects were recognised by 1918—all this is contained in eight pages supported by four figures, three tables, and 100 references.

What was the book like over a three month period of use? I would dip into it for a specific query and find myself enticed into further pages of reading. Perhaps this was because of writing this review but, equally, the prose query and find myself enticed into further pages of reading. Perhaps this was because of writing this review but, equally, the prose

NOTICE


Cystic Fibrosis Medical Care is too big to fit into a clinician’s pocket and too small to justify a place on a reference book shelf. It is described as a practical and easy to use reference book, and by the authors as an introduction to the principles and practices of cystic fibrosis medical care. In doing so it has missed its target audience and has fallen between two stools. Some chapters provide an excellent overview of difficult issues surrounding cystic fibrosis care, such as Chapter 3 on the diagnosis of cystic fibrosis, while others, particularly Chapter 4 on the treatment of pulmonary exacerbations, did not address the problem in any depth.

In addition, there is a strong transatlantic emphasis on practical care which may not always be applicable to European cystic fibrosis clinics. As such, this book will appeal to North American practitioners who, accepting its limitations, may wish only to dip into some of the complex issues surrounding cystic fibrosis care.—KHVT

Dr H M (Bill) Foreman Memorial Fund

The trustees of the Dr H M (Bill) Foreman Memorial Fund invite applications for grants relating to study in respiratory disease and allied fields. Limited funds are available for registered medical practitioners to assist in travelling to countries other than their own to study respiratory disease, and also for support for clinical research abroad.

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