BMD and airways disease

The papers recently published in Thorax by Tattersfield et al and Walsh et al offer important information about the possible adverse affects of corticosteroids on bone mineral density (BMD). Tattersfield and her colleagues reported no change in BMD with inhaled corticosteroids for mild asthma, while Walsh et al found a dose related increase in the incidence of fractures in those taking oral corticosteroids. We would like to report our study of BMD in patients with airways disease, which reinforces these findings and highlights men as being particularly at risk.

We prospectively studied 100 consecutive outpatients (44 men) with steroid responsive airways disease. The formulation and cumulative dose of corticosteroid was recorded in each individual, together with all prescribed prophylaxis for at least two years. Thorax 2001; 56:272–8.

Unfortunately it appears to have been assumed that men are protected from osteoporosis by virtue of their gender. When assumed that men are protected from osteoporosis than women (25%).

References


AHR in asthma

Peat et al have contributed a helpful review to the debate on techniques for measuring asthma in population studies. However, they have endorsed a rapid response (AHR) while neatly sidestepping the issue of what test they are discussing. Inhaled provocation tests used in epidemiological work have included histamine, methacholine, hypertonic saline, cold air, and adenosine. Exercise provocation tests have also been used.

References


Authors’ reply

Primhak and Powell make the valid point that the presence of airway hyperresponsiveness (AHR) is not an absolute attribute. Abnormal AHR represents one end of a continuum of responsiveness. Furthermore, the distribution of that continuum varies according to the nature of the direct or indirect stimulus that is applied.

In our studies, referred to in the review, we have defined abnormal airway responsiveness as a decline of more than 20% in forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV1) after inhalation of a cumulative dose of histamine of 3.9 µmol. Using this criterion, the presence of AHR is a useful marker of airway abnormality consistent with asthma in epidemiological studies and is also predictive of the subsequent course of the disease. We acknowledge that other criteria for the presence of AHR have not been evaluated as extensively in epidemiological studies. However, there is evidence that at least some indirect agonists, such as non-isotonic aerosols and exercise, also have a high level of specificity but only moderate sensitivity as markers of asthma symptoms.

J K Peat, B G Toelle, G B Marks, and C Mellis

Institute of Respiratory Medicine, University of Sydney, Box M77, Missenden Road P O, Camperdown, NSW 2050, Australia

References


One fibre or many; what causes mesothelioma?

In a recent case (00/TLQ/1284) in the Queen’s Bench Division of the High Court in England, a widow sued on behalf of her husband who had died at the age of 60 of mesothelioma. Unusually for such cases, Mr Justice Curtis found for the defendants, and the grounds for his judgement were sufficiently curious to be of general interest and worthy of debate.

It was not disputed that the deceased had been exposed to substantial quantities of asbestos during two periods of employment, nor that there had been a breach of statutory duty by his employers at that time. The judgement was based, however, on the expert and agreed opinion of “two most highly qualified medical men”. In their joint report and oral evidence, the judge believed these doctors to have stated that mesothelioma is the consequence of malignant transformation in a single cell, the result of a hit by either one or several fibres. This led the judge to reason that, although a fibre or fibres inhaled during one
or other period of employment may well have led to the fatal cellular transformation, it was not possible to say which, and he was therefore unable to find either responsible.

In coming to his judgement, Mr Justice Curtis made a distinction between causation and risk. In his words “the only relevance of the number of fibres is in connection with the risk of contracting the disease”. He was thus dissuaded from being influenced by any evidence that might have shown a relationship between risk of mesothelioma and dose of asbestos, although there is much such evidence from studies both of human lungs and of animals.

In coming to his judgement, Mr Justice Curtis made a distinction between causation and risk. In his words “the only relevance of the number of fibres is in connection with the risk of contracting the disease”. He was thus dissuaded from being influenced by any evidence that might have shown a relationship between risk of mesothelioma and dose of asbestos, although there is much such evidence from studies both of human lungs and of animals.

The moral of this story is that lawyers are clever people and part of their business is the meaning of words. The word “cause” is one that requires a bit of thought. My Shorter Oxford Dictionary devotes a column to it.

A Seaton
Department of Environmental and Occupational Medicine, Aberdeen University Medical School, Foresterhill, Aberdeen AB25 2ZP, UK; a.seaton@adim.ac.uk

Mesothelioma

We write as the three medical witnesses who provided evidence (all in writing, two orally) to the Court in the case referred to by Professor Seaton. Essentially we agree with his analysis.

The medical evidence presented to the Court made it clear that the risk of mesothelioma increases in relation to the dose of asbestos and that it is not possible to identify the particular fibre or fibres involved in the genesis of a particular mesothelioma. From an epidemiological standpoint it is therefore appropriate to regard all sources of significant exposure as having contributed to causation of the disease, in the same way that all cigarettes smoked would be considered to have contributed to causation of a lung cancer.

Mr Justice Curtis, however, accepted the invitation of Leading Counsel for one of the defendants to adopt a strictly mechanistic approach to causation. He decided that, because the claimant could not show whether the fibre or fibres actually involved in the genesis of the tumour were derived from either or both of two sources of exposure, causation could not be established against either of the two defendants.

More recently, a different view has been taken in a similar case by Mr Justice Mitting (Queen's Bench Division C2001011).

We consider that there was “no substantial difference between saying that what the defendant did materially increased the risk of injury to the claimant and saying that what the defendant did made a material contribution to his injury”. It would be “wholly artificial to require a claimant to prove which fibre or fibres, inhaled in whose employment in precisely what circumstances, caused or set off or contributed to the process by which one or more mesothelial cells become malignant”.

He concluded that breach of duty on the part of both defendants caused the mesothelioma.

Both cases are soon to be considered by the Court of Appeal and the outcome will determine whether the many mesothelioma victims who happen to have derived their asbestos exposure from more than one source are to be left without redress.

R Rudd
Medical Oncology Department, St Bartholomew's Hospital, London EC1A 7BE, UK; R.M.Rudd@bml.ac.uk

J Moore-Gillon
Respiratory Medicine Department, St Bartholomew's Hospital, London EC1A 7BE, UK

Statement on malignant mesothelioma in the UK

We would like to provide the following additional material to Appendix 3 “Sources of information and help available for patients and carers” which appeared on pages 263–4 of the BTS statement on malignant mesothelioma in the UK published recently in Thorax.

The following Asbestos Support Groups are the major practical sources of information in the UK for people with asbestos related diseases. Most provide a drop in and telephone service, giving confidential free advice and support to patients and families. They also have particular expertise in the field of industrial injury benefits and government and civil compensation claims. Although most of the groups are in the north of England, telephone queries from any part of Great Britain are acceptable to them.

Manchester (tel: 0161 953 4037)
Sheffield (tel: 0114 282 3212 or 01709 513 587)
Liverpool (tel: 0151 236 1895)
Bradford (tel: 01274 393 949)
West Yorks (tel: 0113 243 9979)
Cheshire (tel: 01928 576641)
Nottingham (tel: 0115 927 5108)

In Scotland:
Clydeside Action on Asbestos (tel: 0141 552 8852)
Clydebank Asbestos Group (tel: 0141 951 1001)

Other important sources of help and information are:

The Macmillan Mesothelioma Information Line (tel: 0113 206 6466; email: mavisro@ulth.northy.nhs.uk) and the Occupational and Environmental Diseases Association (OEDA), both of which were mentioned in the original statement.

M Robinson
Mesothelioma Information Service, Cookridge Hospital, Leeds LS16 6QG, UK; mavisro@ulth.northy.nhs.uk

J Wiggins
Department of General Medicine, Wexham Park Hospital, Slough, Berkshire SL2 4HL, UK

Reference

Asymptomatic pulmonary involvement in RA

Davson et al found HRCT evidence of fibrosing alveolitis (FA) in 19% of 150 patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). The presence of FA did not relate to previously described predisposing factors such as male sex, nodular and/or extra-articular disease, disease duration and severity. Moreover, the authors did not find any relation with respiratory symptoms such as dyspnoea or cough, chest radiographic appearance of FA, or restrictive pattern at pulmonary function tests. The only factor significantly associated with FA on the HRCT scan were the presence of bibasal crackles and the reduction in carbon monoxide transfer factor (Tlc). These findings are more difficult to explain, especially considering that FA was defined as an HRCT pattern...
We found TLCO of <75% in duration of less than 2 years. Only 33.3% were 26–72), and 46% of them had a disease (PFTs). Our patients were predominantly as well as complete pulmonary function tests (PFTs). Our patients were predominantly women (22/24), of mean age 49.4 years (range 26–72), and 46% of them had a disease duration of less than 2 years. Only 33.3% were current smokers. We found TLCO of <75% in half of them had RA of short duration. The patients had respiratory symptoms and almost partly explained by patient selection: not all our patients the alterations observed were mild and non-specific (pleural abnormalities, septal and non-septal lines, micronodules). Our data confirm a rather high prevalence of pleuropulmonary alterations in patients with RA, even in the absence of respiratory symptoms. However, we found evidence of FA much less frequently than Dawson et al. This difference may only be partly explained by patient selection: not all our patients had respiratory symptoms and almost half of them had RA of short duration. The newly available diagnostic techniques such as HRCT scanning have increased interest in newly available diagnostic techniques such as wheeze, stridor, and the fine inspiratory crepitations of bronchiolitis.

CD-ROM REVIEW

Paediatric Respiratory Examination

C O’Callaghan, W Stannard. Leicester, UK: OCB Media, 2001; £49.95 (students £25.00). ISBN 190403906

This CD-Rom has been produced as a multimedia based interactive learning tool for a wide spectrum of healthcare professionals including general practitioners, junior doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and medical students. As such, it will find wide appeal to those who wish to learn or brush up on paediatric respiratory examinations. The authors and designers should be congratulated for producing a CD-Rom which is highly intuitive and easy to navigate. The pictures, videos and case studies are of high quality and can be viewed with an informative running commentary, although unfortunately the commentaries cannot be fast forwarded or rewound to find passages of particular interest. The case studies provide excellent examples of classic paediatric auscultatory findings such as wheeze, stridor, and the fine inspiratory crepitations of bronchiolitis.

The Paediatric Respiratory Examination CD-ROM serves as a good template on which other system examination CD-Roms could be designed.

K Tan

NOTICE

Scadding-Morriston Davies Joint Fellowship in Respiratory Medicine 2002

This fellowship is available to support visits to medical centres in the UK or abroad for the purpose of undertaking studies related to respiratory medicine. Applications are invited from medical graduates practising in the UK, including consultants and irrespective of the number of years in that grade. There is no application form, but a curriculum vitae should be submitted together with a detailed account of the duration and nature of the work and the centres to be visited, confirming that these have agreed to provide the facilities required. Please state the sum of money needed for travel and subsistence. A sum of up to £15 000 can be awarded to the successful candidate, or the sum may be divided to support two or more applications. Applications should be sent to Dr I A Campbell, Secretary to the Scadding-Morriston Davies Fellowship, Llandough Hospital, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan CF64 2XX, UK by 31 January 2002.

CORRECTION

In the article entitled “Influence of age and disease severity on high resolution CT lung densitometry in asthma” by F Mitsunobu et al which appeared in the November 2001 issue of Thorax (2001; 56:851–6), an error occurred in table 3 on page 854. The heading to the first column which appeared as “MLD (HU) \(R^2 = 0.0524\)” should read “MLD (HU) \(R^2 = 0.524\)”. "typical" of usual interstitial pneumonia according to a more recent classification. Other studies had shown a high prevalence of FA, even in recent onset RA. In all the other patients the alterations observed were mild and non-specific (pleural abnormalities, septal and non-septal lines, micronodules). Our data confirm a rather high prevalence of pleuropulmonary alterations in patients with RA, even in the absence of respiratory symptoms. However, we found evidence of FA much less frequently than Dawson et al. This difference may only be partly explained by patient selection: not all our patients had respiratory symptoms and almost half of them had RA of short duration. The newly available diagnostic techniques such as HRCT scanning have increased interest in newly available diagnostic techniques such as wheeze, stridor, and the fine inspiratory crepitations of bronchiolitis.

G Provenzano
Division of Respiratory Diseases, A.O. “Villa Sofia CTO”, 90143 Palermo, Italy; giuseppe.provenzano5@tin.it

References