POSTSCRIPT

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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 is present 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.5 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.4 The new BTS guidelines would do well to follow their example.

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References

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.

Our paper is supportive of a further point, adding to work from others,6 which we feel is potentially substantive, of possible importance to future guideline considerations, and perhaps 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 is currently in 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.6, 7

We also realise that the demanding and detailed preparation of the BTS asthma guidelines has followed a due process reliant 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 Glasco Smith Kline.

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References
4 http://www.brit-thoracic.org.uk/guide/guidelines.htm

www.thoraxjnl.com
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 radiotherapy, had secondary respiratory failure and treated both with acetazolamide, theophylline, and medroxyprogesterone acetate. The second patient, a 38 year old woman with a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (FEV1/VC 68%) but his hypoxic ventilatory response was markedly decreased and his central respiratory response was almost absent. The patient was treated with acetazolamide and medroxyprogesterone acetate and his blood gas tensions improved within days to normal values (Pao 10.3 kPa, Paco 5.1 kPa).

We conclude that levels of exhaled NO are increased after caffeine consumption. However, we do 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.

Caffeine and exhaled nitric oxide

We read with interest the paper by Bruce et al7 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 exhaled NO levels after caffeine consumption. To further clarify this effect, exhaled NO (parts per billion (ppb)) levels were measured at baseline and 0.5 and 1 hour after drinking a hot cup of coffee in 18 healthy non-asthmatic adults (five men) aged 17–56 years. Exhaled NO was measured by chemiluminescence (NOA 280, Sievers Instruments Inc, Boulder, CO, USA) using an offline technique in which subjects performed a slow vital capacity manoeuvre into a mylar balloon against a resistance of 5 cm H2O which corresponded to a flow rate of 50 ml/s. In order to minimise NO contamination from the upper airways and dead space, the first portion of the exhalation was not collected. Median (interquartile range) levels of exhaled NO were significantly increased from baseline values 0.5 hour after caffeine consumption (Kruskal-Wallis test, 4.2–8.5 ppb, difference between medians 2.9 ppb (95% CI 1.4 to 12.4), p = 0.007). There was no significant difference between baseline levels and the levels 1 hour after caffeine consumption (4.7 (2.6–6) ppb, p = 0.09).

We conclude that levels of exhaled NO are significantly increased compared with baseline values 0.5 hour after caffeine consumption and have returned to baseline levels by 1 hour. The mechanism for this remains unclear. These results may need to be taken into consideration alongside the results of the previously mentioned study8 when designing studies and interpreting exhaled NO levels in adults.

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References

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 reported that he was obese and he languished of his contemporaries. Calvin Wells was described as licentious even by the stand-ards of his contemporaries.

Athenaeos wrote: “One day, Aristomenes, his Prime Minister and chief advisor, had the effrontery to nudge the king awake when he dozed off during a diplomatic reception”. Ptolemy VI Philometor (case 5) was portrayed in habitual lethargy, perhaps because of obesity he was unable to walk, apart from an occasion when he went to meet the Roman Consul Skipion, the African. In a poem enti-tled “Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II or Kakergetes” the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote: “Most obese, slothful Ptolemy 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.”

Ptolemy X Alexander I (case 7) was so grossly obese that he had a man on either side to help him walk.” He was idle, drunken, and extravagant in his lifestyle.

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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3 Strabo. XVII. 1. 5.
5 Polybius. XXXIX. 7.
6 Posidoniou. Athens, XII. 549c.

BOOK REVIEW
Clinical Management of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

According to the publishers, this book is a comprehensive review of recent evaluative and management strategies aimed at practising clinicians. In the past, most of the volumes from this epic series have concentrated on selective aspects of the scientific basis of respiratory disease and therefore attracted the interested specialist. As on previous occasions, the format follows the pattern of a series of reviews written by acknowledged scientific experts. As usual the book is expensive, and is wide in scope with over 90 collaborators and more than 1000 pages. Unlike a textbook, however, the content lacks strong editorial control and it is effectively a collection of individual reviews. The quality of the chapters is therefore inconsistent. Some authors have clearly accepted their brief and produced excellent reviews. In particular, the chapters on radiology, dyspnoea, genetics, and trial methodology are outstanding. However, many other chapters fall short and there is evident “resting on laurels” in some areas. The book does cover many other interesting facets of COPD but clinicians who purchase this book will also be aware of substantial omissions in clinical areas of COPD care that are currently being developed. There is, for example, very little on rehabilitation or the organisation of services. There is nothing at all on nursing intervention, terminal care, travel, or self-management. There is, however, a welcome attempt to cover the global issues surrounding COPD.

This is an expensive book which contains some excellent chapters. However, the overall volume is slightly disappointing and would compare badly with a thoughtfully structured comprehensive textbook. In the past this series has worked well where it examines the leading edge of research. In this instance the more general reader may find better value in a textbook but could still profit from borrowing a copy from the library.

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