UK immigrant screening is inversely related to regional tuberculosis burden

We read with interest the editorial by Moore-Gillon et al., which advocated a more comprehensive system of immigrant screening/treatment for latent tuberculosis infection (LTBI) as a means of augmenting tuberculosis (TB) control in the UK.

A recent comprehensive, national evaluation of local TB services/primary care organisations (PCOs) in the UK, which provides key insights into UK screening practices, found that the existing National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines are inadequate to control TB. While all TB services would follow-up new entrants referred to them with suspected active TB, only just over half attempted to screen migrants with normal chest x-rays for LTBI; more pertinently it was those local TB services/PCOs that served the highest TB burden areas that were four times less likely to undertake LTBI screening. There was also deviation from NICE guidance in the LTBI screening methods employed (tuberculin skin test vs interferon gamma release assays). Therefore, there is a need for effective national coordination if a new strategy is to be effective in controlling TB.

Furthermore, while we agree with Moore-Gillon et al. on the need to change policy, we believe that there needs to be an expanded evidence base to determine which specific immigrants we should screen, where we should screen them and what tools we should use as well as a change in attitude about the importance of tackling LTBI in migrants to drive down the UK’s TB burden. Crucially, in an increasingly cost-constrained environment, comprehensive health-economic analyses will be required to determine which changes in policy are justified.

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Competing interests AL is inventor for patents underpinning T-cell-based diagnosis. The IFN-gamma ESAT-6/CFP-10 ELISPOT was commercialised by an Oxford University spin-out company (T.SPOT-TB; Oxford Immunotec Ltd, Abingdon, UK) in which Oxford University and AL have minority shares of equity and royalty entitlements.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Accepted 2 December 2010
Published Online First 16 February 2011

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Rethinking TB screening: politics, practicalities and the press

In support of the urgent need for improvements to new entrant TB screening,1 which must encourage the diagnosis of both active and latent forms of TB, we would like to offer two audits of new entrant screening from an area with a low TB incidence (4.3/100 000).2

In 2006, we audited 29 new entrant referrals, all of whom had a chest x-ray reported by the Port Health Control Unit at Heathrow Airport as ‘abnormal’ (predominantly hilar calcification).3 Of the 29 referrals, 22 attended for local screening. Each received a tuberculin skin test (TST) and a repeat chest x-ray that was reported by a respiratory consultant and then by a consultant radiologist. Sixteen (73%) were subsequently reported as having a normal chest x-ray (and negative TST).

While the practical difficulties of screening large numbers of new entrants at the point of entry (in a short space of time) are high, inaccurate reporting of chest x-rays results in wasted resource and a financial burden that is passed on to both the new entrant and local TB services through the need for repeated screening.

Further, the NICE new entrant TB screening guidelines (2006)4 allow certain groups of new entrants to be screened solely via chest x-ray (CXR), limiting a TST to all those aged 0–15 and those aged 16–34 from sub-Saharan Africa. As the authors highlight, this potentially under-diagnoses the latent TB infection (LTBI).

To investigate this, we undertook a retrospective case-note analysis of 547 new entrants over a 44-month period (2006–2009).5 All patients were invited for screening using a locally adapted ‘Dorset’ algorithm that combined CXR and TST unless contra-indicated. Each case was then re-evaluated using the NICE algorithm. This allowed direct comparison of each algorithm’s ability to detect LTBI. Results: 397 (72%) new entrants attended screening, 41 (10.3%) patients were diagnosed with LTBI (all HIV negative). Comparison of the algorithms showed that only 27/41 cases (65.8%) were detected when using the NICE algorithm. This represents a 34.1% shortfall in LTBI detection when following NICE guidance (95% CI 19.65% to 48.67%, 99% CI 19.04% to 53.26%).

The results from these two audits lend strength to the authors’ argument that over-reliance on CXR alone is inadequate;
combination screening with TST or IGRA should be considered. There remains a need for a robust national screening strategy that promotes the detection of latency as well as active tuberculosis.

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**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Accepted 2 December 2010

Published Online First: 16 February 2011


doi:10.1136/thx.2010.156968

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**Authors’ response**

We welcome the correspondence relating to our recent editorial and thank the authors for their interest.

Mr Thomas from the Royal Bournemouth Hospital presents two interesting local audits. The first highlights the possibility of wasted resources in screening individuals identified by the Port Health Control Unit as having an abnormal chest x-ray. The second demonstrates the potential shortcoming in the NICE guidelines, which can lead to an underidentification of latent tuberculosis (TB) infection. We share Mr Thomas’s concerns, particularly on this latter point.

Dr Pareek and colleagues from Imperial College and the Health Protection Agency show that the NICE guidance is often not followed and that it is TB services which serve the areas with the highest TB burden which appear least likely to undertake screening for latent TB infection. This latter finding is, we would argue, unsurprising when resources are as scarce as they are in TB services. Those in high burden areas will be concentrating on ‘fire fighting’—treating those cases of actual disease which actually do arise, with little or no time left for detecting latent infection and preventing the emergence of new active cases. This is likely to be a funding issue. Even in 2001, only one in six of high TB burden districts met minimum staffing recommendations. 

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**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Accepted 2 December 2010

Published Online First: 16 February 2011


doi:10.1136/thx.2010.156968

**REFERENCES**


**Sarcoidosis is a Th1/Th17 multisystem disorder: wider implications**

Facco et al demonstrated elevated levels of T helper 17 (Th17) cells in the peripheral blood and in the bronchoalveolar lavage of patients with active sarcoidosis; increased expression of interleukin 17 (IL-17) and IL-23R in lung and lymph node specimens was also noted. 

These results suggest a role for the IL-23/Th17 inflammatory axis in the pathogenesis of sarcoidosis.

Crohn’s disease (CD) is a severe inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Many components of the IL-23 pathway (IL23R, IL12B, STAT3, JAK2, TYK2) are true IBD susceptibility genes, suggesting a crucial role for this pathway in maintaining intestinal immune homeostasis.

We recently reported the development of multisystem sarcoidosis in two CD patients who had received maintenance therapy with natalizumab, a selective adhesion molecule inhibitor that prevents lymphocyte migration to the gut. We hypothesised that natalizumab may have contributed to the development of the disease by allowing dysregulated lymphocyte trafficking to the respiratory mucosa and other extraintestinal mucosal surfaces in genetically predisposed individuals.

Complex disease genetics has been revolutionised by the advent of genome-wide association (GWA) studies. Shared susceptibility genes between IBD and other immune mediated/inflammatory disorders (ankylosing spondylitis, psoriasis, systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, atopic dermatitis, coeliac disease, multiple sclerosis, type 1 and type 2 diabetes mellitus, mycobacterial disease) have already emerged, paralleling the reported epidemiological evidence. A combined analysis of a limited (100 kb) GWA study in CD and sarcoidosis identified a common susceptibility locus on 10p12.2 (but not at GWA levels of significance).

We feel that this recent publication provides further intriguing evidence of common immunopathogenic pathways between CD and sarcoidosis. Ongoing research into common pathways and susceptibility regions between these two granulomatous conditions is essential, with further exploration of the IL-23/Th17 axis looking increasingly like a good starting point.

**Acknowledgements** Professor Jack Satsangi for his helpful input.

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**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Accepted 26 April 2011

Published Online First: 8 June 2011


doi:10.1136/thoraxjnl-2011-200290