

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

A few weeks ago I was filming an interview for a Channel 4 programme on the early days of *in-vitro* fertilisation. Whilst reading over my old articles, notes and press-cuttings from the early 1980s, I became aware of how little difference the vast verbiage in the press actually makes to medical practice. In spite of all the dire warnings published at that time, many of which have come true, we seem to have learnt nothing and are about to make the same mistakes with regard to genetic engineering. However, enough of my musings and I hope that this 12th in the series of occasional newsletters will help you in your day to day practice and will not be immediately consigned to File 13.

Head Injuries

As many as half the patients labelled as “vegetative” soon after a severe head injury, will eventually recover. The problem has been how to distinguish those who will recover from those who will not. It now appears that cerebral magnetic imaging may hold some of the clues. In a series of 80 patients, those who remained in a vegetative state at one year showed, on cerebral magnetic imaging, greater corpus callosum and other brainstem injuries than those who recovered. (*Lancet.* 1998;**351**:1763-7)

Disaster Planning

Although this topic is close to my heart, most people believe that disasters are a rare occurrence. This is probably why disaster planning is so poor and why we so rarely exercise those few plans which do exist. A recent survey by the Manchester group found there had been at least 108 disasters in the UK since 1968 and they suggest this is a serious underestimate. They call for the government to set up a central disaster register so that lessons from the past will not be lost. (*J.Epidem.Comm.Hlth.* 1998;**52**:392-8)

Peanuts and Pregnancy

A recent report suggests that the increase in allergy generally may be explained by the overall improvement in hygiene in the UK. The foetus used to respond to parasites present in the maternal blood. Now these have been eliminated, the foetus will react to other things in the blood such as antigens. Because of this pregnant women and breast feeding mothers with a family history of atopy have been advised against eating peanuts or peanut products in a bid to reduce the number of children who develop peanut allergy. The report is available from DoH, PO Box 410, Wetherby, North Yorks, LS23 7LN or by fax:+44-(0)1937-845381.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

117 patients with irritable bowel syndrome were followed up over a period of 16 months. When analysing the causes of the cases, the authors of the report found that age, sex, personality - or the presence or absence of clinical anxiety or depression - did not influence the chances of improvement. There was only one obvious predictor and that was the presence or absence of one highly threatening chronic problem. (*Gut.* 1998;**43**:256-61)

NvCJD

It may be that the incidence of nvCJD is declining or at least levelling off. Whereas there were 10 cases in both 1996 and 1997, there have only been 4 cases reported in the first 6 months of this year. (*CMO's Update 19* dated August 1998)

Human Albumin Solution

The recent meta-analysis performed on the use of Human Albumin Solution (HAS), far from settling the debate, seems to have poured petrol on the fire. I note that the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) has set up an expert panel to review the evidence and to consider the implications of continuing to use HAS. From my personal experience of being on an MCA expert working party, I believe the final statement will be so bland and non-committal that it will have very little impact on the debate. Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be learnt is that, having reviewed the latest literature, we should all reconsider our personal indications for using HAS. I know that I have done just this. (*BMJ*. 1998;**317**:223-4, 235-40, 343)

Sunburn

Recently, teachers in the UK have been advised not to apply sunscreen to the children in their class in case they are accused of sexual abuse. It, therefore, seems appropriate that we, in the UK, are made aware of our poor understanding of the causes of skin cancer. Primary school children in both the UK, Australia and New Zealand were invited to describe how someone looked and felt after returning from a really good holiday in the sun. The British children wrote "nice and brown" while their Antipodean peers wrote "sad and sore". (*J.Paed.Child Hlth.* 1998;**34**:254-9)

HIV

French scientists have recently reported that they have identified a new strain of HIV, which may not be detected by most of the tests currently in use. It was isolated from a 40 year old female, living in Cameroon, who was diagnosed as having AIDS. The new strain does not belong to either of the 2 existing sub-groups of HIV I and has been placed in a new sub-group classified as "N". Dr Simon Wain-Hobson of the Pasteur Institute in Paris is worried that this new strain has the potential to cause a pandemic. (*Nature Medicine.* 1998;**9**:1032-6)

Aspirin

I am sure we are all aware of the benefits of aspirin in numerous diseases such as stroke, myocardial infarction and colonic cancer. Equally, I am sure we all believe there is nothing further to discover about this cheap and humble drug. Well, it just goes to show how wrong one can be. A group of investigators were surprised when they discovered three of the metabolites of aspirin in the serum of people who had never taken the drug, and speculate that these came from their diet. Salicylic acid is found in numerous fruits, berries and vegetables, which protect against atherosclerosis and colonic cancer. Could salicylates be the missing link between diet and disease prevention? (*J.Clin.Path.* 1998;**51**:502-5)

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