

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

This is the second of an occasional series of newsletters to draw your attention to items which have recently appeared in the Medical Literature and which may well have some bearing on the medical precautions you take during your travels. I have culled those facts which I believe are important, but to which you may not have had access. The source of each item is given at the end in italics.

Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (CJD)

Blood donors in UK are now to be questioned with regard to CJD. Those whose siblings, parents or grandparents have developed the disease, as well as people who have been treated with Human Growth Hormone, will be excluded from donation. However it is calculated that, at worst, blood transfusion could only account for 0.2% of cases of CJD. One report describes a man who gave 55 blood donations before being diagnosed as suffering from CJD. A follow-up of the recipients revealed that 18 had already died, none from CJD, and none of the other recipients who could be traced showed any signs of developing CJD. The longest intervals between transfusion and follow-up were 21 and 22 years. The conclusion was that transmission of CJD from a blood transfusion either does not take place at all, or has an extremely long incubation period. (*Transfusion Medicine 1996;6(3):217-222, British Medical Journal 24 August 1996*)

Jet Lag and Insomnia

A meeting at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland were told that melatonin was being sold as a food supplement in the USA, but was being used as a drug to treat jet lag and insomnia. The meeting heard that some batches were being made from the pineal glands of cattle, a possible reservoir for BSE. Cases of transmission of CJD have occurred when patients have been treated with Human Growth Hormone derived from human pineal glands. Human Growth Hormone is no longer extracted from pineal glands, but is genetically engineered. The meeting expressed concern over this and also that people taking melatonin were unaware that it can cause depression and vasoconstriction which in turn could lead to a rise in blood pressure. (*JAMA 1996;276:1011-4*)

Second Hand Transfusion Equipment

Used "disposable" transfusion sets, syringes, needles, plasma bottles and many other items of medical equipment are being collected by the cleaning staff in numerous hospitals in India and are then being sold to dealers. These items are then "cleaned" repackaged and then sold back both to local hospitals and clinics and to other dealers who sell them in the rural areas and in neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. It is also impossible to tell whether these items are finding their way into export routes to Africa and Eastern Europe. Very few private clinics have incinerators and most simply throw their clinical waste into skips. Many hospitals adopt the same policy. Dr Iqbal Malik published a detailed study in February this year, *Hospital Waste: A Dangerous Infusion*, in which he produced photographic evidence of clinical waste dumps in

hospitals and other medical institutions. This summer he published a second survey which showed that, in spite of wide TV coverage and promises of Government enforcement, the situation was hardly different. The new government has issued an order that all institutions, with more than 30 beds, are to be equipped with an incinerator. Dr Malik points out that the previous government had instituted a similar guideline but the incinerators were frequently out of order, or the materials were not sorted properly and so were not destroyed. (Hospital Medicine 1996 14 November 1996, 42-44)

Hepatitis C

A study from the University of Bordeaux showed that whilst HIV and Hepatitis B are most commonly transmitted by sexual intercourse, Hepatitis C is usually transmitted by blood transfusion or the sharing of needles by intravenous drug abusers. (British Medical Journal 24 August 1996)

Malaria

The use of bed nets impregnated with insecticide have been shown to be an effective means of reducing the incidence of malaria. (Health Policy and Planning 1996;11:292-8)

MASTA and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have reported the results of a survey conducted between November 1993 and February 1995. A questionnaire was sent to all those travellers who had consulted the MASTA helpline and those reporting side effects from taking malarial prophylaxis were interviewed on the telephone. Although there were equal numbers of side effects reported in both the mefloquine (Larium) and the chloroquine/proguanil groups, those in the mefloquine group were more likely to be of a moderately severe neuropsychiatric nature. The most common of these symptoms were confusion, nightmares, hallucinations, alterations in sleep patterns and loss of concentration. The group sizes were large, 1214 and 1181 respectively. Following this report, the Committee on Safety of Medicines issued a warning that mefloquine should not be prescribed to anyone with a history of depression or epilepsy. (British Medical Journal 1996;313:525-8 and Hospital Doctor 5 Sept. 1996.)

Diphtheria

More than 100,000 cases of diphtheria have now been reported in Russia. Travellers to Russia have contracted this disease, which has developed after their return to Western Europe. (Eurosurveillance 1996;1:131-4)

Dengue

An epidemic of dengue haemorrhagic fever has claimed at least 227 lives in New Delhi. More than 4,700 cases were reported in September and cases were being reported from neighbouring states in October. It is believed that this outbreak is due to the above average rainfall this summer and the consequent rise in the numbers of the species of mosquito, *Aedes aegypti*, which carry the virus. Previously the haemorrhagic form of Dengue has only rarely occurred in India and according to Dr Pradeep Seth, head of microbiology at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi "this country is ill prepared for really dangerous viruses.". The situation is made worse by the

shortage of machines capable of supplying one of the blood components, platelets, which are destroyed by the virus. There are only 6 such machines in New Delhi to cover a population of about 12 million. (BMJ 1996;313:1034)

Cholera

An unlicensed oral cholera vaccine is available in Canada. It is considered safe, effective and well tolerated. However, the use of the vaccine is not supported as the estimated risk of European and North American travellers to endemic areas actually contracting cholera is estimated at 1-2 cases per million trips. (Canadian Communicable Disease Report 1996;22:73-5)

Road Traffic Accidents

Recent research in Finland has found that wandering elk came second only to alcohol as a cause of road traffic accidents. They cause hundreds of collisions and about 12 deaths a year. According to the Finish Ministry of Transport "there are a lot of elk; they are very big; they're not very clever and they don't take any notice of road signs". (Injury Prevention 1996;2:191)

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