

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

My last newsletter was devoted to a single topic. In this, my 22nd, I have reverted to the old format.

Measles

We all tend to view measles as a childhood disease we will get, but it will cause few, if any problems. This is far from the truth and, with the falling levels of vaccination, we could face some serious outbreaks. A recent example occurred in a community in Holland where there have been 2,300 cases since April 1999 with 3 deaths and almost 20% suffering serious complications such as encephalitis, pneumonia and ear and eye infections. Only 3% of the affected children had received MMR vaccination. (*Vaccine Media Desk*. 2000;**3**:3)

Malaria

Our worries over the upsurge of malaria following the recent floods in Mozambique are masking the problems that are appearing elsewhere in southern Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal, the Health Ministry has had to start using DDT for mosquito control and the number of cases of malaria reported in South Africa has risen from 12,000 in 1995 to over 50,000 in 1999, with over 380 deaths. (*BMJ*. 2000;**320**:669)

Rabies

WHO has just published its 33rd world survey of rabies for the year 1997. The highest incidence is in Asia with over 33,000 deaths, the majority being in India. There were 13 cases in Europe of which 10 were from the Russian Federation and 114 deaths in the USA, 4 of which followed bites from bats. Travellers undertaking long journeys in remote parts of the world where rabies vaccine may not be immediately available are strongly advised to be vaccinated prior to departure. The full report can be found at www.who.int/emc-documents/rabies/whocdscrph994c.html.

TB in Central and Eastern Europe

More than 30,00 people in the Russian Federation leave prison every year with tuberculosis, much of which is multi-drug resistant. There has been an upsurge of drug resistant tuberculosis in the Baltic States.

Guinea Worm

India and other countries in South East Asia have been officially certified free of guinea worm (*Dracunculus*) by WHO. This is the second disease, after smallpox, to be officially eradicated. However, the disease still exists in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Sudan. (*BMJ*. 2000;**320**:668)

Diabetes

According to WHO, in the next 25 years the number of diabetics will rise from 130 to 300 million. Current treatment is considered unsatisfactory and it is suggested that the only way of preventing 50% of these patients developing neuropathy is to use ACE inhibitors. (*Anal.Med.* 2000;**32**:1-5)

Japanese B Encephalitis

There is an outbreak of Japanese B Encephalitis in Andhra Pradesh State, India, with over 1,000 cases recorded and 200+ deaths. As the vector for this disease is the mosquito, travellers to this area are reminded that they should keep arms and legs covered after sunset, avoid the so-called "pigs and paddy fields" zones, use insect repellents containing DEET and, if their stay will be longer than one month, be vaccinated. (*Health Advice for Travellers*. DoH 24th Jan 2000)

Toxic Shock

Kaempfer and his team have developed a synthetic peptide antagonist, which blocks the lethal toxins secreted by the virulent strains of staphylococci and streptococci and which produce the toxic shock syndrome. Injections of this peptide not only saved 100% of the mice exposed to the toxins but also about 50% of those rodents in whom toxic shock had already begun. This work may well have a wider application in the treatment of drug resistant strains. (*Nature Med.* 2000;6:414-21)

Severe Shortage of Blood in South East Asia

At a recent WHO conference, Dr Dhingra-Kumar stated that South East Asia accounts for 25% of the world's population but collects only 9% of the world's blood. Although 7 million units are collected each year, a further 15 million are required. Geoffrey Dennis of the International Red Cross said that 30% of blood in India comes from commercial sources, much of which is untested. As there is no national blood policy in Pakistan and Bangladesh, blood banks offering poorly or unscreened blood from paid donors are allowed to flourish. There is no screening for Hepatitis C in India although the incidence can be as high as 8%. There are over 4 million HIV positive people in India and between 5 and 10% of HIV infections in South East Asia are transfusion induced. (*BMJ.* 2000;320:1026)

Anti-inflammatory Drugs and Heart Failure

In a recent case-control study from Australia, patients admitted for the first time with a history of heart failure were 10.5 times more likely than the controls to have taken non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) in the preceding week. The strength of the association increased with the dose, suggesting that the effect is causal. The authors estimate that NSAIDs could account for up to 20% of all hospital admissions for heart failure. (*Arch.Int.Med.* 2000;160:777-84)

Marijuana's Anticancer Properties

The median survival for patients with malignant gliomas, even with the most aggressive current therapy, is depressingly brief. However a team from Madrid offer some hope. They have applied the cannabinoids extracted from marijuana directly onto malignant gliomas in rats via an intracerebral catheter. This led to shrinkage of some tumours and a slowing of the growth of others. The group hopes to be able to eventually use this work to treat human disease. (*Nature Medicine.* 2000;6:313-9)

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