

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

The problems of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and its association with air travel are back in the news. Whilst courts in different countries have produced conflicting judgements as to whether there is a legal liability, the scientific evidence is becoming clearer. In South Africa, where a recent compensation claim failed, a prospective study comparing business and economy class travel found that none of the 898 passengers examined had ultrasonic evidence of DVT. More than 10% of all passengers had raised D-dimer levels but there was no difference in the incidence between those flying in business as compared with those in economy class. Kelman and colleagues have reviewed 5408 patients admitted to hospital with DVT between 1981 and 1999 and matched this with data for arrivals of international flights. They found that the risk of DVT was raised for only 2 weeks after a long-haul flight and that the incidence was about 4 times that in the control group. However, they point out that the risk of death is minimal, 1 per 2 million flights and is insignificant when compared with mortality from Road Traffic Accidents and those at work. (*South African Med.J.* 2003;**95**:522-8 *BMJ.* 2003;**327**:1072-5)

Dressing Down is not All Bad.

Recent research from New York has shown that wearing a necktie that is too tight can increase your intra-ocular pressure by as much as 20%. Measurements were taken with the subject's collar open and 3 minutes after tightening their tie to a point of slight discomfort. The increase is probably due to constriction of the jugular vein leading to a raised venous pressure. The implication is that habitually wearing a buttoned collar and tight tie might predispose to glaucomatous optic neuropathy. (*Br.J.Ophthalmol.* 2003;**87**:946-8)

Use of Unsterilised Needles and Syringes.

Hutin et al have recently reviewed the use of injections in the various WHO regions. The analysis excluded four regions (predominantly affluent, developed nations) where the reuse of disposable items was considered negligible. In the other 10 regions, unsterilised equipment was used in 1.2% to 75% of cases. The incidence was highest in South East Asia (75%), the Middle East (70%) and the Western Pacific (30%). No information was available from Latin America, although reuse is known to be high in this area. (*BMJ.* 2003;**327**:1075-8)

West Nile Fever in the USA.

West Nile Virus (WNV) is now so firmly entrenched in the USA that eradication is now officially futile. Although originally believed only to affect birds of the crow family, cases have been diagnosed in horses, alligators and squirrels as well as birds as diverse as turkeys and cardinals. Over 30 different species of mosquito have been found to act as vectors for the disease and, as male mosquitoes have been found to be infected, it is postulated that WNV can be transmitted vertically through the eggs and infected mosquitoes can transmit WNV venereally. In humans, it is estimated that 150 people are infected for every case of meningoencephalitis that is diagnosed. In 2002 there were over 3,000 cases of WNV meningoencephalitis reported, suggesting that over 450,000 people were infected in the USA.

Brucellosis in Turkey.

Travellers to Turkey should remain vigilant when buying milk or milk products in an open market. Most milk sold is unpasteurised and, in 2000, there were over 10,000 cases of brucellosis notified. (*Tropical Doctor*. 2003;**33**:151-3)

HRT Risks and Benefits.

Long-term use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) doubles the risk of breast cancer. From 1996 to 2001, 1,084,110 women aged 50-64 years were followed up for mortality and incidence of cancer. Those women who took the combined pill were at double the risk of developing breast cancer than those where not using HRT. In simple terms for every 1,000 people taking combined HRT for 10 years, there would be 19 extra cases of breast cancer. 2 further studies have shown that HRT offers no protection against cardiovascular disease. However, HRT does reduce the incidence of post-menopausal symptoms and osteoporosis. (*Lancet*. 2003;**362**:419-27 *New Engl.J.Med.* 2003;**349**:523-34 & 535-45)

Helminthic Infections.

Awasthi and colleagues have provided an excellent review of the problems of child development caused by helminthic infections and the cheap and simple remedies that could alleviate these. More than a quarter of the world's population are infected with one of the 4 most common worms, roundworms, hookworms, whipworms and schistosomes. Treatment costing less than \$1 per year could eradicate the majority of these and experience from Kenya has shown that this reduced school absenteeism by over 25%. In addition, cognitive ability was greatly increased and even children who were not treated benefited from the lower transmission rates within the schools. (*BMJ*. 2003;**327**:431-3)

Cleaning Simple Cuts.

Children presenting with simple lacerations at a paediatric emergency department were randomised to having their wound cleaned with either tap water or sterile saline prior to suturing. There was no difference in the incidence of wound infection between the 2 groups, showing that tap water was as effective as sterile saline. (*Ann.Emerg.Med.* 2003;**41**:609-16)

Tolerating Malarial Prophylaxis.

One of the major reasons for people stopping taking malarial prophylaxis is the incidence of unpleasant side effects. There are more than 30,000 cases of malaria reported annually in non-endemic countries. A recent randomised double blind trial in Switzerland, Germany and Israel compared adverse events in 600 non-immune travellers to sub-Saharan Africa. The best-tolerated regimens were doxycycline and combined atovaquone and proguanil. Skin problems were more common in those taking chloroquine and proguanil and neurophysiological adverse events were more likely in those taking mefloquine. (*BMJ*. 2003;**327**:1078-81)

Monday, 08 December 2003

Michael JG Thomas
MA, MB, FRCP (Edin), DTM&H
Clinical Director