

An Occasional Medical Newsletter from The Blood Care Foundation

Dear Member,

This is the eighth of my occasional series of newsletters.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Russia

Dr AA Karpeev, the Head of the Ministry of Health Protection, recently reported that syphilis could now be considered an epidemic in Russia. The number of cases reported in 1990 was 7,911. By 1995 this had risen to 261,833 and 173,805 cases were reported in the first 6 months of 1996. It is predicted that the total for 1996 will be in excess of 350,000. (*Transfusion Today*. 1997;**32**:8-9)

Effects of this epidemic have been noted in other countries. In Finland the incidence of syphilis has markedly increased since the border has been opened and the Public Health Laboratory Service have recently reported that over 55% of cases of syphilis, reported since April 1994, have been acquired abroad. Of these, nearly 30% have been contracted in Eastern Europe. (*BMJ*. 1997;**315**:1018-9)

The use of Mefloquine (Larium) as a malarial prophylactic

Major Ashley Croft and Dr Paul Garner have reported the results of their systematic review of the effectiveness of mefloquine as a malarial prophylactic. They pooled the results of 10 randomised controlled trials, all of which met Cochrane criteria, in which either mefloquine or a placebo was administered to non-immune adult volunteers. While the review confirmed the theoretical efficacy of mefloquine in preventing malarial infection, it confirmed the high toxicity associated with the drug. They found that study participants were more likely to withdraw if they were taking mefloquine than if they were taking the placebo. They concluded that while mefloquine may not be useful for routine prophylaxis, it has a place in the protection of groups travelling to regions with a high risk of chloroquine resistant malaria and only limited access to effective medical care. (*BMJ*. 1997;**315**:1412-6)

Acupuncture

A consensus panel of the National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, has concluded that acupuncture is a safe and effective treatment for postoperative nausea and vomiting. In addition it was found effective for the control of nausea and vomiting in pregnancy and after chemotherapy. (*BMJ*. 1997;**315**:1252)

HIV Estimates

HIV infection is far more common than was previously thought. Dr Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, reported that the latest figures show that 33% more people are HIV positive than was estimated in December 1996. He said "We are now realising that rates of HIV transmission have been grossly underestimated – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the bulk of infections has been concentrated to date." Figures show that 90% of HIV positive people are unaware that they are infected. In South Africa, it is estimated that 2.6 million people are infected and this figure is climbing faster than had been previously predicted. (*Joint UNAIDS and WHO Report 1997 & BMJ* 1997;**315**:1486)

HIV in India

The National AIDS Control Organisation in India has recently estimated that about 3 million people in India are infected with HIV. About half of the 100,000 commercial sex workers in Bombay are infected. Professor Subhash Hira, professor of infectious diseases at the Mahatma Gandhi Medical College in Bombay, has recently investigated the 4120 excess deaths occurring in the city amongst men in the age group 25 – 44 years. He said “We’re currently witnessing the effects of the first wave of HIV infections in the country that spread primarily from commercial sex workers to their clients, but the infection is now spreading beyond the so called high risk groups into the general community.” (*BMJ*. 1997;**315**:1400)

Mobile Telephones and Medical Devices

The Medical Devices Agency has drafted guidelines for the use of radio handsets and mobile telephones in hospitals. It would appear that the equipment most susceptible to interference includes physiological and cardiac monitors, defibrillators and external pacemakers. Although problems are mainly caused by radio handsets, as used by the emergency services, it is advised that mobile telephones be switched off in those areas of a hospital where susceptible equipment is in use. Further information can be obtained from Dr Sue Ludgate, MDA, Room 1110 Hannibal House, Elephant and Castle, LONDON SE1 6TE, UK.

Patients with pacemakers are warned to keep any cellular phone at least 20 cm away from their pacemaker and its leads. Apparently the electrode can act as an antenna and pick up the signal, which is then transferred to the pacemaker, causing potentially dangerous interference. (*European Heart Journal*. 1997;**18**:1538-9)

Interferon and Hepatitis C

It is estimated that there are 200 million chronic carriers of Hepatitis C in the world. Of these 20% will develop cirrhosis, a quarter of whom will go on to chronic liver failure and a significant number will develop hepatocellular carcinoma. Early trials show that 50% of chronic carriers respond to a course of 3MU of interferon ? three times a week for 6 months. Of these, 25% show a sustained response with an overall cure rate of 8.75%. (*Proc.R.Coll.Phys.Edin*. 1997;**27**:493-4)

El Niño and diarrhoea

In Peru there has been a 35% increase in the incidence of diarrhoeal illness during the months of April to June 1997, whereas in the previous three years there had been a decrease of 16%, on average, during the same period. Similar increases have been noted in Chile, Ecuador, Columbia and the Philippines and these are thought to be due to the higher temperatures and lower rainfall associated with El Niño. (*Lancet* 1997;**350**:1597-8 & *BMJ* 1997;**315**:1485)

Rabies

No case of animal rabies has been reported since a rabid fox was shot in the Ardennes region near Belgium in October 1996. It is therefore felt that the vaccination programme accomplished by dropping meat, dosed with rabies vaccine, from helicopters, has eradicated rabies from France. (*BMJ*. 1997;**315**:1112)

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