LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The British Heart Journal welcomes letters commenting on papers that it has published within the past six months.

All letters must be typed with double spacing and signed by all authors.

No letter should be more than 600 words.

In general, no letter should contain more than six references (also typed with double spacing).

International Primary Pulmonary Hypertension Study

Sin,—In December 1993 (British Heart Journal 1993;78:537–41) Brenot and colleagues reported 15 new cases of primary pulmonary hypertension (PPH) with a history of exposure to appetite suppressants. The series brought this problem to the attention of the scientific and medical community. Brenot et al concluded that the results of a European case-control study are awaited.

We wish to comment briefly on this European study. Indeed, as Brenot et al state, the reported case series "provides no definitive answers about a cause and effect relation". This cautious conclusion arises out of the many difficulties associated with interpreting such case reports. For instance, appetite suppressants are most often used by those who are also at higher risk of PPH, that is young women. They are also more likely to have been exposed to other alleged risk factors for PPH such as pregnancy or the use of oral contraceptives or both.

Exposure to one appetite suppressant is very rarely unique: thyroid compounds, amphetamines-like drugs, other drugs, and special diets are often also "tried" by those who want to lose weight. Appetite suppressants are sometimes prescribed to reduce obesity in patients presenting with dyspnoea, a prodromic sign of PPH. All these factors and other sources of bias mean that it is difficult to assess independently of other factors the exact contribution of one factor to the development of the disease, especially in a retrospective case series. This was why an epidemiological study was organised. Epidemiological data on primary pulmonary hypertension are almost nonexistent.

The International Primary Pulmonary Hypertension Study (IPPHS) is recruiting incident cases of PPH in five countries: France (including Dr Brenot’s and Dr Simonneau’s centres), the United Kingdom, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Switzerland. The study is examining all the alleged risk factors for PPH, not only fenfluramine derivatives. More than 150 centres are participating in the study with the objective of recruiting 100 validated cases and 400 properly matched controls. Cases reported to the IPPHS are screened by local specialists and reviewed by an international panel. The selection of controls is physician-based. This is carefully done to obtain a valid basis to compare the exposure in a control population with PPH when the exposure to alleged risk factors in the general population is widespread but unevenly distributed. Interviewers are blind to the hypotheses under study. Our aim was to complete the study by the end of 1993.

Exposure to appetite suppressants has been identified as a possible factor in the onset of PPH. This study was designed to investigate if exposure to appetite suppressants is an actual risk factor for PPH.

Are streptokinase antibodies clinically important?

Sin,—A recent editorial and paper examined the clinical significance of streptokinase (SK) antibodies. There are two problems associated with the presence of specific SK antibody. Firstly, there is the possibility of impaired thrombolytic action of SK and secondly there is the increased likelihood of allergic reactions. Higher titres potentially increase these problems in patients treated with SK in the previous two years and up to 100 cases have been reported. The present dose of SK used for the first time is as efficacious as the other thrombolytic agents but its efficacy in patients receiving a second dose for re-infarction has not been evaluated.

Significant inhibition of SK activity by specific antibody has been shown in vitro. However, one cannot extrapolate directly from the laboratory bench to the intra-coronary thrombus. Though SK binds to plasminogen on an equilibrium basis, the plasminogen-SK complex is a far more potent activator of plasminogen than SK alone and generates plasmin in a cascade fashion. Thus, one should remember that even if the number of molecules of the SK-plasminogen complex formed were reduced, enough may be present to activate all circulating plasminogen and plasminogen bound to plasmin to generate a thrombotic state. In the Third International Study of Infarct Survival (ISIS-3) SK was readministered to a large subgroup of patients (21·7% had previous myocardial infarction) and the overall results did not suggest reduced efficacy of SK (or anistreplase) compared with alteplase. A study by White et al had too few patients for any conclusions to be drawn. The potential problem of impaired efficacy of SK readministration needs to be evaluated in vivo.

Increasing the dose of SK was proposed as a possible solution to higher antibody titres. However, in the presence of high titres of circulating antibody this would, probably, increase even further the risk of immune reactions. Whereas the commonly encountered mild reactions are necessarily related to the antibody titre, serious immune reactions—for example, serum sickness—are increasing the concentration of administered antibodies, which may prove to be related to immune complex deposition in the glomeruli. If it is, an increased dose may worsen the proteineuria.

The editorial and paper mentioned the need for a bedside test to measure specific antibody concentration. Skin testing may prove to be a predictor of circulating antibodies, however, so an effort has been made to develop a test. A bedside test that is inexpensive and rapid would be helpful for the readministration of SK.

Clearly the efficacy of repeat administration of SK needs to be assessed in a study of coronary artery patency. We need to evaluate the present dose of SK in patients presenting at least two and a half years after their initial infarct. Until the immune problems associated with SK have been investigated, increasing the dose should probably not be regarded as an option. In the meantime, when patients re-present with further infarction between one and two years and a half years of their SK-treated infarction administration of a thrombolytic agent other than SK or anistreplase should be considered.

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International Primary Pulmonary Hypertension Study.

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