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).

Time of occurrence, duration, and ventricular rate of paroxysmal atrial fibrillation: the effect of digoxin

Sr—I read with interest the excellent study of Rawles et al (1990;63:225–7) on the effect of digoxin in paroxysmal atrial fibrillation. It is always a pleasure to see widely held beliefs about a commonly used drug overturned by careful clinical observation. I would, however, take issue with one statement in their paper. Rawles et al point out that digoxin shortens the refractory period of atrial muscle, rendering the atrium more susceptible to fibrillation and increasing the rate of fibrillation. They suggest that the result of the use of digoxin in atrial fibrillation is "a compromise between increased fibrillation rate and reduced atrioventricular conduction, with the beneficial effect of reduced conduction generally predominating."

In fact, the increase in atrial rate produced by digoxin may be beneficial in controlling ventricular response by increasing anterograde concealed conduction. The clinical existence of an increased atrial rate causing a decreased ventricular response is often noted when atrial flutter with 2:1 anterograde conduction converts to atrial fibrillation, when the increase in atrial rate results in a decreased ventricular rate.

Before conversion to sinus rhythm there is a concomitant in fibrillatory waves associated with a decrease in the number of waves in the atrium.1 Experimentally this is associated with an increase in ventricular response—"an observation we have noted clinically."

Indeed, not only may the effect of digoxin on atrial refractoriness be salutary for ventricular rate control, but some investigators have suggested that it is the predominant mechanism by which the drug slows the heart rate in atrial fibrillation.4

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BOOK REVIEW


Those who roam the vast exhibition areas at the major American cardiological meetings will certainly have encountered Dr Marriott at one of the booths, presenting material much like that contained in this book to a group in an open lecture theatre; they will have heard his light, yet earnest, admonitions about how much you can learn from a close scrutiny of electrocardiograms. Some of course may have read his larger books and already know of his original, sometimes idiosyncratic, yet always thoughtful, ideas. Until quite recently he would return to England every year or two and give a series of courses in London and the provinces. He makes a point of including nurses and technicians in the audience he aims to attract and always gives good value. The present book is no exception.

The first part of the title is drawn from an Oslerian phrase: "pearls are butts that stick in the memory" and casts no aspersions on his readers. There are 70 sections, each covering one aspect, usually specific, occasionally general. Some of these segments are as brief as five lines but a few occupy more than one side of a page. Usually, but not always, the corresponding illustrations are opposite the text, so there is quite a lot of blank space. The individual items are important and the explanations usually, but not always, lucid. Occasionally a favourite phrase could have been less elegant but easier to understand, such as the heading for figure 39: "Anterograde conduction impaired by anterograde anterograde conduction," which takes a lot of working out. But most of the points are discussed in a helpful manner, and some of the pearls are true gems, like the very appropriate explanations of parastyle and atrioventricular dissociation. Occasionally Marriott uses the author's privilege to trot out a hobby horse, an example being his personal definition of high grade block.

Many statements are supported by references and he sometimes highlights classic observations that deserve recall. Others, like the estimation of right ventricular pressure (from V1, are unsupported. But his favourite source of wisdom is Sherlock Holmes, which gives you an idea of his approach. You will have to follow the master, too, when working out the numbering of the figures; the first is figure 2, a little disconcerting until you realise that each figure corresponds to a numbered item of text.

Worth while? Very definitely: an ideal Christmas present to the medical and nursing staff of a coronary care unit—excellent for systematic reading or for the occasional brief glance. And if you attend an American conference and hear that Barney Marriott is giving an extramural presentation, don't miss it either. He is excellent on the rostrum, and this book gives you the flavour.

DENNIS M KRIKLER