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).

Life at a price: the implantable defibrillator

SIR,—Professor Campbell (*Br Heart J* 1990; 64:171-3) outlined some of the dilemmas surrounding the use of the implantable cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs) and in particular stressed the cost of the device and the lack of established guidelines for selection of patients. We would like to draw attention to some of the data already available to aid cardiologists in this difficult task.

Cost-benefit analysis of ICDs has been attempted by two groups. Kupperman *et al* defined a group of patients with out-of-hospital cardiac arrest caused by haemodynamically unstable ventricular tachycardia or ventricular fibrillation occurring in the absence of acute myocardial infarction,¹ all of whom subsequently had persistently inducible ventricular tachycardia or fibrillation despite serial drug testing. She then collected data on the implantation and follow up costs of the ICD and compared them with the costs for drug treatment of the same group. The ICD cost \$17 400 per life-year saved. This was based on the performance of the ICDs available in 1986; the development of programmability, a five-year ICD life, and transvenous insertion techniques were estimated to bring the annual cost down to \$7400. There are many assumptions involved in the calculation of such figures but they are of similar order of magnitude to the costs of heart transplantation (\$26 900 per life-year) and the treatment of severe hypertension in men aged 40 years (\$11 100 per life-year).

Buxton *et al* performed a similar analysis using 1990 costs in the United Kingdom and produced a range of estimates from £6000 to £20 000 per life-year saved (the lower cost assumes a reduction in ICD price and the cost of implantation, an increase in ICD life and the cost of amiodarone treatment, and a higher incidence of death in the untreated group).²

We believe that it would be sensible for the development of defibrillator use in Britain to be centred around the identification of those patients most likely to benefit from defibrillator implantation and evaluated against the current best treatment for these groups. Concentration of defibrillator implantation in a small number of centres would maximise the potential for systematic assessment.

To illustrate the importance of patient selection we have used Buxton's cost estimates in several scenarios. It should be stressed that there are potentially very large margins of error in these figures which are costed assuming an ICD life of two years and which take no account of any economic contribution made by the patient during this period. Their main purpose is to illustrate the relative cost of using the ICD within different groups. Data from Wilber *et al* stratifying survival after out-of-hospital cardiac arrest³ enable calculation of the cost of ICD use based on the inducibility of arrhythmia at electrophysiological study, suppression of the arrhythmia by drug treatment, and left ventricular function (low EF = ejection fraction $\leq 30\%$). This represents the non-prophylactic use of the ICD.

Patient group	Cost per life-year saved
Inducible, suppressed, high EF	Dubious benefit
Non-inducible, high EF	£110 000
Inducible, suppressed, low EF	£68 000
Inducible, non-suppressed, high EF	£24 000
Non-inducible low EF	£21 000
Inducible, non-suppressed, low EF	£16 000

In the same way the prophylactic use of the implantable defibrillator in post-infarction patients can be costed. Survival data from the St George's Hospital post-infarction database produce the following figures:

All post-infarction patients	£442 000
Patients with ejection fraction $<40\%$	£220 000
Patients with positive late potentials, reduced heart rate variability, and more than 10 extrasystoles per hour	£35 400

In conclusion, we believe that with current data it is possible to identify patients likely to benefit most from implantation of an ICD. Most of these patients are not at present referred for assessment at specialist centres. We should encourage such referral and at the same time strive to establish funding for a programme of assessment at several designated implantation centres. Only in this way will reliable, sensitive, and rapid evaluation be achieved.

A JOHN CAMM
MARK ANDERSON
Department of Cardiological Sciences,
St George's Hospital Medical School,
Cranmer Terrace, London SW17 0RE

- 1 Kupperman M, Luce BR, McGovern B, *et al*. An analysis of the cost-effectiveness of the implantable defibrillator. *Circulation* 1990; 81:91-100.
- 2 Buxton MJ, O'Brien BJ, Rushby JA. Cost-effectiveness of the automatic implantable cardioverter defibrillator: a preliminary assessment. (Health Economics Research Group Research Report No 7.) Uxbridge: Brunel University, 1990.
- 3 Wilber DJ, Garan H, Finkelstein D, *et al*. Out-of-hospital cardiac arrest: use of electrophysiological testing in the prediction of outcome. *N Engl J Med* 1988;318:19-24.

Electrical neurostimulators for pain relief in angina

SIR,—The editorial on electrical neurostimulators for relief of angina (*Br Heart J*

1990;63:141-2) was a timely recognition of the benefit of this form of treatment. The various forms of electrical neurostimulation, be it carotid sinus stimulation, electroacupuncture, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), or dorsal column stimulation, all seem to work via a combination of analgesia and suppression of sympathetic activity.

There is no evidence that any type is more efficacious than the other. There is, however, an enormous difference in cost and patient morbidity. The dorsal column stimulator device is expensive and insertion of the electrodes requires epidural implantation. Invasive procedures and insertion of devices are associated with pain and suffering. These devices can lead to continuing discomfort, and there is the risk of infection and device malfunction, requiring operative intervention. The costs include the dorsal column stimulator unit (leads, connection, and pulse generator) at \$A5570 (about £2300), two surgical procedures for implantation, testing, and wiring, and approximately three days as an inpatient. In addition, should problems occur, neurosurgical exploration may be required. In comparison, a TENS unit costs between \$A100 (£41) and \$A300 (£125) depending on sophistication and portability, and is non-invasive. Furthermore, the cost of an acupuncture needle is \$A1.

The first patient treated with dorsal column stimulation as quoted in the editorial unfortunately did not have a trial of TENS or acupuncture before the procedure.¹ These may have been equally effective. The patient also had subsequent readmissions to hospital for stimulator malfunction at 3.5 months, 15 months, 24 months, and four years, and required exploration on two occasions.

Recent work by Han suggests the optimal frequency of stimulation for pain relief is probably 15 Hz (personal communication). At this frequency there is stimulation of all three opiate receptors—mu, delta, and kappa—due to release of endorphins, met-enkephalins, and dynorphins.² A synergistic, not just an additive effect is seen when the three receptors are simultaneously stimulated.³

DAVID M COLQUHOUN
First Floor,
Wesley Medical Centre,
40 Chasely Street,
Auchenflower,
Queensland 4066,
Australia

- 1 Murphy DF, Giles KR. Intractable angina pectoris: management with dorsal column stimulation. *Med J Aust* 1987;146:260.
- 2 Han JS. Progress in the pharmacological studies of acupuncture analgesia. In: Paton SW, Mitchell J, Turner P, eds. *Iuphar 9th international congress of pharmacology, London, 1984. Proceedings volume 1*. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- 3 Huang L, Ren MF, Lu CJ, Han JS. Mutual potentiation of enkephalin, dynorphin A-(1-13) and morphine in their analgesic effect in the spinal cord of the rat [Abstract]. In: Han JS, ed. *The neurochemical basis of pain relief by acupuncture. A collection of papers 1973-1987*. Beijing Medical University, 1987:281.

This letter was shown to the author, who replies as follows:

SIR,—Dr Colquhoun makes a good point. Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is an underrated but effective way of helping angina pain in some patients. We always give our patients a trial of TENS

treatment before considering epidural spinal cord stimulation. But it is clear that patients prefer the totally implantable system. TENS systems are bulky, cumbersome, and skin reactions are common. Dr Colquhoun's arguments are similar to those put forward when the external Lucas pacemaker system was used. That was also much cheaper but it was displaced by totally implantable pacemaker systems. There are problems with the present epidural electrodes which slip too frequently; but with further developments it should be possible to overcome these, and we are now trying new designs.

It is not our experience that all forms of electrical neurostimulation are equally effective. Some patients respond better to TENS than epidural stimulation and vice versa. For this reason we now insert a temporary electrode that can remain in place for 2–3 weeks to assess effectiveness before we implant the permanent unit; this also ensures that an expensive unit is not implanted unnecessarily.

Finally, I was interested in Dr Colquhoun's comments about the optimal frequency of stimulation and the work by Han. We have tried stimulating at 15 Hz and it seems to be effective but some patients describe it as a rather unpleasant sensation compared with higher frequency stimulation. But this subject is in its infancy (in the West) and there is much to explore about mechanisms and the best techniques.

JOHN SANDERSON
Department of Cardiology,
Taunton and Somerset Hospital,
Mugrove Park,
Taunton TA1 5DA

Limited potential of special ambulance services in the management of cardiac arrest

SIR,—We agree with Dr Rowley and colleagues that there has not been sufficient critical analysis of the effectiveness of ambulance personnel with advanced training (*Br Heart J* 1990;64:309–12). However, we wish to make the following observations about their findings and raise important questions about the development of the emergency ambulance service.

Concentration on those patients with pre-hospital cardiac arrest brought to the accident and emergency department excludes an unknown number of resuscitation attempts terminated by attending doctors. It may be that crews with defibrillator training spend more time at the scene of an arrest, increasing the likelihood that a general practitioner will arrive, certify that the patient is dead, and release the ambulance. The basic emergency crew will "scoop-and-run", leaving less scope for GP involvement. This may explain why larger numbers of patients were transported to hospital by the crews with a more basic training. What were the total number of resuscitation attempts made by each type of crew, regardless of later hospital transfer?

In our area ambulances only transport victims of cardiac arrest to hospital if resuscitation is in progress. When resuscitation is inappropriate a doctor is called to certify death and the patient is left at the scene or taken to the mortuary. We were surprised therefore that 64 of 147 patients were taken to hospital by defibrillator trained crews without any attempt at resuscitation. These patients had not been pronounced dead by a medical

practitioner. What criteria did the ambulance personnel use to withhold resuscitation from these individuals?

While the conclusion that the addition of other skills (drug administration and intubation) might save "a few extra lives" is probably correct, we are concerned that this study together with the results of the Scottish experience of semiautomatic defibrillators¹ may stop full extended training in ambulance aid being given to paramedics.

We have already shown the effectiveness of personnel with extended training in the management of hypoglycaemic coma.² There is recent evidence that patients with acute myocardial infarction complicated by hypotension and bradycardia have a better outcome when transported to hospital by a paramedic vehicle rather than an ordinary ambulance.³ Personnel with extended training also treat patients with acute asthma,⁴ hypovolaemic shock, and respiratory arrest, and in the future may administer thrombolytic agents.⁵

We are sure that the provision of a defibrillator on every emergency ambulance is an essential short term aim for improving the prehospital management of cardiac arrest. We are equally certain that the provision of a paramedic on every vehicle, coupled with a strict clinical audit, is the essential long term approach to improving all aspects of pre-hospital emergency care.

CLIVE WESTON
MICHAEL STEPHENS
Department of Cardiology,
University Hospital of Wales,
Heath Park, Cardiff CF4 4XN

- 1 Cobbe SM, Redmond MJ, Hollingworth J, Carrington DJ. Heartstart Scotland: initial experience of a nationwide scheme for out of hospital defibrillation by ambulance crews [Abstract]. *Br Heart J* 1990;64:65.
- 2 Weston CFM, Stephens MR. Hypoglycaemic attacks treated by ambulance personnel with extended training. *BMJ* 1990;300:908–9.
- 3 Pressley JC, Severance HW, Raney MP, et al. A comparison of paramedic versus basic emergency medical care of patients at high and low risk during acute myocardial infarction. *J Am Coll Cardiol* 1988;12:1555–61.
- 4 Wathen CG, Crompton GK, Carrington DJ, Hollingworth J. Treatment for acute asthma in the ambulance [Letter]. *Br J Gen Pract* 1990;40:388.
- 5 Bouten MJM, Simoons ML, Pool J, Hartman JAM. Prehospital thrombolysis by ambulance paramedics [Abstract]. *Eur Heart J* 1989; 10(suppl):123.

BOOK REVIEW

Practical Echocardiography in the Adult. J P M Hamer. (Pp 229; £79.50.) Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990. ISBN 0792306708.

There are many large detailed reference texts for those experienced in echocardiography and Doppler. However, there is a dearth of books, like this one, giving practical advice and tips to those starting and learning the technique.

The book is approximately 200 pages long

and liberally illustrated with high quality diagrams and echocardiographic/Doppler images. Unfortunately, many of the images and Doppler recordings have been reproduced in a rather small format and this does not do them justice. Dr Hamer has attempted to cover every aspect of adult echocardiography and with each cardiac structure he has described what features the echocardiographer should examine and what measurements to make. This is indeed good practical advice and to my knowledge is not presented in this form elsewhere.

In discussing each abnormality Dr Hamer has very sensibly integrated the role of all the echocardiography and Doppler techniques including transoesophageal echocardiography. There is also a small but excellent chapter on reporting echocardiograms which I believe would be of particular value to non-clinicians.

There is undoubtedly a need for practical books on echocardiography and I am sure that this volume will prove popular. However, while the range of topics covered is very comprehensive this has unfortunately caused a lack of detail and omission of many practical pointers which those new to the technique would have undoubtedly found useful.

MARK J MONAGHAN

BRITISH CARDIAC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

The office move was completed uneventfully, and we now have more space. At present the society occupies three rooms at the top of numbers 1 and 2 St Andrew's Place, and we hope to have the fourth room shortly. We can now accommodate committee meetings, and once we have a large enough table (we hope second hand) full council meetings should also be possible in our own premises. Please note that our address is Number 1. We have given up one telephone number but now two lines are available on 071-486 6430.

The Glasgow meeting is approaching. We have made one more break with tradition in that we are liaising with our public relations consultants to encourage the presence of the media. Our constitution states that the press will not be admitted to scientific sessions, and this will be upheld. But we plan to offer briefing sessions where we will be prepared to discuss items of interest that are expected to be presented that day, and to comment on items that may have been presented on the previous day. This will of course be conditional on agreement with the authors. We hope that the senior author or a nominee will agree to be present if we know that a particular paper is likely to attract interest. The health and medical correspondents of the London daily newspapers may not wish to travel to Glasgow. If necessary we may be able to arrange a meeting in London beforehand with an embargo on any premature publication. Particular care must be taken not