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 prehospital 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 to 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 have transport victims of road accident and 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 been not 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 defibrillators 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.1 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.2 Personnel with extended training also treat patients with acute asthma,4 hypovolaemic shock, and respiratory arrest, and in the future may administer thrombolytic agents.

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.

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2 Weston CFM, Stephens MR. Hypoglycaemic attacks treated by ambulance personnel with extended training. BAU 1990;300:908–9.

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 considerably more meeting times 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...