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;70:537–41) Brenot and colleagues reported 15 new cases of primary pulmonary hypertension (PPH) with a history of exposure to appetite suppressants.1 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 pradromic 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 Simmonneau’s centre), the United Kingdom, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Switzerland. The study is examining all the alleged risk factors for PPH, not only fenfluramine derivatives. More that 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 to factors known 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 before four years from 1 September 1992. It is very likely that this goal will be reached because two thirds of the required validated cases in all the participating countries have been recruited to date.

In France, where the case series reported by Brenot et al originates, we have been able to identify only 46 incident cases of PPH over a 13 month period. To achieve this level of recruitment we contacted most of 80 centres every three months. The expected number of incident cases of PPH in a country such as France was a priori thought to be around 100 per year.


Are streptokinase antibodies clinically important?

Sin.—A recent editorial and paper examined the clinical significance of streptokinase (SK) antibodies.1, 2 There are two problems associated with the presence of specific SK antibody. Firstly, there is the possibility of impairing the 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 or three months. 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.3 However, one cannot extrapolate directly from the laboratory bench to the intra-coronary thrombus. Though SK binds to plasminogen on an equimolar basis, the plasminogen-SK complex is a far more potent activator of plasminogen than SK alone and generates plasmin in a cascade fashion. Thus the requirement was 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 plasma 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 al4 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 not necessarily related to the antibody titre, serious immune reactions—for example, serum sickness—are. Increasing the concentration of administered antibody results in the formation of more immune complex and its deposition in various organs. Early studies evaluating the therapeutic dose of SK found much increased incidence of allergic reactions in patients receiving prolonged SK infusions, a situation that resembles a repeat bolus dose (both methods of administrations cause high circulating concentrations of specific antibody). Allergic reactions to SK would therefore worsen the proteinuria.

The editorial and paper1 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 far too few patients have been studied.4 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 confirmed by a properly designed 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 are presented with further infarction between days one and two 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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