What is allodynia?

Allodynia is the term used when any normally painless stimulus is experienced as painful. Hyperalgesia is the experience of unusually heightened pain from a known painful stimulus. These two symptoms (together with myoclonus, seizures, agitation, and delirium) are well documented but rare side effects of opioids, particularly if renal function is poor (*Current Opinion in Anaesthesiology* 1998;11:436-45). Allodynia and hyperalgesia are thought to represent a hyperexcitable state, possibly induced via an antiglycinergic mechanism. The symptoms generally resolve rapidly when the dose of the opioid is reduced or another opioid is substituted, or both.

Both allodynia and hyperalgesia should be considered if a patient is already using high doses of the opioid or if the beginnings of hyperexcitability are observed. Better control of symptoms may be achieved by using combinations of analgesics with different mechanisms of action or neural blockade techniques rather than simply increasing the dose of the opioid in patients whose pain is uncontrolled.

Allodynia and hyperalgesia have been observed with several opioids, including morphine. In the

case of morphine, there is little direct evidence that these effects are due to either the accumulation of morphine or its metabolites. They may be caused by both (*Pain* 1998;74:43-53), or by particular morphine to metabolite ratios. It is suggested, however, that two common metabolites—morphine-3-glucuronide and morphine-6-glucuronide are implicated. Animal studies have shown that high concentrations of morphine-3-glucuronide can antagonise morphine, thus reducing the analgesic effect of morphine (*Pain* 1995;62(5):1-60; *Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences* 1998;87:813-20); and to some extent this may be happening in humans. Under normal circumstances, however, morphine is effective, despite the fact that up to 75% of it is metabolised to morphine-3-glucuronide in humans and the concentrations of morphine-3-glucuronide greatly exceed those of morphine. It is not always appropriate to extrapolate what happens in animals to humans. The metabolism of morphine, and indeed the receptor population via which the parent drug (or its metabolites) are acting, may be quite different in the two species.

Abi Berger *science editor, BMJ*

Science
commentary

Diversity to divinity

In the fortnight in which nail bombs tore through ethnic minority neighbourhoods in Brixton and Brick Lane and brought mayhem to Soho, a little known, relatively unpublicised event took place in the Midlands that should give hope to all who wish for harmony between Britain's communities.

This event was the consecration of a new Hindu temple on 13 acres of derelict land set in the bleak industrial landscape of Tividale in Sandwell.

Sitting out in the unexpected sunshine of a May bank holiday weekend we contemplated a scene that represented everything that a tolerant multicultural society stood for and that defied the perversely logical potential of nail bombs to spread fear and discord. The need for tight security—after all, a government minister was among the invited dignitaries—did not dampen the obvious enthusiasm of the more than 5000 people who took part in the festivities. Amid a deeply moving display of religious devotion and a dazzling exposition of south Asian culture, a new Hindu temple was established in Britain.

Speaking at the same time in nearby Birmingham on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Sikh Khalsa, the prime minister, Tony Blair, spoke of a "modern civic society" in which discrimination and violence have no place. As public health physicians we recognise that this vision represents one of the prerequisites for health so eloquently espoused by Health for All 2000.

We were among thousands of people who converged from all over Britain to join together in consecrating the new Hindu temple. Remarkably, many of those present were not of the Hindu faith, the host community being represented in fair numbers and at the highest level. Recognising the multicultural nature of the development, the millennium commission part funded the project. It was as much a celebration of art and culture as of religion, and in this too there was participation by all communities.

There are spin-off benefits from the temple. The multipurpose hall will soon be turned into a healthy living centre. The Sacred

Lands project is a unique effort at transforming the derelict land on which the temple was built into a landscaped haven of peace and beauty for the local community to enjoy and cherish. Tourist money will be attracted to an area not previously on any tourist map.

Interestingly, the project is the brainchild of a group of Indian doctors working in the NHS. For many it was an emotional moment to see their efforts of many years take shape. Overseas doctors, it is often said, are the unsung heroes of the NHS, their contribution understated and undervalued. But here in Tividale their commitment to the temple project and to Britain was amply recognised and richly rewarded.

We believe the new temple is a successful symbol of the diversity of the British way of life. The prime minister believes that a civilised society should respect this diversity. Diversity might occasionally lead to discord, but as long as we value our differences and respect each other's religion there will be hope for an equal and civil society.

The Sri Venkateswara Temple in Sandwell is a powerful symbol of the inherent good in British society where diversity leads to divinity.

Jammi Rao and Sam Ramaiah, *public health physicians, West Midlands*

We welcome articles up to 600 words on topics such as *A memorable patient, A paper that changed my practice, My most unfortunate mistake*, or any other piece conveying instruction, pathos, or humour. If possible the article should be supplied on a disk. Permission is needed from the patient or a relative if an identifiable patient is referred to. We also welcome contributions for "Endpieces," consisting of quotations of up to 80 words (but most are considerably shorter) from any source, ancient or modern, which have appealed to the reader.