(61, 62, and 63). Also, three of our patients who were operated on had small aneurysms initially that grew by over 1 cm in six months, a far quicker rate of growth than that described by others in non-hypertensive patients.²

On the basis of our initial findings we believe that screening should be offered to male hypertensive patients from the age of 60 and should be done regularly—for example, every three to five years—in this group.

In the 388 women we have screened eight aneurysms have been detected (only two over 3.5 cm), confirming the low incidence of aneurysms in women described by others.³ One woman, aged 72, has required an elective repair of an aneurysm of 6.1 cm. Many more hypertensive women will require screening to determine more precisely the lower incidence of aneurysms in this group. Offering screening in some form to this group may well, however, prove to be just as economical as breast cancer screening, in terms of quality adjusted life years at least.

Numerous studies have suggested an association between hypertension and abdominal aortic aneurysms. We believe that hypertensive people also "require special provision for screening irrespective of any plans to screen apparently healthy people."¹

MARTIN SOWTER
MICHAEL LEWIS

Department of Surgery,
East Glamorgan Hospital,
Pontypridd,
Mid-Glamorgan CF38 1AB

- 1 Harris PL. Reducing the mortality from abdominal aortic aneurysms: need for a national screening programme. *BMJ* 1992;305:697-8. (19 September.)
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EDITOR,—I am sympathetic to P L Harris's objective of trying to reduce mortality from ruptured abdominal aortic aneurysms.¹ I have recently screened 678 (97.6%) of the 695 patients aged 60-79 in our practice for aneurysms. Twenty six were found to have an aneurysm (range 3.0-8.3 cm external sagittal diameter), and 13 were referred for a surgical opinion. The screening programme has exposed some of the dilemmas in current management of aneurysms.

Patients deserve to know of important risks associated with repair of an aneurysm. Harris's statement that in the best centres elective repair carries an "operative risk of under 5%" cannot be generally assumed, and published mortality statistics may not reflect the risk for an average patient.² Morbidity associated with elective repair of an aneurysm has not been widely published, but in series of mixed elective and emergency repairs it has been considerable.^{3,4} Without reference statistics on mortality and morbidity the balance of when to operate for a particular size of aneurysm and risk to the patient becomes uncomfortably difficult. For individual patients local results will be most pertinent unless distant referral is considered.

Harris rightly directs attention to aneurysms of 4.0-5.0 cm, for which management is contentious; most aneurysms detected by screening fall into this category. Surgery has been advocated for aneurysms of >4 cm,⁵ but such an aggressive policy is not supported by recent prospective^{6,7} and retrospective⁸ studies of the natural course of aneurysm. Rarely, small aneurysms will rupture fatally, but I believe that relatives find unlikely natural tragedy easier to bear than tragedy after well intentioned surgery. A more conservative approach to surgery tips the risk-benefit balance towards benefit, and Scott *et al*'s study exemplifies how such a policy has worked successfully.⁷

With regard to the psychological consequences

of detecting aneurysms by screening, will patients with small aneurysms be able to maintain a fair perspective of a low risk of rupture or will their predominant perception be of a time bomb waiting to explode within? The predicament of those with large aneurysms who are considered to be unfit for surgery is particularly unfortunate. The anxiety an aneurysm can generate should not be underestimated or disregarded.

If a low mortality and morbidity associated with elective surgery, a conservative approach to intervention, and adequate counselling of patients can be combined then I believe that a local screening policy for aneurysms could make good ethical and economical sense. That such criteria apply nationally is doubtful, and currently I do not favour a national screening programme.

Lastly, β blockade has shown promise in the management of aneurysms.¹⁰ As aneurysms are common, whether physiological β_1 adrenergic antagonism can retard their expansion or reduce the rate of rupture is of great practical importance. An extension of the Medical Research Council's small aneurysm study to address this issue would be expedient.

J S ROSE

The Surgery,
Lindford,
Hampshire GU35 0QJ

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Domiciliary thrombolysis by general practitioners

EDITOR,—The results of the Grampian region early anistreplase trial¹ need to be seen within the context of the burden of myocardial infarction that is carried by a community. The general practitioners who participated clearly, and effectively, performed a great deal of selection. Recruitment of one patient every 11 months means that most patients with myocardial infarction were not entered into the trial. A local estimate for Plymouth Health Authority is of eight to 10 myocardial infarctions per general practitioner each year; on the basis of the lower figure, and assuming a 30% death rate if medical help is not called, these general practitioners' patients would have suffered 1537 myocardial infarctions, but only 311 were recruited.

Another way of looking at this is to consider the total number of deaths ascribed to myocardial infarction among patients of the doctors in the study. Extrapolation from local data for Plymouth gives an estimate of 1060 deaths over the period of the study. A considerable proportion of these will have been sudden deaths; this still leaves many more deaths than those noted during the study.

Any strategy for implementing a new advance needs to take into account the whole range of

presentations of conditions; for thrombolysis this means not only patients with classical myocardial infarction diagnosed by general practitioners but also, for example, people with atypical chest pain and those who do not perceive their symptoms as serious.

ALISON ROUND

Plymouth Health Authority,
Plymouth PL6 5XN

- 1 GREAT Group. Feasibility, safety, and efficacy of domiciliary thrombolysis by general practitioners: Grampian region early anistreplase trial. *BMJ* 1992;305:548-53. (5 September.)

EDITOR,—I am surprised that in the Grampian region early anistreplase trial no patients were diagnosed as having unstable angina, which is the most common differential diagnosis and the most difficult to make in the early stages of a myocardial infarction.¹ It is likely that the patients in the diagnostic groups "possible myocardial infarction" and "ischaemic heart disease" in fact had unstable angina. If only definite and probable myocardial infarctions are counted the diagnostic accuracy of the general practitioners was 57% (and of the hospital doctors 66%). This may also account for the lower mortality and fewer Q wave infarctions in the domiciliary group.

As there is no evidence that thrombolytic treatment is of benefit in unstable angina² it seems that nearly half the patients in the study received thrombolytic treatment inappropriately and were needlessly exposed to the risks of haemorrhage. Colleagues and I found similar figures in a study in Somerset, where the general practitioners accurately diagnosed myocardial infarction on clinical grounds (without electrocardiography in most cases) in 45% of cases (S Rule *et al*, unpublished work). Again this was largely because many patients with unstable angina were thought to be in the early stages of myocardial infarction.

Diagnosing myocardial infarction at the onset can be difficult, but at a minimum a good history should be obtained and an electrocardiogram properly interpreted. In the Grampian study the general practitioner was required to record an electrocardiogram but not to interpret it, which seems pointless. It is the electrocardiogram, however, that causes problems for many general practitioners as individually they will see few cases of myocardial infarction each year. The higher diagnostic accuracy in hospital may relate to this.

JOHN E SANDERSON

Taunton and Somerset Hospital,
Taunton,
Somerset TA1 5DA

- 1 GREAT Group. Feasibility, safety, and efficacy of domiciliary thrombolysis by general practitioners: Grampian region early anistreplase trial. *BMJ* 1992;305:548-53. (5 September.)
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EDITOR,—The Grampian region early anistreplase trial provides a valuable contribution to the debate on pre-hospital thrombolysis, particularly in view of the importance of minimising the delay to treatment.¹ Several points merit additional discussion. Although the authors state that about 60% of eligible patients were recruited into the study, they do not state the proportion of all patients with myocardial infarction. The narrow time window for entry to the trial selected patients presenting early. Indeed, the median patient delay in an earlier community study by the same authors was two hours,² compared with 45 minutes in this study. Thus the improvements in outcome may not necessarily apply to patients presenting later. The median delay to presentation in recent large scale studies has been substantially longer (57% beyond four hours in the second international study of infarct survival³).

The high accuracy of diagnosis achieved in this