Bacterial superinfection in chickenpox

Children are probably more susceptible ...

EDITOR,—In their lesson of the week about bacterial complications of childhood chickenpox Andrew J Pollard and colleagues state that there have been no community based studies of complications of chickenpox in Britain.¹ In a hospital based study we reviewed the clinical data on 222 patients with chickenpox (including 78 children) admitted to our infectious diseases unit from 1989 to 1993.² A third of the children had appreciable secondary bacterial skin infection, and four of these had disease mediated by superantigens (bacterial toxins that bind T cell receptors at the variable part of the β chain away from the conventional antigen binding site, resulting in non-specific stimulation of large numbers of T cells). Only 17% of the 144 adults had superinfection, and none had superantigen disease. Of five children with eczema, one (who was taking topical steroids) developed secondary skin infection. Six children developed bacterial chest infections, including one with sickle crisis. Of seven asthmatic children, two had pneumonia and one had pneumonitis.

Pollard and colleagues proffer explanations for the increased propensity to invasive streptococcal infection after infection with varicella zoster virus. The lesions of chickenpox predispose to bacterial skin infections, and children are probably more susceptible than adults as they may not have acquired protective antibodies. We suggest that the expression of staphylococcal and streptococcal superantigens is more likely to occur in patients with chickenpox than in those with a simple bacterial infection. Perhaps the microenvironment of vesicles enhances the expression of superantigens, the effect of this being exacerbated by immune impairment mediated by chickenpox.

Pollard and colleagues point out that the association of chickenpox with toxic shock has been largely neglected in standard texts. In our experience it is not an uncommon complication, and it is discussed and illustrated in one of the recent standard texts.³

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... but it can occur at any age

EDITOR,—In their lesson of the week Andrew J Pollard and colleagues report 13 cases of severe bacterial infection associated with infection with varicella zoster virus.¹ While such infection is the commonest cause of morbidity related to chickenpox in otherwise healthy children, it is uncommon in adults.^{2,3} We report our recent experience of chickenpox complicated by necrotising fasciitis and the toxic shock syndrome in a 32 year old man.

A previously fit white man, who had no underlying immunodeficiency, was admitted to hospital a week after the onset of clinical chickenpox, which he had acquired from his young son.

Initially stable, he rapidly developed high fever and hypotension, with an area of spreading erythema and central skin necrosis on the anterior chest wall. He was transferred to the intensive care unit, where he required haemodynamic and ventilatory support. He was treated with high dose benzylpenicillin, clindamycin, metronidazole, and high dose acyclovir and underwent radical debridement of the chest wall. The necrotic skin was stripped down to the pectoral fascia and appeared healthy. Blood cultures and swabs from the chest wall grew group A streptococci, which were sensitive to penicillin and clindamycin. Electron microscopy yielded negative findings for herpes virus particles, but results of serological tests for varicella zoster virus were consistent with acute primary chickenpox.

Despite aggressive management the patient deteriorated inexorably over the next 36 hours, with generalised erythema, renal failure, worsening lactic acidosis, the adult respiratory distress syndrome, and hypotension unresponsive to maximal inotropic support. He died 72 hours after admission. The features of multiorgan failure in association with isolation of group A streptococci are compatible with the streptococcal toxic shock syndrome.⁴

The fulminating course of sepsis due to group A streptococci seen in this patient has been well described in young children with chickenpox but is rare in adults with the disease (in whom chickenpox pneumonitis is the most important cause of morbidity and death⁵). We agree with Pollard and colleagues' conclusions about the potential severity of bacterial superinfection in chickenpox and emphasise that this complication can occur at any age.

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Demand for donated eggs by ethnic minority groups exceeds the supply

EDITOR,—Egg donation is an established fertility treatment for a variety of indications. The main limiting factor is the supply of donors, although the shortage may be confined to southern England.¹ In the 1991 census ethnic minority groups comprised 5.5% of the British population, but egg donors who are not white are rare. We determined what in vitro fertilisation clinics in the United Kingdom were offering recipient couples from ethnic minority groups and whether women from these groups were donating their eggs.

The 46 licensed egg donation clinics in the United Kingdom were telephoned and asked what they would offer couples requesting egg donation who were not white and had not got their own donor, how many recipient couples

from ethnic minority groups they had seen over the past two years, and how many anonymous egg donors had been recruited from ethnic minority groups during this time.

Twelve of the 46 clinics would offer a recipient couple from an ethnic minority group eggs from a white donor after counselling, and a further five would arrange eggs from a white donor for an Asian couple but not for a black couple. Three units would offer free in vitro fertilisation to women who were not white in exchange for half of their eggs. Only 17 women from ethnic minority groups had volunteered to become anonymous egg donors in the past two years, whereas 274 such couples had requested egg donation.

This survey shows that the demand for eggs from donors who are not white exceeds the supply available. Clinics are looking for alternative solutions. The use of eggs from white donors for recipients who are not white is offered by over a third of the clinics. This situation may be a second best option as it is unclear whether children born as a result of such donation would be fully accepted into their communities.

Offering free in vitro fertilisation to couples from racial minority groups in exchange for some of their eggs may be an acceptable option. Concerns have been raised, however, about how the donor couple would feel should their own treatment be unsuccessful.

The solution is to increase recruitment of donors from the recipient couple's community. Recipients usually wish to maintain confidentiality and cite this as their reason for not bringing their own donor. Recruitment could be improved through posters in an appropriate language; a clinic could act as an intermediary by contacting a sympathetic community leader, and it could also increase the general awareness of the public through the media.

In the future, techniques such as oocyte freezing and in vitro maturation of oocytes may obviate the need for egg donors. For now, however, egg donation clinics need to develop strategies to increase the awareness of the need for egg donors among all racial groups.

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Laparoscopy does have a role in tuberculous peritonitis

EDITOR,—We question a statement made in the discussion of the Grand Round on tuberculous peritonitis.¹ H J F Hodgson states that, "other things being equal, a trial of antituberculous treatment [rather than laparoscopy] is justified"; this comment is based on anecdotal experience of one patient who died when laparoscopy led to a laparotomy. The stated reason for Hodgson's concern is that "If one has multiple matted pieces of bowel, the process of performing a peritoneal biopsy at laparoscopy is itself hazardous."

In a report by one of us (JH) 22 patients who had tuberculous peritonitis underwent laparoscopy and peritoneal biopsy; there were no deaths and few complications.² In a review Marshall commented on four reports on a total of 110 patients who underwent laparoscopy for peritoneal tuberculosis, with no deaths.³ The procedure is not, however, without risk, and occasional deaths have been reported,^{4,5} although these seem usually to have been associated with complicating factors.

Laparoscopy with local anaesthesia enables targeted tissue biopsy specimens to be obtained from the peritoneum, thus allowing a rapid diagnosis, while other conditions, such as peritoneal lymphoma and carcinomatosis, are excluded. Laparotomy, which is associated with a mortality of 3-12% in patients with tuberculous peritonitis,⁴ may also be avoided. If multiple pieces of matted bowel are found during the procedure and are of concern to the operator then a biopsy specimen need not be obtained, although even then the procedure may provide useful information.⁴ Because of the advantages of laparoscopy, we believe that Hodgson's view is overcautious and that, if there are no contraindications, the investigation should be considered early in management.

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Bovine spongiform encephalopathy

Public health officials are confused over whether to eat beef

EDITOR,—Helen Cohen reports considerable variation between doctors and patients in the extent to which they stopped eating beef after the announcement on 20 March of a possible link between bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.¹ She attributes this difference to varying levels of medical knowledge, educational background, and sources of information. We have carried out a similar survey of the 202 directors of public health and consultants in communicable disease control in England. Questionnaires were posted on 18 March, just before the media attention and the disparity of information were greatest.

Of those officials who ate red meat (100 of 120 respondents), 54 and 69 had reduced their consumption of beef and beef products, respectively (table 1). Confusion was evident, however, in the fact that respondents were more willing to eat beef and beef products if they were cooked at home or at a friend's house than when eating out. This resulted from concern over the source of the meat rather than the place of consumption. Nevertheless, beef products were always less likely to be eaten than beef.

We also asked the officials for their opinion on the official line being taken (those who did not eat red meat were included). Eighteen respondents agreed that there was no proved risk of transmission of bovine spongiform encephalopathy to humans and no need to avoid beef or beef products; 45 agreed that, since there was no proof that transmission could not occur, people of all ages should avoid beef or beef products, or both, while a further 18 believed this to be true for only children and young adults; and 37 respected informed choice (that is, they thought that the public should be given the facts and allowed to make up their own minds).

Table 1—Number of public health officials and their families who had changed their pattern of consumption of beef and beef products because of their concerns over bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and where they would be prepared to eat beef and beef products (n = 120)

	Beef		Beef products	
	Self	Immediate family	Self	Immediate family
Change in consumption:				
Had reduced consumption in past six months, or now intended to	17	26	21	27
Had reduced consumption over six months ago	37	40	48	48
Had increased consumption	2	2	3	2
Had not changed consumption and did not intend to	45	35	33	24
Intention not indicated	19	17	15	19
Would eat beef or beef products:				
At home	75	68	34	31
At a friend's house	77	67	36	34
At a quality restaurant	67	60	27	24
From a "take away" restaurant	30	27	18	16

Cohen considered increased knowledge to be a reason why doctors changed their eating habits less than patients did. Public health professionals should be among the people best informed about transmission of disease and any risks, but in our study their response was confused. Cohen did not state the date of her survey, and perhaps the greater concern among public health officials reflects the closeness in time of our study to the initial mass of confused information in the media. A gradual reversion to normal eating habits, as information is assimilated and risks are assessed more rationally,² may be expected both within medical circles and among patients and the general public. This, however, would rely on a clear message being disseminated through both medical and non-medical channels, which evidently was not the case early on in the crisis.

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Study shows need for better communication between government and doctors

EDITOR,—In contrast to the heated scientific debate on bovine spongiform encephalopathy and the public health, which has raged for many years in other European countries, in Britain advice on possible health risks and the safety of beef and beef products has come largely from central government. This has prompted organisations such as the Consumers' Association to

complain that the issuing of selected information on bovine spongiform encephalopathy, aimed at reassuring the public, prohibits informed decision taking and debate on food safety. For example, the brains of cattle potentially infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy continued to enter the human food chain until November 1989. During this time the Department of Health and other government departments advised that all beef produce was safe to eat. Other health professionals were more cautious in their interpretation of the science,^{1,2} but their concerns were not reflected in official communications.

In March 1996 a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was reported in younger people in Britain; it was possibly associated with exposure to the agent causing bovine spongiform encephalopathy.³ Before this our concern that medical professionals had inadequate knowledge and understanding of bovine spongiform encephalopathy prompted us to survey all 1038 doctors in North Yorkshire. Our aims were to determine their knowledge of spongiform encephalopathies, the proportion who had reduced their consumption of beef products, and the proportion who had been consulted on this issue by patients.

The response rate to the survey in September 1995 was 86% (644 men, 244 women). Test-retest reliability was 92% (1404 questions in a 35 test-retest sample). Although just over a quarter of doctors had been consulted by patients for advice about bovine spongiform encephalopathy, most (55%) thought that their knowledge of the subject was inadequate for them to give such advice. More than a third of doctors had decreased their consumption of beef products or had stopped eating them altogether, specifically because of unresolved fears about bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Less than a fifth of doctors were satisfied that control procedures were adequate to protect health.

This study shows the need for better communication between central government and medical practitioners on important public health issues such as food safety. It also shows the need

Table 1—Medical practitioners' knowledge of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), experience of consultations about BSE, and change in consumption of beef products

	Yes	No	Unsure	Total
Do you have anxieties about safety of beef?	390	369	129	888
Are control measures concerning BSE adequate?	163	193	528	884
Is your knowledge of BSE adequate to advise patients on possible health risks?	174	480	226	880
	Often	Occasionally	No	
Have patients asked you about BSE and safety of beef?	8	225	651	884
	Yes	No		
Have you reduced your consumption of, or stopped eating, beef products because of BSE?	283	528	811	