Management of leg ulcers

Editor,—I congratulate Sarkar and Ballantyne for their excellent review on the management of leg ulcers. Additional comments regarding investigative methods of peripheral arterial pathology and the management of venous leg ulcers are, however, necessary.

In these patients, the ankle/brachial pressure index (ABI) is not sensitive enough. Falsely raised values are frequent in the case of incompressible arteries (medial calcification), especially in diabetics, but they are also found in elderly patients or those with chronic renal failure. An ABI in the normal range is also observed in hypertensive or diabetic subcutaneous microangiopathy. Therefore, an arterial duplex ultrasound is recommended as well as recording the toe blood pressure or the skin perfusion pressure by plethysmography or laser Doppler.

Almost all venous leg ulcers can heal with adequate compression therapy. However, 30% to 40% of patients with venous leg ulcers have an isolated superficial venous incompetence that can be treated with surgery alone, avoiding long term use of compression bandages and reducing recurrence rate. Some degree of superficial reflux in the ulcer area is also found in patients with deep venous incompetence. Treatment of these local haemodynamic abnormalities may be an important factor in the healing of the ulcers and in prevention of their recurrence. Consequently, surgical surgery is a good alternative for many patients, especially the elderly who have difficulties putting on compression stockings and those with peripheral arterial pathology, which may be aggravated by it. Phlebectomy of saphenous veins and their branches with ligation of incompetent perforating veins can be done under local anaesthesia and are therefore particularly suitable for elderly patients. Preoperative duplex ultrasound is, however, necessary to localise precisely the incompetent venous segments.

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Dr Findlay responds:
I was very interested to read of the case presented by Sinha et al of a patient who had been treated with amiodarone and who had developed hyperthyroidism several months after stopping the drug. Before the development of the hyperthyroid state the thyroid function was normal on four occasions while on amiodarone. The diagnosis of amiodarone induced hyperthyroidism is, as the authors state, very likely, although it would be important to check thyroid autoantibodies to exclude thyroid dysfunction unrelated to treatment with amiodarone.

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Giant cell (temporal) arteritis and temporal artery biopsy

Editor,—I have read with interest the article by Dr Karseras, entitled “Ophthalmology and general medicine”. The author states that “Prospective representation of clinical malaise or tenderness of temporal arteries, raised erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) and rarely, biopsy will usually exclude this potentially blinding and lethal condition”. I would like to emphasise some salient points particularly regarding the ESR and biopsy. A more specific and accepted description of the disease is “giant cell (temporal) arteritis” to distinguish it from Takayasu’s arteritis. It is important to maintain a high index of suspicion of the disease when seeing patients aged 50 years or older. The condition is an ophthalmic emergency. The condition can cause permanent total blindness unless urgent treatment with corticosteroids is provided. Treatment should not be delayed while awaiting results of the ESR or biopsy. Blindness can result from optic neuropathy or retinal artery occlusion. Death from myocardial infarction or stroke can occur. The ESR is raised in about 90% of cases. Hence a normal ESR does not exclude the disease.

Most authorities recommend that temporal artery biopsy should be performed in all cases regardless of the presence of a firm clinical diagnosis and raised ESR. Treatment involves the long term use of oral prednisolone. The establishment of a biopsy proved diagnosis can be helpful particularly in cases where significant side effects from prednisolone occur. Just as biopsy should be ipsilateral to the side of the visual symptoms or headache. Contralateral biopsy can be considered in cases where the histology of the ipsilateral biopsy is negative. The biopsy should preferably be performed within one week of the start of steroid treatment.

The biopsy is positive in about 70% of cases of giant cell (temporal) arteritis. Skin lesions may be present along the course of large and medium sized arteries. In addition, vasculitis may affect the ophthalmic artery but not necessarily the temporal artery. Hence negative histology does not necessarily exclude the diagnosis.

D INFIELD
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Dr Karseras responds:
I thank David infeld for his interest in my article. There is not much in his letter of commentary that I would disagree with. Certainly where there is a high index of suspicion and symptoms fit the clinical picture I would personally start treatment on systemic steroids before the results of the ESR or biopsy. I am not too sure about undertaking a temporal artery biopsy in all cases, regardless of the presence of firm clinical diagnosis. Possible side effects from prednisolone do not occur to
me to be a good reason to subject patients to this less than easy procedure in all circumstances.
I have usually not needed to resort to temporal artery biopsy in cases that have come clinically to the ophthalmic department. A balanced clinical view would be to assess the likelihood of temporal arteritis being present in a patient who has possible impending blindness. The decision for biopsy is based on clinical acumen and wisdom. Some patients may be treated unnecessarily but others may well be saved from the blindness that can come on so quickly and bilaterally.
I am pleased to see that Dr Infeld recognises the presence of difficult cases, which can still have drastic consequences despite a normal ESR and biopsy.
I suppose 40 years of personal clinical experience of the occasional case of temporal arteritis gives one the confidence to advocate “better safe than sorry” and accept that it is better to have some side effects, which may be unnecessary, rather than some irreversible loss of sight. But I agree with most of Dr Infeld’s comments.

Foreign bodies in the nasal cavities

Editor—We read with great interest the review of foreign bodies in the nasal cavities compiled by Kalan and Tariq in a recent issue.1 The authors state that there are no comprehensive discussions on the subject of foreign bodies in the nose, but appear to have overlooked previous reviews by Werman and Baker,2 perhaps because their methodology lacks a systematic approach. Furthermore, we feel that the article affords undue emphasis to the role of the ear, nose, and throat (ENT) surgeon, and the requirement for their early involvement in this condition.
Emergency physicians frequently encounter foreign bodies in the nose, often in children brought to the hospital by their parents soon after insertion. In this group the presentation is not an offensive unilateral nasal discharge, as stated by Kalan and Tariq, but a history of recent insertion with local irritation. We have published a systematic review of foreign bodies in the nose and ear, including techniques for their removal in the emergency department.3 Current evidence indicates that the vast majority can be removed without complications by suitably trained emergency department staff, and without the need for ENT involvement. Locally we have been able to demonstrate considerable success with an appropriate teaching programme and a specific set of instruments for foreign body extraction.
It seems likely that Kalan and Tariq’s article is biased by the fact that only difficult, complex, or late presenting cases tend to be referred to an ENT surgeon. We wish to emphasise the important role that emergency physicians have in this common condition.

BOOK RECEIVED

The receipt of these books is acknowledged and this listing must be regarded as sufficient return for the courtesy of the sender. Books that appear to be of particular interest will be reviewed, space permitting. The journal does not publish unsolicited reviews.


BOOK REVIEWS

The reviewers have been asked to rate these books in terms of four items: readability, how up to date they are, accuracy and reliability, and value for money, using simple four point scales. From their opinions we have derived an overall “star” rating: * = poor, ** = reasonable, *** = good, **** = excellent.


This text is one of a series of books supported by “Trent Focus for the Promotion of Research and Development in Primary Health Care”. Its objectives are to provide the beginner in primary care research with an overview of appropriate methodology and an awareness of when and how to obtain specialist advice.
It is a delightful book to read as the text is laid out with clearly labelled, short, succinct, and highly relevant sections. It contains chapters on an introduction to research methodology, experimental designs, qualitative research, surveys and questionnaires, the use of interviews in a research project, and data collection by observation as well as a glossary and index. As there are five contributors, there is inevitably a degree of duplication. However, good cross referencing compensates.

Basic research terminology is defined and important information on topics such as sampling, calculation of sample size required, confidence intervals, and types of questionnaires is clearly set out in language which uses the minimum of jargon. Boxes and bullet points emphasise important facts and the text is interspersed with exercises which maintain reader’s interest and give feedback on their standing. The chapters conclude with a summary, answers to the exercises and references, further reading, and sometimes suggestions for other resource information.
At £15.95, this book is certainly good value for money and should find a place on the bookshelves of aspiring primary care researchers.

T L TAPPER-JONES
Roath House Surgery, Cardiff, UK


A multitude of books on eating disorders have been written in the last two decades. Bob Palmer’s vast experience in this field easily sets this book apart. Although an overview and not a detailed study of eating disorders, it adopts a pragmatic approach and contains down-to-earth knowledge, thus becoming an invaluable tool for clinicians.

The text is free from dubious research and theoretical frameworks and focuses mainly on the daily clinical work with sufferers. It is divided in two parts. In part I, an account of several pathogenetic factors is given, but the multifactorial nature of the disorders is emphasised. Part II outlines their management. Some of the strongest points of this part are the focus on specific management issues, such as hindrances in progress or making help meaningful and accessible to patients, as well as on general aspects of running a comprehensive eating disorders’ service. The use of case scenarios, metaphors, and tables enhance clarity. Although the author points out that the focus of this book is on adult patients, a great deal of the knowledge provided is also applicable to adolescents.

This is an all-inclusive, clear, and practical book. It would be useful not only to those who work closely with patients but also to other health professionals, as a means of understanding sufferers and the services available to them. Its concise volume and affordable price makes it accessible to all.

T KIANA
Consultant Child and Family Psychiatrist, Northampton, UK


This book is based on a highly successful pre-MRCGP course held at the Royal Society of Medicine. Although it contains papers from 21 eminent contributors, the book as a whole presents a comprehensive and up to date guide. The discipline of general practice has few fixed boundaries and therefore a guide through this diverse field of medicine is essential, particularly when one is preparing to become a member of its Royal College.


A candidate will ask “What does the examination test?” The answer is anything relevant to British general practice, a large and complex area which frequently changes. This book assists by presenting current information about issues relevant to general practice, including vocational training, medico-political issues in relation to primary care, practice management, audit, and revalidation. There is some repetition of certain topics resulting from the fact that a number of contributors are discussing current issues, however this did not detract from the value of the book.

The structure of the MRCGP examination changes almost as frequently as the medico-political scene and therefore the detailed explanation of the elements of the college exam is invaluable. The insights into what examiners are looking for together with some marking schedules are extremely useful. The book is concise and contains invaluable references to all the current papers with which candidates should be familiar.

I can thoroughly recommend it, not only to candidates working towards their membership examination, but also GP trainers and GP principals alike.

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DIARY

Whittington Hospital & Fellowship of Postgraduate Medicine Conference Unit
MRCP Part II (PACES)/Communication Skills and Ethics: 2 day course
21–22 May 2001: Whittington Hospital, London, UK
The course involves:
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For further details and a booking form please contact Kate Stephens, CHIME, 4th Floor Holborn Union Building, Archway Campus, Highgate Hill, London N19 3UA (tel: 020 7288 3134; email: k.stephens@chime.ucl.ac.uk).

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Amiodarone induced hyperthyroidism

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