Letters to the Editor

Infection and infectious diseases

Sir,

Dr Critchley's criticism1 of my 'condensed review'2 contains errors when he states that it contained statements that could be misconstrued and do not reflect experience gained from three recent outbreaks. He quotes three references. The first3 refers to his analysis of 27 patients with one type of botulism seen by a number of physicians in a small area of one small country. The second and third references4,5 each refer to outbreaks in one patient. The world is larger than one country and writing for a journal that has an international readership demands a more than parochial view. My review started by mentioning 'his' outbreak but it is obvious that I thereafter took a broader look at botulism.

In individual outbreaks symptoms differ. I said 'symptoms of gastroenteritis are usually notable by their absence.' Christie6 states 'unlike other forms of food poisoning, botulism produces almost no signs of gastrointestinal irritation' and this world view is held by others 'there may be little in the earliest symptoms that suggests foodborne disease.'7

Critchley objects to my comment that patients might be found dead. Whilst all patients survived and no unexplained deaths occurred in the outbreak described by Critchley, in areas of the world other than Britain the mortality rate may be higher. Schaffner8 gives a figure of 25% given antitoxin, and intensive respiratory support – all of which may not be available in developing countries where the incidence and mortality of botulism would be higher. Whole families of Eskimos have been found dead6 and in infant botulism Clostridium botulinum or its toxin were found in 10/280 of unexpected sudden infant deaths in one study9 and in 9/70 in another.9

Critchley states correctly that the presence of fever or drowsiness does not exclude botulism. However, the presence of anything does not exclude any diagnosis. Schaffner8 states 'patients are afebrile' (his italics) and 'development of fever signifies complicating nosocomial infection.' Critchley states 'antibiotics are best reserved for secondary complications except in the presence of infantile or other toxico-infective forms of botulism' – so his recommendation is that antibiotics are not to be given. However, I said that 'some physicians give penicillin to eliminate gut carriage.' Opinions do differ – no one knows – so that the proper question that should be asked is, in our current state of uncertainty, 'Would prescribing antibiotics be likely to do more good than harm?' I said that treatment includes urgent administration of antitoxin. Critchley states, correctly, that antitoxin treatment is only of proven (my italics) value in type E intoxication. Reading the literature it is apparent that antitoxin might be beneficial in other types – but how does a clinician know which type he is dealing with unless there is, at the time when individual patients present, an obvious outbreak with rapid accurate clinical and botulinum type diagnosis? Indeed, in the one well described and recent outbreak, botulism caused by type B toxin, all new patients and those whose condition had yet to stabilize received toxin.1 If I had botulism, on balance, I would want antitoxin without waiting for type identification.

P.D. Welsby
Department of Infectious Diseases,
City Hospital,
51 Greenbank Drive,
Edinburgh EH10 5SB, UK.

References

Intraocular pressure

Sir,

With tons of journals received weekly, I usually read the table of contents of each to decide which articles I should read in depth. I was immediately attracted to the paper by Al-Sereit et al.1 when I read the title 'Intraocular pressure and papillary responses in patients with diabetes mellitus' in the Contents of the March issue of the Journal. I was curious to know if the papillary responses referred to the optic papilla or the retinal papillae.

I, of course, was very surprised to find that it was the papillary responses, not papillary responses, the article was about. Thanks to this printing error, I was glad that I learned something about the autonomic neuropathy in patients with diabetes mellitus.

Tsung O. Cheng, M.D.
Division of Cardiology,
The George Washington University,
2150 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.,
Washington, DC 20037, USA.