Seizures and steroids

Sir,

As Dr Robinson rightly states in his excellent review, infantile spasms are associated with a great variety of conditions, as long as these cause a severe disturbance of cerebral function and occur at a certain age. I am sure his last paragraph is of particular importance, as although it may not often happen, there is no doubt that steroids given within a few days of the onset of the myoclonus (sometimes mistaken for colic) can almost immediately stop this, with a return of the electroencephalogram to normal.

Admittedly, the situation is complex but it may be that among those patients with so called 'cryptogenic infantile spasms' there are children who are suffering from an allergic type of encephalomyelitis, perhaps due to virus infections and immunisations, and that in these children the steroids are not acting much as anticonvulsants, but as specific treatment for the underlying cause of the particular disease in that instance? I write this letter in response to the last sentence about the educational role of the paediatrician as I agree it is important to emphasise the occasional success of early steroid treatment when so many of the published trials confirm the lack of any effect of steroids in preventing mental handicap but omit to state the time interval between the start of the 'spasms' and the start of the treatment.

Reference

1 Levene Ml, Evans DH. Medical management of raised intracranial pressure after severe birth asphyxia. Arch Dis Child 1985;60:12-16.


Sustained release theophylline in nocturnal asthma

Sir,

We read with interest the paper by Dr Elias-Jones et al but must admit to being surprised by the unusual trial design, small numbers, and incorrect statistical analysis. The design and data analysis have defects which must question the validity of some of their conclusions.

Asthma, by its very nature, is a disease that shows considerable variation, and any trial must be long enough or study sufficient numbers to allow for this. Dr Elias-Jones et al studied 10 children only and analysed data from short active and placebo periods of 10 days duration. Their study design included a run in period during which the child was on active treatment, apparently to his and the doctor's knowledge. This may have biased the subsequent completion of diary cards during active and placebo trial periods as they would know what benefits could be expected from active treatment.

Inspection of symptom score, frequency of occasions when awake at night, and number of doses of beta agonists shows that these data are not normally distributed, have different standard deviations during active and placebo periods, and are therefore not suitable for paired t tests. It is also apparent that three of the 10 children showed no benefit from theophylline treatment. When the three who could not complete the trial are included, it would seem that six of the 13 children did not or could not benefit from theophylline.

H Davies, P Helms, J Stroobant
Hospital for Sick Children,
Great Ormond St.
London WCIN 3JH

Dr Elias-Jones and co-workers comment:
Dr Davies and colleagues make a point of suggesting that studies of long duration are more appropriate when