Vietnamese origin. The incidence of SIDS varied from 0.9 to 1.5 per 1000 and was significantly higher in the groups which had been longer in the United States. The same authors had previously reported an incidence of SIDS among Chinese babies in California that was about 38 times that found by Davies in Hong Kong. Whether these differences are environmentally or culturally determined, or whether there is something about people who emigrate which makes them more susceptible to SIDS than those who stay put, is not known. Do the Chinese in California lie their babies prone?


Severe neonatal respiratory failure

Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation and carbon dioxide removal for the management of severe acute respiratory failure has been on the horizon for some years now but its application to the newborn has been slow. A report from Paris (Chevalier J-Y et al, Lancet 1990;335: 1364-6) describes the use of this technique in 20 newborn babies, 17 of whom survived with no apparent chronic or long-term functional handicap. The babies were all more than 35 weeks' gestation and weighed more than 2000 g and the causes of their respiratory failure were: persistent pulmonary hypertension of the newborn (n=7), meconium aspiration (n=5), sepsis (n=5), respiratory distress syndrome (n=2), and diaphragmatic hernia (n=1). None had been expected to survive with conventional management.

Are we about to witness another revolution in neonatal intensive care?

Phenobarbitone is a depressing drug

Do we need any more nails to hammer into the coffin of phenobarbitone as a treatment for childhood epilepsy? If so, what about depression? Brent and colleagues in Pittsburgh report on the follow up of 28 patients aged 6 to 16 years treated with a single drug for epilepsy (Pediatries 1990;85:1086-91). Major depression was diagnosed in 38% of phenobarbitone treated patients. The authors conclude that more research is needed with carbamazepine. Discontinuation of phenobarbitone treatment led to recovery from depression. Strangely the frequency of suicide attempts was the same (phenobarbitone 13%, carbamazepine 12%) in the two groups. The authors do not say whether any of these attempts were successful and do not distinguish between determined attempts at suicide and 'cries for help'. They point out that the small study numbers and the non-random assignment to the two drugs precludes firm causal conclusions.

Latent coeliac disease

There are those who have coeliac disease and there are those who don't. At least that's the way it's been looked at until recently, but now the concept of latent coeliac disease needs to be incorporated into thinking about basic mechanisms of the disease. O'Mahony and colleagues in Pennsylvania (1990;335:1487-90) studied eight adult patients with dermatitis herpetiformis and normal jejunal histology (most patients with dermatitis herpetiformis have changes of coeliac disease). Measuring immunoglobulins and antibodies in jejunal fluid they found changes similar to those found in untreated coeliac disease, that is, raised IgA, IgM, and IgG and high concentrations of IgA and IgM antibodies to gliadin, β lactoglobulin and ovalbumin. Serum concentrations of IgA gliadin antibodies were the same as in controls but those of IgG antibodies were intermediate between those found in controls and in patients with coeliac disease.

Latent coeliac disease may be found in apparently normal adults, with no special diagnostic tests. The degree of anti-gluten reactivity in sera of patients with coeliac disease, people with recurrent aphthous ulceration, and in gluten sensitive diarrhoea without overt enteropathy. The changes of antibodies to gluten are probably a marker of increased sensitivity and the tests may be an important part of future research into adult coeliac disease and the relevance of the findings for the disease in children will need to be considered.

ELISA's baby and the diagnosis of tuberculous meningitis

We described the ELISA (enzyme linked immunosorbent assay) test, of course, and a very good friend she's been. In the diagnosis of tuberculous meningitis, however, detection by ELISA of antimycobacterial antibodies in cerebrospinal fluid gives inadequate information. New workers at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm have developed a method for counting cells in blood or cerebrospinal fluid that are secreting antigen specific IgG or IgA antibodies—naturally enzyme linked immunosorbent test—and the method has been used at the Shanghai Medical University to examine cerebrospinal fluid and blood from children with tuberculous meningitis (Lu et al, Lancet 1990;336:10-3). In previously reported studies the Swedish team has shown the technique to be useful in the diagnosis of Lyme disease and they have demonstrated cells in the cerebrospinal fluid secreting myelin antibodies in people with multiple sclerosis.

Twenty five patients, adults and children, had a clinical diagnosis of tuberculous meningitis. Cells secreting antigen from all of them and cells secreting anti-BGC IgG antibodies were found in 24. Doing the test on blood was less reliable. Five patients with a positive cerebrospinal fluid IgG test had blood examination. Two had IgG antibody secreting cells and four had IgM antibody secreting cells in blood. Six patients had cerebrospinal fluid examined within a week of the onset of symptoms and five had anti-lgG antibody secreting cells. Maximum numbers of the cells were found in the second and third weeks of the disease. Cerebrospinal fluid was also examined in 12 patients with non-tuberculous meningitis, from a patient with cryptococcal meningitis, contained anti-BGC IgG secreting cells.

Nineteen of the 25 patients had raised cerebrospinal fluid concentrations of anti-BGC IgG antibody measured by ELISA, five of the six negative tests occurring in the first week of the disease and the other in the second week of the disease. As a parting shot the authors mention the possibility of using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to detect mycobacteria in the cerebrospinal fluid and call for comparative studies of PCR and the immunosorbent assay.

ARCHIVIST