LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Atopy, bronchial responsiveness, and symptoms in wheezy 3 year olds

EDITOR,—There is now increasing evidence that most children with recurrent wheeze in the first year of life do not have atopic asthma and that 'wheezy bronchitis' is a distinct entity with a different natural history.1 Although it is now clear that infants are able to respond to bronchodilators, it is well known that β agonists are rarely effective in this age group during wheezing episodes. Despite this, it is still widely believed that bronchospasm is the main cause of wheeze in these children. The recent paper by Nicola Wilson et al suggests that non-atopic infants who wheeze have greater bronchial responsiveness than atopic individual children.2 In contrast, a recent study from Perth could find no evidence of increased bronchial responsiveness in recurrent wheezy infants when compared with matched controls.3 The group from Perth suggest that their results support the notion that diminished lung function present from birth predisposes infants to lower respiratory tract symptoms.

An alternative explanation may be that excessive mucus production with or without mucosal oedema is predominantly responsible for the symptoms experienced by infants with wheezy bronchitis. This would explain why antihistamines often appear more effective than β agonists. It would also explain why inhaled steroids are frequently of benefit in patients with recurrent or persistent respiratory symptoms as steroids inhibit both the production and release of mucus. Coarse 'ratty' upper airway noises suggestive of mucus secretions are extremely common in young infants4 and many recurrently wheezy children have 'rattles' between exacerbations. 'Noisy breathing' is reported as being always present in 11% of children and they frequently have symptoms from birth. It may well be that infants with wheezy bronchitis have an increased capacity to secrete mucus in response to stimuli such as virus infections, either because of a tendency from birth or as a response to environmental events such as ventilation in the neonatal period, acute bronchiolitis, or 'passive smoking'. Increased baseline production of mucus might explain the increased airways resistance seen in these infants.1 Anticholinergics will inhibit mucus production from submucosal glands but will have no effect on goblet cell secretion and therefore cannot be expected to relieve totally symptoms in those with prominent goblet cell hyperplasia. These are more likely to be the ones with increased capacity to secrete mucus due to stimuli such as passive smoking and those with 'postbronchiolitic symptoms'. It is possible that treatment of these infants, if any is required, would improve if we consider using drugs which inhibit mucus production or newer mucolytics.

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Dr Wilson comments: I was interested in Dr Everard’s suggestion that the syndrome of ‘wheezy bronchitis’ might be explained by increased mucus production rather than bronchospasm. He may well have a point. However, contrary to his implication, we did not propose that the increased bronchial responsiveness found in the non-atopic children in our study was responsible for their virus induced wheeze. We concluded that the episodic wheeze associated with colds in the first three years of life, in this hospital based population, was of non-atopic and non-atopic, apart from the age of onset. Often, early asthma precipitated by viral infections can only be distinguished from wheezy bronchitis retrospectively. It is therefore not certain whether the syndrome of wheezy bronchitis can altogether be explained on the basis of mucus production.


Serum IgG titres against Pseudomonas aeruginosa

EDITOR,—Pseudomonas specific IgG titres are currently one of the main topics in clinical research in cystic fibrosis.1 We read with interest the article concerning the value of specific IgG titres in the management of early pseudomonal infection.2 From the abstract we understood that most study parameters had improved significantly in the treated group. However, trying to verify statements from the results in text or tables revealed rather the opposite. Forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) and total serum IgG were not significantly different comparing observation and treated groups after one year, and there was no statistical analysis available comparing longitudinal changes of these parameters throughout the study period. We were also confused by the confidence intervals considered to be significant: p values listed in the table indicate that the authors accepted significance levels of 10% rather than 5% as stated in the distributions section. Therefore, we are still uncertain about the value of the study, and we would like to ask the authors to reveal all the essential data not yet mentioned. Finally we would like to express our concern how an article with inconsistent results could be accepted by the referees for publication in such a highly rated journal.

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Audit of screening for congenital hypothyroidism

EDITOR,—We read with interest the audit of a screening programme for congenital hypothyroidism.3 From the data available the birth prevalence of congenital hypothyroidism in the period of study was calculated to be 1:3770. The authors state ‘This level of prevalence is similar to 1:3980 found from 36 centres in 12 European countries and the 1:4200 reported from the USA, which suggest that it is unlikely that a significant number of cases, other than the known false negatives, were missed’. There are a number of problems with this assumption.

1 In the audit 62 cases were detected out of 228 289 livebirths over a period of seven years, giving a birth prevalence of 1:3682 and not 1:3770 as stated in the article.

2 If the 95% confidence intervals for the data presented were to be worked out it would give the possible range of birth prevalence as 1:2872 to 1:4803 (using the Poisson distribution). This means, that for 228 289 livebirths, the region could have had between 48 and 79 cases of congenital hypothyroidism. Taking the upper limit would imply that the programme could have missed up to 19 cases—that is a false negative rate of 8% which is worrying.

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3 Instructions to authors. Arch Dis Child 1992; 67: 156.