LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Management and outcome of severe head injury in the Trent region 1985–90

EDITOR,—Elias-Jones et al recently reported the use of body surface cooling to 32°C for prolonged periods up to 10 days in the management of children with raised intracranial pressure after severe head injury.1 While the authors have substituted body surface cooling for ‘barbiturate coma’, aiming to maintain a cerebral perfusion pressure of greater than 60 mm Hg and an intracranial pressure less than 20 mm Hg, we believe that they may well have replaced one potentially hazardous treatment with another.1

The use of surface cooling to maintain children normothermic after a severe head injury as a means of limiting the energy requirement of the brain is hardly controversial. However, the practice of cooling children to hypothermic levels for prolonged periods in our opinion results only in cold induced immunosuppression (including neutropenia), cold induced bronchoconstriction, and decreased mucociliary clearance, all of which contribute to a marked increase in the risk of nosocomial infection.1 Not surprisingly, Elias-Jones et al noted an exceedingly high incidence of ‘infective episodes’, particularly pneumonia, in their series. Although ‘infective episodes’ responded to physiotherapy and antibiotic treatment, it is questionable whether it was appropriate to expose these children to this excessive risk of infection in the first instance.

Interestingly, the authors suggest that their use of cimetidine as stress ulcer prophylaxis may have contributed to the increased incidence of pneumonias. Yet, at the same time, they resorted to the immediate infusion of parenteral nutrition—a known immuno-suppressor—in those patients who seemed likely to require prolonged ventilation. This is exactly the population who, in our view, would benefit from early enteral nutrition as one of the physiological means of gastrointestinal protection. Early enteral nutrition undoubtedly would have reduced the risk of infection associated with total parenteral nutrition and is never contraindicated in patients with a normal gastrointestinal tract. Failure to feed by the enteral route is more to do with local practices and prejudices than the patient’s small bowel function.

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The growing pains of community child health

EDITOR,—Michael Rogers emphasises the secondary care role of community doctors, believing they should leave primary care [to] . . . general practice.3 He does not consider whether sufficient numbers of general practitioners (GPs) are available in the work the effects such a policy would have had in deprived areas. Service organisation in two contrasting districts serve to illustrate the different service needs of deprived areas.

South Sefton (Merseyside) is a small health district (population 180 000) within the conurbation of Liverpool. A survey of 10 general practices (CNIB) has conducted an audit of community child health work in a small geographical patch within the district. The new GP contract has had little effect on the involvement of GPs in child health. Thirty-four per cent of babies were immunised by their GP in 1991, a modest increase on the 1989 figure (20%). Attendances at one community child health clinic showed an 80% increase over six years (1986–92) associated with a dramatic improvement in immunisation rates: diphtheria and polo (77% to 97%), pertussis (51% to 86%), measles, mumps, rubella (53% to 93%). It is hoped to publish detailed results at a later date.

Northampton has a large semi-rural population (300 000) with a mixed rural and urban population, including the towns of Northampton and Daventry. Almost all children are immunised by their GP and many GPs had established child health clinics before the new contract, allowing community doctors to withdraw from those areas. Fourteen of the 17 community child health clinics retained (because they continue to be needed) are in Northampton and Daventry and most are in or adjacent to the districts. Community immunisation rates are diphtheria and polo 97%, pertussis 94%, and measles, mumps, rubella 96%.

Relative underuse of preventive, primary, and secondary care has been shown for lower socioeconomic groups.1 General practice in deprived areas is commonly underdeveloped, a finding described by the ‘inverse care law’: those most in need of high quality health care are least likely to receive it.2 Community paediatricians must assess their population’s health needs and act accordingly. In South Sefton the predominant need is to improve access to primary health care: a policy that was highly successful in improving immunisation rates and other health indicators (unpublished data). In Northampton, only selected areas now need community child health input to primary care, but this will be maintained for the foreseeable future.

The uneven regional distribution of general practitioners—a shortfall of over 100 in Mersey region and an excess of 70 in the Oxford region— is the likely reason for the different service needs in the two districts described. A rapid withdrawal of community doctors would provide a severe threat to the area’s GP workforce, and look set to intensify the disadvantage of living in a deprived area.

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Dr Rogers comments:

I believe that the related aims of (1) developing community child health as a specialty within paediatrics and (2) the taking over of all aspects of primary care (including health surveillance) by general practice, together represent the best long term strategy for children’s health services.

The points raised by Drs Ni Bhrokhain and Shribman about deprivation are very important, and the complex issues manifest in the ‘inverse care law’ have so far proved intractable. Purchasers have paid far too little attention to the realities of child health surveillance in deprived areas. The easy stage of transferring child health surveillance to general practice, involving enthusiastic and committed GPs, has already been achieved: further progress will be much more difficult, and ‘a rapid withdrawal of community doctors’ would indeed be very damaging. Nevertheless, I suggest we should not let short and medium term difficulties distract us from longer term objectives. Ultimately, all aspects of primary health care belong elsewhere than within the specialty of community child health. Achieving this may take some time!

1 Committee on Child Health Services. Fit for the future. London: HMSO, 1976. (Court report.)