LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR

Liver cirrhosis in cystic fibrosis

EDITOR,—Feigelson et al report a relatively large series of 31 patients with cystic fibrosis and liver cirrhosis, emphasising its protracted course and reviewing their experience in the management of portal hypertension.1 We too have observed that the development of uncomplicated cirrhosis often has little influence on the natural history of cystic fibrosis. However, we disagree with their conclusions about the management of alimentary bleeding from portal hypertension, which is a life threatening complication. In their study, five patients were treated by injection sclerotherapy, which was limited to two or three sessions. Not surprisingly, recurrent bleeding was common and this, combined with four deaths from variceal haemorrhage and the potential for ectopic variceal bleeding, prompted the authors to express doubts about this technique. Their single success with partial splenectomy led them to conclude that this is the procedure of choice.

Since 1979 we have regularly reviewed 19 patients with cystic fibrosis, cirrhosis, and portal hypertension (figure), 11 of whom were included in a previous analysis of the results of injection sclerotherapy in children with bleeding oesophageal varices.2 Fifteen of these patients (eight boys, seven girls) have required injection sclerotherapy for variceal bleeding. The mean age at onset of bleeding was 11.5 (range 6–14–9) years. Variceal obliteration was achieved after a mean of 6 (range 3–9) injection sessions over a period of 0–8 (0–3–2–3) years; one boy is still undergoing treatment.

Five of the 15 died of respiratory failure without further gastrointestinal bleeding two months to nine years after variceal obliteration. Two patients have required surgery; one a splenectomy for symptomatic hypersplenism and the other a splenectomy and lienorenal shunt for gastric variceal bleeding. Excluding the boy still undergoing treatment, none of the survivors have significant residual oesophageal varices after a mean follow up of 4–3 years after completing treatment. Endoscopic injection sclerotherapy has proved effective in the control of oesophageal variceal bleeding and only one patient has required portosystemic shunt surgery for ectopic variceal haemorrhage.

Feigelson et al report no respiratory problems from sclerotherapy. We have a policy of intense perioperative physiological, bronchodilators, and prophylactic antibiotics to minimise the recognised deleterious effects of general anaesthesia and sclerosant injection on respiratory function.3 Sclerotherapy is an effective and safe modality for the control of bleeding from oesophageal varices in children with cystic fibrosis and the results appear to be better than those of portosystemic shunt surgery.4 Nevertheless, such surgery has an invaluable role in the management of some patients, such as those with ectopic variceal bleeding.5

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