If you have a burning desire to respond to a paper published in ADC or FeN, why not make use of our “rapid response” option? Log on to our website (www.archdischild.com), find the paper that interests you, click on “full text” and send your response by email by clicking on “submit a response.” Providing it isn’t libellous or obscene, it will be posted within seven days. You can retrieve it by clicking on “read eLetters” on our homepage.

The editors will decide, as before, whether to also publish it in a future paper issue.

Category D: unknown whether ill treatment is cause

I would like to congratulate Southall and colleagues for their very important paper, which represents extremely well the clinical and practical reality of the spectrum of child abuse.1

However, I have one fundamental concern relating to unexplained subdural haematomas. The authors state that “sometimes the pattern is significant about the extent of damage that the impulsive act may cause. For example, in some societies it is not generally known that shaking of a young infant can tear veins around the brain.” It is suggested that because of widespread publicity in the UK about shaken baby syndrome such injuries might be best classified under category A. Although perhaps unfashionable, there is an increasing acknowledgement that we understand very little about the mechanism of this often catastrophic event.2 If the purported mechanism of injury (violent shaking of the inconsolable infant) is correct, then it would be logical to predict that the peak incidence would be in infants aged under three months. Yet the actual peak of unexplained subdural is around eight months.3 Until we have a much better understanding of this condition, I suggest that the proposed classification should also have a Category D (unknown whether ill treatment is cause of the injury). This category would enable appropriate classification of those previously well cared for infants who have no other signs of injury but present with subdural haematoma, retinal haemorrhages and “no adequate history of injury”. Even in those infants that have rib fractures we need to consider whether there may be a less sinister explanation in some cases.4

E A S Nelson
Department of Paediatrics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Prince of Wales Hospital, Shatin, Hong Kong, Tony-nelson@chuhk.edu.hk

References

Gentamicin usage in newborns: an audit

This is in response to the letter by Grant and Macdonald on medicines for children and gentamicin toxicity in Archives of Disease in Childhood.

Recently we audited our gentamicin regimens (2.5 mg/kg/dose; 24 hourly for < 29 week postconceptional age (PCA); 18 hourly for 29–35 week PCA; 12 hourly for > 35 week PCA) because of concerns that it resulted in too many subtherapeutic peak levels. We prospectively audited 50 sets of levels. Trough levels were determined just before and peak levels one hour after the third dose. Desired trough levels were <2 and peak 5–10 mg/l. Most of the peak levels (92%; 46/50) were < 5 mg/l. Trough levels were < 2 mg/l in 98% (49/50). During this study period, 100 sets of levels were analysed by the microbiology department. A peak level of < 5 mg/l was noted in 100/108, and a trough level of < 2 mg/l in 107/108.

We changed our gentamicin regimen (4 mg/kg/dose; 36 hourly for < 28 week PCA; 24 hourly for ≥28 week PCA; trough levels determined before the third dose and peak levels not determined routinely), guided by current evidence,5 and prospectively re-audited 60 levels. We randomly determined 20 peak levels; these were in the range 5.8–7.5 mg/l in 16/20. Trough levels were < 2 mg/l in 97% (58/60). During this study period, 100 trough levels were analysed in total, and only 41/100 were ≥2 mg/l, the highest being 2.3 mg/l.

We are happy with our new gentamicin regimen as it is practical and easy to remember. It achieves therapeutic levels without any added risk of toxicity. We have stopped routinely determining peak levels, resulting in less trauma and blood sampling for delicate newborns and the saving of laboratory time. The decision to not determine peak levels routinely is based on current evidence and a dose of 4 mg/kg is highly likely to give peak levels in the desired range. Discretion, however, will have to be used in clinically septic newborns. In the long run, it should result in significant cost savings, as analysing the gentamicin levels has been reported to represent 75% of the cost of using this relatively inexpensive drug.

M Bajaj, K Palmer
North Staffordshire Hospital, Stoke-on-Trent, UK

Correspondence to: Dr Bajaj
monicakbajaj29@hotmail.com

Kasabach–Merritt syndrome and interferon alpha: still a controversial issue

We read with interest the paper by Akyuz and colleagues,1 which described a 2 year old patient with a Kasabach–Merritt syndrome (KMS) secondary to an infiltrating angiolipoma, who was successfully treated with interferon alpha 2a (IFN-alpha). The authors did not emphasise the increasing body of concerns associated with the use of IFN-alpha in children affected by KMS. Indeed, several authors have recently warned about potential adverse effects related to the use of this drug, the most worrisome being spastic diplegia.2

Although IFN-alpha has been shown to be an effective therapy for patients with KMS,3 it may cause transient or permanent neurological disabilities.4 Furthermore, neurotoxicity of IFN-alpha, the pathogenesis of which remains unclear, is usually detected late during the course of treatment, and early diagnosis may result very challenging particularly in young children, who appear to be at higher risk. Although neurological complications may spontaneously reverse after discontinuation of IFN-alpha, some patients may experience permanent disabilities.

Unfortunately, no predictive risk factors regarding either the onset of symptoms or the reversibility of neurological deficits have been identified. This precludes a proper counselling about the actual risk of neurological deficits associated with long term treatment with IFN-alpha.

Further controlled studies are urgently needed in order to answer these questions.

P Biban
PICU, Major City Hospital, Verona; paolo.biban@asapp.vr.it

References
1 Akıyüz C, Emir M, Büyükakmukcu et al. Successful treatment with interferon alfa in...

**Authors’ reply**

Dr Biban states that we did not adequately emphasise the neurologic side effects of interferon treatment. Although it has been reported that interferon alpha has been responsible for various neurologic side effects, there are no clear data indicating the frequency of these in children. Short term interferon therapy has been safely used at our department in treating various different conditions, particularly in the complex hemangiomas for many years. No side effects of interferon therapy except mild fever, malaise, leukopenia, and elevation of liver transaminases have been observed. These were reversible by stopping therapy for a short period. In one patient who received long term interferon therapy peripheral neuropathy developed during the treatment.

This patient was a 15 year old boy with Hodgkin’s disease who received interferon as an adjuvant immunotherapy post autologous stem cell transplant. Peripheral neuropathy developed 20 months after IFN treatment. A large cumulative dose combined with the prolonged treatment may have had an important role in this complication in our case. We concluded that the use of interferon in children affected by KSM or in children with various benign tumours containing vascular elements is still a good therapeutic alternative. If the duration of treatment and the cumulative doses of interferon are closely monitored, severe neurologic side effects during IFN therapy would not be an important problem. As the use of interferons in various conditions gradually expands, the data related to the adverse neurologic side effects will increase and be better understood.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Cystic Fibrosis (CF) status</th>
<th>Other related problems</th>
<th>Antibiotics used (mg/kg/day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9 y</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Preantarctic plasm/Cr (mg/l)</td>
<td>Lymphopenia</td>
<td>Gentamicin 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 mth</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Dipyridamol</td>
<td>Not done</td>
<td>Not done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 y</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 mth</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Metastatic disease</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
<td>Not done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 y</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Renal failure</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
<td>Cefazolin 0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References**


**Fatal iatrogenic hyponatraemia**

We recently cared for a 13 month old girl admitted to hospital following a short history of diarrhoea and vomiting. Clinical examination revealed lethargy and moderate dehydration. Initial serum sodium was 137 mmol/l and she was commenced on intravenous fluids using 4% dextrose/0.18% saline. Twelve hours after admission the child suffered a generalised tonic-clonic seizure at which time the serum sodium was found to be 120 mmol/l. Unfortunately, the child went on to have a respiratory arrest, developed fixed and dilated pupils, and died despite full intensive care. An extensive postmortem examination revealed only diffuse cerebral swelling with necrosis of the cerebellar tonsils.

It is well recognised that symptomatic hyponatraemia can result in significant morbidity and mortality in previously healthy children and adults. The administration of hypotonic intravenous fluids to children can be fatal and the reasons for this have been well documented for several years. Many physiological stimuli encountered during acute illness result in the non-osmotic release of antidiuretic hormone; these include pyrexia, nausea, pain, reduced circulating volume, and the postoperative state. The administration of hypotonic intravenous fluids in
these circumstances results in the excretion of hypertonic urine, the retention of free water, and the development of hyponatraemia.1

Despite clear and repeated warnings over the past few years,7 the routine administration of 4% dextrose/0.18% saline remains standard practice in many paediatric units. This practice is based on formulas developed for calculating maintenance fluid and electrolytes in healthy children over 40 years ago and there seems little understanding of the potential risks associated with their use during acute illness.

A global change of clinical practice is required to prevent these needless deaths. This is a challenge that the RCPCH should face up to, together with the Medicines Control Agency and the National Patient Safety Agency. A useful first step would be to label bags of 4% dextrose/0.18% saline with the warning that severe hyponatraemia may be associated with its use.

S Playfair
Consultant Paediatric Intensivist, Royal Manchester Children’s Hospital, Hospital Road, Pendlebury, Manchester M27 4HA, UK; Stephen.Playfair@CMFT.nhs.uk

References
5 Nalbandian Ch are another group at risk of hyponatraemia peripherally. BMJ 1999;319:1269.

Thyroid screening in Down’s syndrome: current patterns in the UK

Children and adults with Down’s syndrome are at increased risk of developing thyroid dysfunction, and screening for thyroid dysfunction is recommended as part of their health surveillance.1 Clinical history and examination are known to be unreliable indicators of thyroid dysfunction in Down’s syndrome. Venous blood for thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) assay remains the gold standard. Capillary blood spot on filter paper TSH has been proposed, as a simpler and more convenient alternative screening method for hypothyroidism in these children.1

To establish current screening practices, we undertook a postal questionnaire of community paediatricians registered with the British Association for Community Child Health (BACCH). Community paediatricians are the group mostly likely to see children with Down’s syndrome for health surveillance. Paediatricians were asked whether they routinely screened children with Down’s syndrome for thyroid dysfunction. They were asked what age of child they began screening, how often they screened, and which method they used. The questionnaire response rate was 64% (209/325). All the paediatricians who returned completed questionnaires routinely looked after children with Down’s syndrome. As expected, almost all of respondents, 93% (194/209), were screening routinely. Most paediatricians began screening before 5 years of age, and screened every two years (table 1). Venous blood TSH was the most frequently used method of screening (83%, 174/209). Only a small number have begun using capillary blood spot on filter paper TSH (7%, 15/209). A few paediatricians were relying on clinical suspicion alone. Those paediatricians not routinely screening for thyroid dysfunction, were either measuring TSH opportunistically or were undertaking biochemical screening only when symptoms or signs raised suspicion.

The Down’s Syndrome Medical Interest Group (DSMIG) has recommended biochemical screening for thyroid dysfunction at least every two years after the first year of life.1 Most paediatricians’ practice is consistent with this recommendation. Capillary blood sampling has practical advantages over venous sampling, with regard to patient acceptability, particularly in adolescents with Down’s syndrome and with regard to cost. There is growing evidence that capillary blood spot TSH is a reliable screening tool for thyroid dysfunction in children with Down’s syndrome.4 Capillary blood spot TSH may, in the future, come to replace venous TSH sampling in children with Down’s syndrome.

S Varadkar, G Bineham, D Lessing
Hounslow & Spelthorne Community & Mental Health NHS Trust and University Middlesex University Hospital, Isleworth, UK

Correspondence to: Dr S Varadkar, Biochemistry, Endocrinology and Metabolism Unit, Institute of Child Health, 3D Guilford Street, London WC1N 1EH, UK, sophia@varadkar.co.uk

References

Changes in serum sodium levels during treatment of hyperglycaemia

Carloitti et al state that fluid and electrolyte management might contribute to the development of cerebral oedema in hyperglycaemia. There is a simple rule of thumb, formulated by Katz, which may help calculate water and electrolyte deficits and predict the changes in sodium levels which accompany changes in glucose levels,6 namely that a decrease of 0.29 mmol/l in serum sodium may be expected for every 1.0 mmol/l increment in serum glucose.

This may be explained as follows: hyperglycaemia causes an osmotic movement of water out of the cells, which leads to hyponatraemia by dilution. Thus, at presentation, the patient is usually dehydrated, with cerebral oedema intracellularly. However, the serum sodium is lower than would be expected because of this dilution of the extracellular fluid. When the patient is treated with insulin, glucose enters the cells, taking water with it, leading to a relative concentration of the extracellular fluid, and thereby a rise in serum sodium. This rise may be predicted and calculated using Katz’s formula.4

Carloitti et al also comment on the report of Glaser et al that the chance of cerebral oedema during treatment is increased in children who present with high initial serum urea levels and who is seen without an increase in serum sodium levels during treatment.7 This increased risk may be explained by the fact that the urea level rises in proportion to the degree of dehydration. Urea contributes to serum osmolality and if the fall in urea is not taken into account the serum osmolality may be allowed to drop too rapidly, thereby increasing the risk of cerebral oedema. Carloitti et al do not take this into account in their formula for calculation of osmolality. The calculation of serum osmolality as twice the sum of sodium and potassium plus the urea and glucose levels (all in mmol/l) corresponds better with the formally measured osmolality.4

By treating hyperglycaemia using hypotonic solutions or glucose alone, the serum osmolality will fall rapidly and thereby increase the risk of cerebral oedema. Serum osmolality must be monitored frequently, either by direct measurement or calculation from the sodium, potassium,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Results of completed questionnaires (n=209)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age screening initiated (y)</td>
<td>No. (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>167 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>28 (13.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>13 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TSH, thyroid stimulating hormone.
glucose, and urea levels. In this way, the effects of falling urea and glucose levels on the serum osmolality will be compensated to a large extent by the accompanying rise in sodium. Thus the osmolality falls slowly and in a controlled fashion at a rate of 1–2 mOsm/kg/hour thereby, reducing the risk of cerebral oedema.

A M Oudelusys-Murphy, P van Echtelt
Department of Paediatrics, Medisch Centrum
Rijnmond-Zuid, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence to: Dr Oudelusys-Murphy
oudelusys@mcruz.nl

Author’s reply
We thank Dr Oudelusys-Murphy for her letter in reply to our article. In essence, two points were raised:

1. Can one estimate the deficits of Na+ and water if one applies the formula proposed by Katz? This calculation makes the presumption that one can predict the change in plasma sodium concentration (PNa) when water is that one can predict the change in plasma sodium concentration (PNa) when water is not reabsorbed in the ECF compartment thereby, reducing the risk of cerebral oedema. Nevertheless, because the ECF volume was expanded by different amounts in calculations A and B above yet the rise in the PNa was virtually identical, there is no constant relationship between the PNa and the ECF volume. Moreover, there was no change in the effective osmolality of Na+ in the ECF compartment in these two examples. In contrast, patients presenting with DKA have a contracted ECF volume and a deficit of Na+ when their PNa is 57 mM. Conclusion: If you do not know what the ECF volume is in quantitative terms, you cannot deduce the ECF Na+ content from the PNa. Accordingly, much as we would like to agree with the suggestion of Dr Oudelusys-Murphy, the facts do not support that view.

2. Urea should be included in calculations of effective osmolality. Urea is not an effective osmole across cell membranes when the change in the plasma urea concentration (Pur) is not abrupt. 2 Given the time course for the fall in Pura in patients with DKA, we did not include urea in our calculation of effective osmolality. Therefore we believe that it is more prudent to keep the Pura + 2 (Pur + Pna) relatively constant in the first 12–18 hours of therapy. A gradual decline in the effective Pura should occur with time thereafter.

M L Halperin
Chief, Division of Nephrology, University of Toronto, St Michael’s Hospital, 38 Shuter Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada MSB 1A6, mitchell.halperin@utoronto.ca

References

Author’s reply
We thank Dr Oudelusys-Murphy for her letter in reply to our article. In essence, two points were raised:

1. Can one estimate the deficits of Na+ and water if one applies the formula proposed by Katz? This calculation makes the presumption that one can predict the change in plasma sodium concentration (PNa) when water is that one can predict the change in plasma sodium concentration (PNa) when water is not reabsorbed in the ECF compartment thereby, reducing the risk of cerebral oedema. Nevertheless, because the ECF volume was expanded by different amounts in calculations A and B above yet the rise in the PNa was virtually identical, there is no constant relationship between the PNa and the ECF volume. Moreover, there was no change in the effective osmolality of Na+ in the ECF compartment in these two examples. In contrast, patients presenting with DKA have a contracted ECF volume and a deficit of Na+ when their PNa is 57 mM. Conclusion: If you do not know what the ECF volume is in quantitative terms, you cannot deduce the ECF Na+ content from the PNa. Accordingly, much as we would like to agree with the suggestion of Dr Oudelusys-Murphy, the facts do not support that view.

2. Urea should be included in calculations of effective osmolality. Urea is not an effective osmole across cell membranes when the change in the plasma urea concentration (Pur) is not abrupt. 2 Given the time course for the fall in Pura in patients with DKA, we did not include urea in our calculation of effective osmolality. Therefore we believe that it is more prudent to keep the Pura + 2 (Pur + Pna) relatively constant in the first 12–18 hours of therapy. A gradual decline in the effective Pura should occur with time thereafter.

M L Halperin
Chief, Division of Nephrology, University of Toronto, St Michael’s Hospital, 38 Shuter Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada MSB 1A6, mitchell.halperin@utoronto.ca

References
Partial splenectomy in CF patients with hypersplenism

Our recently published article on partial splenectomy in cystic fibrosis (CF) patients with hypersplenism1 appeared with a commentary by colleagues from the Birmingham Children’s Hospital.2

The authors of this commentary rightfully point out that liver disease in CF may have a widely varying symptomatology ranging from hypertension, bleeding oesophageal varices, ascites, to splenomegaly with hypersplenism. While the quoted clinical experience of 200 patients with CF liver disease might be considered as substantial, it nevertheless appears unjustified to rush from that experience to the statement that severe hypersplenism, requiring a specific surgical approach, is not a feature of the discussed disease spectrum. In the equally substantial clinical experience of our CF centre such severe hypersplenism occurred in only those three patients described in our paper. In these rare cases, however, we found the respiratory and haematological complications caused by the massively enlarged spleens to be impressive and to range from severe impairment of respiratory compliance to life threatening thrombocytopenia. It is for those rare patients that we consider the described surgical intervention to be of potential value. We strongly believe that such patients deserve a therapeutic option for children with advanced CF liver disease. In contrast to them, however, we welcome partial splenectomy as an additional therapeutic strategy that particularly addresses the problem of splenomegaly and hypersplenism. Ultimately, this difference of perspectives on the same issue might relate to the almost philosophical question whether one welcomes such a new treatment strategy as a potentially promising addition to one’s therapeutic quiver, or, alternatively, tends to reject such interesting new possibilities off hand.

M S Zach, G H Thalhammer, E Eber
Respiratory and Allergic Disease Division, Paediatric Department, University of Graz, Austria
Correspondence to Professor Zach; maximilian.zach@uni-graz.at
References

Partial splenectomy—worth the risk

In 1993, we published the results of our first cystic fibrosis (CF) patients who had complications of liver disease and portal hypertension (PHT), and had been operated on by partial splenectomy (PS). We also presented the results of 11 patients at the Jerusalem CF meeting in 1996. Since 1982, we have operated on and followed up 21 patients (aged 8 to 22 years). All patients had a large spleen measuring 15–28 cm in length, oesophageal varices graded 2 to 4 by endoscopy, hypersplenism with a platelet count below 50 000, and a well documented liver disease treated with UDCA.

Surgical procedure consisted of PS with conservation of the upper lobe of the spleen, terminal haemostasis, and suturing of parenchymatous vessels. The whole procedure lasts 3–4 hours. The only postoperative complications consisted of scar rupture in three cases and a painful episode of a few days in two cases. No pulmonary exacerbation occurred after surgery. A speedy normalisation of the haematological profile was observed. Normal function of the remaining upper lobe of the spleen was registered by scintiscan. An important improvement of oesophageal varices was noticed in nine cases out of 11 and a stable condition observed in two cases. The size of the remaining spleen remained stable in nine patients out of the first group who presented in 1996. No deterioration, and even some improvement of hepatic function was observed.

In conclusion, we believe that the risk of PS is worth taking since it appears to be a good option for the treatment of oesophageal varices, which is the main concern, and also might be the cure for hypersplenism. Partial splenectomy is an important alternative to all other procedures in the treatment of PHT. Moreover, it allows a delay of hepatic transplantation and it may even be avoided altogether.

We intend to present our global results in a near future.

J P Chazalette, J Feigelson, D Louis
Hôpital Renée Sabran, France
Correspondence to Dr Chazalette, Hôpital Renée Sabran, Giens 83 406, France; jean-pierre.chazalette@chu-lyon.fr