withholding food and drink for six hours is a small price to pay for an increased safety margin.

J M STOKES
P N POSTER
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The authors reply:
Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the letters from Nandwani et al and Stokes and Foster produced in response to our article "Is fasting necessary before prilocaine Bier's block". We believe prilocaine Bier's block to be safe when conducted by experienced operators with appropriate monitoring. The data we collected supported this view. We are aware of the theoretical benefit for the practice of fasting to reduce the risk of airway contamination in the event of fits or faints but our data do not show this to be a significant risk. The reported episodes of equipment failure still without toxicity to the patient provides further support for the safety of the procedure and therefore the redundancy of a fasting period.

We do not support or condone the use of lignocaine, which has a higher toxicity, nor the use of additional sedation, which we agree increases the risk of aspiration and should not be necessary with a properly conducted Bier's block.

Far from "a minor inconvenience", an extended wait for a fasting period causes the patient considerable discomfort and personal inconvenience. Since this is of no proven value, is not officially recommended by the College of Anaesthetists, and is already not practised in many departments without adverse effects, it could be seen at best as an outdated practice and at worst as unceraining defensive medicine.

TOMAR O'SULLIVAN
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GP in A&E

EDITOR,—Recent research has suggested that general practitioners in A&E departments are cost-effective because they use fewer investigations than senior house officers when treating primary care patients. In a six month retrospective review of our computerised records we looked at the number of x rays ordered per doctor in our A&E department. There was no significant difference between the number of x rays ordered by the SHOs (676/117 708 = 38%) compared with GPs (720/101 030 = 43%). We did, however, find that SHOs on call ordered x rays at a slightly higher rate than their counterparts on duty. The latter are seen by our centralised triage system and have more time to explore the presenting complaint carefully. However, we found that the SHOs ordered significantly more x rays than GPs (0.2; 0.8). This, therefore, suggests that the SHOs are wasting a substantial amount of time on investigations that are not necessary.

We found that the GPs' approach to the use of x rays was very different from that of the SHOs. The GPs tended to use x rays only when indicated by the clinical picture. We believe that the SHOs are using x rays to emphasise the clinical picture and to reduce the possibility of a miss diagnosis. It is, therefore, important that the A&E departments review their policy on the use of x rays and ensure that the SHOs are using their time effectively. This would also reduce the cost of the service and the pressure on the A&E departments.

RUTH SPEDDING
BRIAN MCMICHELL
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Paramedic care: the case for minimum intervention

EDITOR,—I believe that when it comes to the management of victims of major trauma, we as paramedics may have lost sight of our true role.

Unless there are specific indications to the contrary, our first choice of action should be to "scop and run" and not to "stay and play".

We should not forget that our basic principle is to deliver patients to hospital in no worse a condition than that in which they were found at the scene.

Nancy Caroline, one of the founders of the paramedic services in the USA, stated "a critically injured patient CANNOT be stabilised in the field". This is as true today as it was before the advent of paramedics, yet we seem to have developed a deep seat belief that we must not move our patients until we have performed at least one of the extended skills that we have been taught. If our patients are unlikely to survive without treatment, they are unlikely to survive without this treatment and it is our job not to make critically injured patients "better". That is for hospitals to do. Early intervention may well prevent death, but unless it is both appropriate and adequate, the delay造成的是 more likely to increase mortality.

There are of course clear instances where paramedic interventions are appropriate: prolonged entainment; long distances to hospital; any situation in which the patient is likely to die before reaching definitive care.

Nancy Caroline defined the following "critical interventions":

- Airway management
- External haemorrhage control
- Sealing of open wounds to (a) the neck, (b) the chest
- Temporary stabilisation of flail chest

Let us not forget about immediate and continuing cervical spine immobilisation from the moment of the patient contact, and, when needed, assistance to inadequate ventilation. If we remember that everything that we do takes time, it makes sense that intubation should only be necessary if basic airway management is ineffective. A drip can be set up on the move. Our first choice for cannulation is always the best available vein and it is therefore clear that second or third attempts can only be second or third best. We should ask ourselves "is it in the patient's best interest that I waste precious time hunting for a vein when I could (and should) be heading towards the hospital?" It is irrefutable that internal bleeding from a major vessel may be much less rapid than extravasation through two peripheral cannulae, even if they are both working perfectly, and any delay at scene in order to gain double venous access may well be to the patient's detriment.

I can almost hear the outcry from my rural colleagues and I freely concede that distance may be a relative contraindication to a "scop and run" policy, but a patient with severe injuries is already disadvantaged by long journey times and so there is more reason to reduce the time on scene atf minimise prehospital time. There is also a case for selecting, when available, the most appropriate hospital, that is, a trauma centre.

I also believe that "consultant phobia" may be partly to blame. This refers to the fear of criticism by the receiving A&E consultant if a patient is delivered to hospital without every possible prehospital intervention having been taken. This fear is totally unfounded. A&E consultants' only real concern is that they see an increasing tendency to delay at the scene with struggles to cannulate etc, when there is clearly no hope of "stabilising" the patient without major surgical intervention, which is impossible outside the theatre environment.

In summary, it is my firm belief that we are, on the whole, doing a good job, but when it comes to serious trauma, particularly penetrating trauma of the torso, the best treatment that we have to offer is a heavy right foot on the accelerator pedal and that this should be our treatment of choice, not of last resort.

Let us show that we have the maturity NOT to undertake procedures simply because we have the skills, and to ensure that we act in the patient's best interests at all times.

I am a serving Leading Paramedic Paramedic with 25 years in the ambulance service, most of the time on emergency work. I have been a paramedic for seven years and last year attained advanced life support provider. These are my own thoughts and have nothing to do with my employers, Mersey Regional Ambulance Service NHS Trust.

STEVE EVANS
Runcorn, Cheshire

Advanced Life Support video. British Heart Foundation, 14 Fitzhardinge Street, London W1H 4DX. A Four Hour Production, 1995. (Running time 20 min; £10.)

This British Heart Foundation video has a running time of some 20 minutes and provides up to date information for all medical, nursing, and paramedical professionals involved in learning or teaching Advanced Life Support techniques according to the current European Resuscitation Council guidelines.

The presenter is Dr Peter Baskett, a well respected founding father of the Life Support programmes in the UK. His style is, as always, clear, concise, and methodical.

The video opens with a simulated cardiac arrest scenario in a physiotherapy gymnasium and there then follows the cascade of recognition of cardiac arrest, call for help, basic life support through to advanced life support, with a welcome final successful outcome.

The video opens with a trailer for Advanced Life Support courses, together with the principles of working together as a well coordinated team whose every member must keep their clinical skills up to scratch through regular training and practice.

The British Heart Foundation has made a sound investment in recruiting the expertise
Paramedic care: the case for minimum intervention.

S Evans

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