LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Anaesthetic training in accident and emergency

EDITOR,—I read with interest the comments of Boyle et al1 regarding anaesthetic training for accident and emergency (A&E) specialist registrars. They suggest that there is a definite advantage for A&E registrars in anaesthesia over six months as a “true” anaesthetic SHO at the time of entering higher training in A&E, rather than as a supernumerary extra in theatre. As someone who initially undertook a training in anaesthesia with a view to entering higher training in A&E via this route, I would agree that it offers more than the opportunity to become confident and competent in advanced airway management in the relatively controlled theatre setting. However, our presence in anaesthesia offers the chance to gain many other skills that are extremely useful to the A&E trainee, particularly in the resuscitation setting, including the assessment and management of critically ill patients, providing ventilatory and circulatory support where necessary, the use of anaesthetic equipment, invasive haemodynamic monitoring techniques and transportation of critically ill patients. The opportunity to become proficient at the various regional anaesthetic techniques and to gain an understanding of pain management is also very relevant to A&E practice.

The possession of the FRCA, which requires at least 2.5 years of training in anaesthesia, is one of the established ways to enter the A&E specialist registrar grade. Surprisingly, in the current membership list of the British Association of A&E Medicine, only 60 (0.05%) members possess the DA (or old primary FRCA), with only 12 (0.01%) possessing the FRCA or equivalent.2 As our specialty continues to develop and accepts more responsibility for early advanced airway management, ventilatory and circulatory support and rapid sequence inductions, both within the A&E department and in the pre-hospital setting, I feel that we should encourage more of our junior trainees interested in a career in A&E to enter the specialist registrar grade via this route.

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Rapid sequence intubation

EDITOR,—All emergency medicine specialists should be competent in rapid sequence intubation (RSI). We thank the authors for their commitment to training this essential skill.1 The simulator experience with video playback could be an extremely powerful teaching tool and may obviate potential attendant complications. Currently, only a few accident and emergency (A&E) departments in the United Kingdom have access to this expensive tool.2 RSI is a skill that is used with short notice and requires confidence and competence to perform appropriately. The cognitive and psychomotor skills needed are unlikely to be retained from a single course. RSI should therefore be taught as part of an integrated training programme. This should include prolonged exposure to intubations during an anaesthetic attachment, a short course similar to the National Emergency Airway Management Course from the USA covering core knowledge, and a process of revalidation and quality assurance.

We feel that the use of simulators would not be practicable for the primary training of the large numbers of UK A&E specialists in RSI. The use of simulators could, however, play a vital part in the regular appraisal and revalidation of individual practitioners once they have completed their training programme. This revalidation of skills and the regular audit of results should form the basis for the essential quality assurance, which this programme would need.

In summary, if we follow the airline pilot analogy, training occurs in the classroom and in the air, revalidation is the work of the simulator.

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Emergency cranial computed tomography

EDITOR,—Harris et al1 apply Rothrock’s criteria2 to a UK population of non-trauma patients. Their abstract concludes “Simple criteria can be usedfully applied to patients presenting to an A&E department in this country to target patients most likely to have clinically significant findings on urgent cranial computed tomography”. We believe that the method and findings of the study do not justify the change in practice implied by this conclusion.

Our methodological concerns are threefold. Information gathered retrospectively from notes and request forms casts doubt over the accuracy and completeness of the symptoms and signs (particularly the symptom of nausea). The inclusion criterion is ill defined (patients who are referred on the grounds of computed tomography). There is no explanation for the inclusion of nausea (it is not one of Rothrock’s original criteria). There are also theoretical objections. To be useful, a clinical filter must be applied to unselected patients and include criteria that have a high inter-observer reliability. There is no logic in applying a clinical filter after the decision to investigate has been made.

Furthermore, both studies acknowledge that they do not tackle the problem of subarachnoid haemorrhage in young patients presenting with isolated headache. Surely this is a major consideration in formulating any criteria for computed tomography (CT)?

We applied Harris’ criteria to our prospective series of patients attending A&E with non-traumatic headache (248 patients). Seventy-two CT scans had been performed. The criteria would have missed three (1.2%) patients with an abnormal CT scan.

Judging from the differing rates of CT abnormality in the two studies (35% vs 6%), CT rates in the UK are well below those in the USA. Given that we accept a detection rate of 1 in 80 for patients with skull fracture and GCS 15, perhaps we should be scanning more patients with non-traumatic headache not fewer.
The authors reply

We are pleased that our study has prompted discussion about the use of clinical guidelines for emergency head computed tomography (CT) in the non-trauma population. This is a developing area where little evidence exists.

It was interesting to hear that our modified criteria (any of: (1) GCS<14, (2) focal neurology and (3) headache with nausea or vomiting) would have missed three patients with abnormalities on CT findings. It is unclear whether these were young patients with subarachnoid haemorrhage who, when presenting with isolated headache, we have already acknowledged as a problem population.

Our modified criteria are simple, common-sense suggestions that reflect current practice regarding requesting CT from the accident and emergency department. We acknowledge the retrospective nature of our trial. Having now demonstrated that the criteria could be useful, prospective validation is necessary.

HELEN DRAPER
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The irritable hip

EDITOR,—As Mattick et al have defined, the irritable hip is a common presentation that requires the exclusion of serious pathology. The protocol described allows appropriate outpatient management of many children. The text describes how no one single investigation or history and clinical examination alone is reliable in this condition. A recent study identified four cases of occult osteomyelitis, at various sites in the distal limb, presenting to a paediatric A&E department with atrophic limp. Clinical findings were unreliable with further investigation and the subsequent diagnosis resulting from the identification of a markedly increased erythrocyte sedimentation rate. Finally, Anton et al reported identification of neuroblastoma by detection of anaemia on investigation of the limping child.

Therefore, we would advise caution in discharging children presenting to A&E departments with atrophic limp based on history, clinical examination and imaging alone.

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The authors reply

We welcome the interest shown by Bridges et al in our paper. They state that a history and clinical examination are sufficient to select those children, presenting with atrophic limp, who require further inpatient investigations. They suggest that routine screening of blood is unnecessary for such children who are discharged, and imply that we are subjecting children to needless venepuncture. However, no objective evidence is offered to substantiate their statement.

In addition, Bridges et al misquote our paper. Our paper states “no one clinical finding or investigation can be used in managing the limping child who attends the A&E department.” Our protocol was not aimed at identifying “septic arthritis,” but identifying children who may be safely discharged home.

We paper demonstrates that this protocol does not appear to miss significant pathology in children presenting to A&E. While we accept that our protocol has the potential to be refined, making it more sensitive and specific, we are unaware of any robust published evidence demonstrating history and clinical examination alone as being reliable at excluding significant pathology in children presenting with hip pathology.

However, there is evidence demonstrating the pitfalls of relying on history and clinical examination alone. Taylor et al reported in a series of 509 cases of “irritable hip” that history is unreliable in this condition. A recent study identified four cases of occult osteomyelitis, at various sites in the distal limb, presenting to a paediatric A&E department with atrophic limp. Clinical findings were unreliable with further investigation and the subsequent diagnosis resulting from the identification of a markedly increased erythrocyte sedimentation rate. Finally, Anton et al reported identification of neuroblastoma by detection of anaemia on investigation of the limping child.

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Topical anaesthesia use in the management of children’s lacerations, a postal survey

EDITOR,—The suturing of lacerations of children is a common presentation that requires appropriate outpatient management of many children. The text describes how no one single investigation or history and clinical examination alone is reliable in this condition. A recent study identified four cases of occult osteomyelitis, at various sites in the distal limb, presenting to a paediatric A&E department with atrophic limp. Clinical findings were unreliable with further investigation and the subsequent diagnosis resulting from the identification of a markedly increased erythrocyte sedimentation rate. Finally, Anton et al reported identification of neuroblastoma by detection of anaemia on investigation of the limping child.

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Feigning dystonia to feed an unusual drug addiction

EDITOR,—We recently had a patient attend our department repeatedly feigning acute dystonia in an attempt to obtain procyclidine medication. The case illustrates the fact that many medications are abusable.1 Patients are knowledgeable and may be willing to go to some lengths to obtain them fraudulently. Accident and emergency staff should be alert to this possibility when faced with unusual stories or situations. The psychotropic drug directory is a brief handy reference, which may help in such situations and can be obtained free of charge from Lundbeck Pharmaceuticals.2

A 19 year old man of normal appearance, presented on three occasions complaining of neck pain and holding his neck in full extension. Examination revealed a full range of passive neck movements, with no other associated neurological or ocular abnormalities. The patient admitted to previous crack cocaine and marijuana misuse. He further stated that he had recently taken a substance he believed to be diazepam. A putative diagnosis of acute dystonia was made and he was treated with 5 mg intramuscular procyclidine. He made a recovery within a few minutes and was discharged.

The patient attended on two further occasions in the following month with the same presenting complaint. On his last visit he was aggressive, demanding an injection and “something to take home to stop this happening again”. Our suspicions were aroused by his demeanour and further discrete observation revealed that his posture normalised when he was unaware of being watched. He was warned of the abuse potential of procyclidine and offered the opportunity of consultation with the community psychiatric nurse. A note was made that he should have no further treatment without psychiatric evaluation.

Acute dystonia can be a side effect of certain medications. It is treated with anti-cholinergic or antihistaminic medication. Procyclidine (Kemadrine) is the usual drug used.3 Procyclidine is an anticholinergic drug whose potential for misuse, although described, is not widely recognised.4 It is believed to have an euphoric effect. Indicators of misuse include absence of symptoms when a patient is unaware of being observed, dystonia of a static form, the presence of non-organic neurology, evidence of a secondary gain, or symptoms of somatisation disorder.5 If simulation is suspected a call to the patients’ general practitioner or to local emergency departments may reveal, that the patient is “shopping”.6

NOTICES

13th Annual Congress of the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine

1–4 October 2000, Rome, Italy

Further details: ESICM Congress Secretariat, 40 Avenue Joseph Wybran, 1070 Brussels, Belgium (tel: +32 2 559 03 55, fax: +32 2 527 00 62, e-mail: public@esicm.org, web site: http://www.esicm.org).

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