LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Blood alcohol levels

Sir

As senior house officers in a busy accident and emergency department, we were often required to deal with alcohol-related problems. We felt that a knowledge of blood alcohol levels in certain cases would be of benefit, for example, the unconscious or stuporose patient.

The Lion Alcolmeter seemed to be an ideal instrument to gain such measurements, being painless, immediate and easy to operate. Therefore, we set out to test the reliability of the Meter in the clinical situation.

Our tests revealed a number of limitations in the accuracy and usefulness of the Meter and the main shortcomings are outlined below. Firstly, accurate estimates of blood alcohol levels were only obtained from those patients coordinated and cooperative enough to give a mouth sample, i.e. low risk patients. Estimates from unconscious or uncooperative patients (obviously high risk) had to be made from nasal samples and were inconsistent and unreliable. Secondly, readings cannot be taken less than 20 min following ingestion or vomiting of alcohol. Timing such events is obviously difficult to assess in the unconscious patient.

We also found, as expected, that the relationship between blood alcohol level and conscious level was extremely variable, the individuals alcohol tolerance being the most important factor. Thus, knowledge of blood levels is of little consequence in unknown individuals. We found that in no patient tested by the Alcolmeter did alcohol levels alter the treatment, the clinical state being of far greater significance.

Thus, the reliability of the Lion Alcometer as an indicator of blood alcohol levels in the unconscious patient in the clinical situation must be questioned and the value of such knowledge also seems limited.

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Toe nails

Sir

I wonder if your comments on toe nails at the end of the Editorial (*Archives of Emergency Medicine*, Volume 3, Number 4, December 1986), while most placatory in tone, were meant to provoke some thought and debate.

To my mind, and for want of a better term, ingrowing toe nails are a nuisance. They