Masala

Persistent fever in patients with documented tuberculosis on proper antitubercular treatment is worrying. Forty sputum-positive patients of tuberculosis from the Military Hospital, Namkum, Ranchi remained febrile for more than 2 weeks after starting treatment. Five patients developed dissemination—2 had Pott's spine, 2 loculated empyema and 1 tuberculous arthritis of the hip with abscesses—and 5 developed cold abscesses in unusual locations. Fever due to hypersensitivity was seen in 9 with isoniazid-induced lupus in 2. Four had fever attributed only to toxemia of the disease and 13 had other infections such as malaria or pyogenic lung infections (Indian J Tuberculosis 2001;48:147–9).

Carotid stenosis can cause transient ischaemic attacks and stroke. There are two main strategies for treating carotid stenosis—halt plaque progression by modifying risk factors or reduce the stenosis by carotid endarterectomy or stenting. A review article (N Engl J Med 2001;345:1113–18) gives an algorithmic approach to the problem. Asymptomatic patients <80 years of age and with stable cardiac disease should undergo endarterectomy only if the carotid stenosis is ≥60% and there is an experienced vascular surgeon available. Symptomatic patients with >70% stenosis need endarterectomy. In patients with 50–69% carotid stenosis, endarterectomy should be offered to those with a higher risk of stroke.

The ICMR Bulletin (April 2001) has focused on mental health. Disability-adjusted life-years (DALY) measure the burden of the problem and worldwide it is estimated to rise from 6.8% in 1990 to 15% in 2020. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) is evaluating the magnitude of various psychiatric problems in India and is trying to integrate general and mental health care. In the next 20 years nearly 50% of Indians will live in urban areas exposed to problems related to large scale migration. Another important area of study is suicidal behaviour as suicide is already the second highest cause of mortality in the 15–35 years age group.

Rehabilitation of patients with burns is long and arduous, especially children. Purposeful activity probably gives better results compared to rote exercise in rehabilitating children. The measures studied were number of repetitions of therapeutic exercises completed, number of episodes of overt distress behaviour displayed and scores on self-report scales of pain intensity and ‘fun’. Although only two 6-year-olds were studied (Am J Occup Therapy 2001;54:381–90), this is an interesting study of an aspect of treatment not often given due importance by clinicians.

Clinical information should not be discarded in favour of numbers. An editorial in the BMJ (2001;323:705–6) points out that interference by antibodies in immunoassays is well recognized. Such interference can invalidate thyroglobulin, digoxin, oestrogen and human chorionic gonadotrophin assays. There have been instances of aggressive chemotherapy or surgery being done based on false-positive immunoassays. Interfering antibodies are surprisingly common, affecting 30–40% of the population. They probably arise from mundane activities such as keeping pets, ingesting animal antigens, vaccination, infection or blood transfusion.

Most sore throats are caused by viral upper respiratory tract infections. Group A beta-haemolytic Streptococci are the only common cause of sore throat needing antibiotics and are cultured in <20% of adults with pharyngitis. A retrospective analysis of nearly 6.7 million annual visits in the USA by adults with sore throat between 1989 and 1999 (JAMA 2001;286:1181–6) finds that antibiotics were used in over 70% of visits and in 68% of patients non-recommended antibiotics were used. Over this 10-year period there was a significant decrease in the use of penicillin and erythromycin and increase in the use of extended spectrum macrolides and fluoroquinolones.

Severity-of-illness scoring in critically ill patients is important in predicting mortality and has been long standardized by the APACHE (Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation) and SAPS (Simplified Acute Physiology Score). However, these scores plotted at or soon after admission are not always accurate. Twelve hundred mechanically ventilated patients were prospectively studied in 16 Canadian intensive care units (ICUs). Six components of the Multiple Organ Dysfunction Score (cardiovascular, respiratory, renal, neurological, hepatic and haematological) were scored at admission of the patients to the ICUs and during their ICU stay. ICU mortality was studied. The researchers found that cardiovascular, renal, neurological and respiratory dysfunction when measured at admission and serially were significantly associated with ICU mortality (Crit Care Med 2001;29:2046–50). An accompanying editorial questions whether such scoring is closer to an ideal system.

Nil by mouth is a common postoperative order following surgical procedures on the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Traditionally, this has been followed to prevent postoperative nausea and vomiting and to protect the anastomosis before it is stressed by food. A meta-analysis of 11 studies in over 800 patients found that early feeding reduced the risk of any type of infection and also the length of hospital stay (BMJ 2001;323:1–5). In four of the studies, feeding was started within 6 hours after surgery and in the remaining within 24 hours. In all but two of the studies, patients underwent lower GI surgery; in the two studies in which patients underwent upper GI surgery, early feeding either gave no advantages over standard practices or had a deleterious effect.

Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors have a beneficial effect in type 1 diabetics with nephropathy. However, there has been no similar study in type 2 diabetics. In the USA, both the prevalence and incidence of end-stage renal disease has doubled in the last 10 years and nephropathy due to type 2 diabetes accounts for almost all the increase. Three articles in the N Engl J Med (2001;345:851–60, 861–9, 870–8) have shown a beneficial effect on nephropathy in type 2 diabetes with losartan and irbesartan, both relatively new ACE receptor-blocking drugs compared to placebo or other antihypertensives. An editorial comment in the same issue asks why ordinary ACE inhibitors were not tried. Not surprisingly, most of the researchers were sponsored by the concerned drug companies.

Humanism in medicine is defined as a physician’s actions that demonstrate interest in and respect for the patient and his concerns. A group of like-minded American physicians first came together in 1998 and have now set out guidelines on teaching methods (JAMA 2001;286:1067–74). Certain social amenities stressed are greeting the patient, introducing team members and demonstrating interest in and respect for the patient and his concerns. A group of like-minded American physicians first came together in 1998 and have now set out guidelines on teaching methods (JAMA 2001;286:1067–74). Certain social amenities stressed are greeting the patient, introducing team members and asking the patient’s permission when appropriate. Role modelling by clinical teachers is very effective, for example, personally attending to the patient’s comfort by adjusting pillows and bedspreads. Teachers could model emotional support by touching the patient and paying attention when she/he is in pain or short of breath. Is this the forgotten art of medicine?

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