

Conference on adverse drug reactions

PROFESSOR J. D. E. KNOX, M.D., F.R.C.P.(Ed.), F.R.C.G.P.

Department of General Practice, Dundee University

The Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) and Sub-committee on Adverse Reactions convened a one-day conference on "the dissemination of information on adverse reactions" at the Royal College of Physicians, London, on 2 October 1975. It was attended by over 100 delegates from a wide range of disciplines within medicine, from the pharmaceutical industry, and from the news media.

Sir Eric Scowen

The chairman, Sir Richard Doll, introduced Sir Eric Scowen, Chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines who outlined the statutory work of the Committee especially in relation to the introduction of new drugs.

Professor D. J. Finney

Professor D. J. Finney (Professor of Statistics, University of Edinburgh) presented the main issues with which the Conference was concerned in a paper entitled: *Drugs and patients—thoughts on communication*. He began by presenting a series of contrasting statements about benefits from drugs and adverse reactions to them; for example, when a drug is first introduced there can be no certainty that the intended benefits will occur—and equally that it will not produce adverse effects. As experience grows, it becomes possible to plot the efficacy of the drug—and concern about adverse effects—on a scale between two extremes.

Professor Finney then outlined the duties of the Committee on Safety of Medicines and referred to the systems providing information on suspected adverse reactions. This information is carefully evaluated in a series of operations which may involve experts outside the Committee. The aim is to enable the Sub-committee to form a consensus about a problem and place it at a point on the scale referred to above. From this will flow appropriate action, which may range from persuading manufacturers to withdraw the drug to issuing a special communication to every doctor.

Professor Finney discussed the responsibilities of the CSM to the drug industry. He included such considerations as early communication if action is being contemplated to stop the use of the drug, the avoidance of making pronouncements that are unnecessarily prejudicial to the good name of the manufacturer, and the need of the CSM to act unhesitatingly as judges to protect the best interests of the health of the community.

The committee also had responsibilities to the medical profession, such as warning doctors when evidence pointed fairly strongly towards dangers of adverse reactions. It seemed right to assume that the medical profession would accept the validity of the statements, and interpret them in the best interests of the individual patient and society. Professor Finney ended his thoughtful analysis by pointing out that so far the Committee on Safety of Medicines had done little to communicate directly with the public. Yet he considered that there was a responsibility to society and invited the conference to consider how this might best be discharged.

This point was later taken up in discussion when the role of the family doctor, of the Health Education Council and Health Education Units were mentioned: television had great potential in this kind of education. Great care was needed in the timing of messages through the media, to avoid exposing doctors to unnecessary calls on their limited time and to avoid putting them in a difficult position if they had no prior knowledge of the particular issue.

Among other points raised were the need for research on the effectiveness of the existing system of communication to the medical profession, and the need expressed by members of the press for better communication between the CSM and the media. Evidence was presented of the greater effectiveness of the general practitioner in securing patient compliance with drug therapy than was the case in attenders at hospital.

Dr S. E. Ellison

Dr S. E. Ellison presented a paper entitled *The Problem for the General Practitioner*. In addition to the points already made, he mentioned the astonishingly wide range of drugs prescribed by general practitioners shown by multi-observer studies, yet each doctor individually had a relatively small repertoire from which he commonly selected his therapy. Dr Ellison considered that the issues with which the conference was concerned really extended beyond communication as such and included both education and a critical reviewing of one's daily work.

Dr E. D. Quantock

Dr E. D. Quantock, put forward the industry's point of view in his paper entitled *Problems of Adverse Reaction Dissemination: an Industry Viewpoint*. He indicated the willingness of industry to help the CSM in its difficult task. At the same time he indicated the uneasiness felt in many quarters about the apparent lack of validity of some of the data on which the CSM had often to base its judgments.

Dr M. O'Donnell

As a medical journalist, Dr M. O'Donnell gave an entertaining and provocative contribution entitled *Why not frighten the horses?* (an allusion to a comment on television concerning sexual morality and the permissive society). He stressed the importance of understanding the journalist's point of view in relations between the medical profession and the media. There was no corporate journalistic responsibility as such—though each journalist had a responsibility governed by many different factors.

Discussion

The discussion after these papers highlighted the need for a more effective approach to undergraduate education and postgraduate training in prescribing.

The provision of information needed to be improved, and one way might be by establishing groups of general practitioners trained and equipped for the special requirements of providing hard data. This suggestion was criticised on several grounds including the bias it might introduce into the system and the reluctance of general practice to accept ideas invoking 'selection.' Nevertheless the key role of general practitioners in providing information was emphasised by Dr Inman who indicated that of the 3,000–4,000 notifications received annually, half came from general practice. Other points raised in debate included the role of the pharmacist and the potential contribution he could make in a co-operative approach involving retail chemists, hospital pharmacists, and general practitioners in a given locality.

Summing up

The Chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines, Sir Eric Scowen, concluded the proceedings by stressing the need for co-operation of all concerned. The conference provided a useful forum for the exchange of ideas, some of which would be pursued by the Committee in furthering its work.

Association of university teachers of general practice

J. G. R. HOWIE, M.D., Ph.D., M.R.C.G.P.
Honorary Secretary,
Association of University Teachers of General Practice

The Annual Scientific Meeting of the Association was held in Southampton on 10 and 11 July 1975. Thirty-three members and 18 guests were present.

On the first morning, following an introduction by the Dean of Southampton University Medical School, Professor E. D. Acheson, papers were presented on the management of spina bifida (Dr J. H. Walker, Newcastle), on the distributions of patients in city practices with different zoning policies (Professor I. M. Richardson, Aberdeen) and comparing the attitudes of