

Otitis externa from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* in swimming pools

Sir,

Outbreaks of otitis externa due to *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* acquired from swimming pools are well recognized.¹ A high bather load, inadequate chlorination and raised temperature all encourage the growth of the organism.¹ Although some outbreaks have arisen from newly opened pools,^{2,3} continued vigilance is necessary as the following report indicates.

My training practice was responsible for the boarders at a local preparatory school. Ten boys, aged eight to thirteen years, presented on the same day with otitis externa. All had one or more of the following signs: oedema, erythema or scaling of the external canal. There was no exudate. The duration of symptoms varied from one to seven days. All 10 had used the school pool most weekdays for the previous term; none had used any other pool in the previous fortnight. *P. aeruginosa* was cultured from seven ear swabs out of 10.

Tests instigated by the community physician showed that chlorine levels were satisfactory and the water free of organisms. However, the tests were performed one week after the boys were first seen and at a time that an inspection was expected. Closer questioning of the headmaster revealed that chlorination of the pool was haphazard. Hypochlorite was added erratically, measurements made only occasionally on a meter that had not been calibrated since its purchase in the distant past. Although for research purposes, serotyping of the cultured *Pseudomonas* would be required to prove the epidemic had a common source, the circumstantial evidence was so strong and in keeping with known facts¹ that for practical purposes the swimming pool was incriminated.

With the increasing popularity of swimming, general practitioners should be alert to the possibility of pools as a source of infection in epidemics of otitis externa, particularly in closed communities.

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Ultrasound therapy for herpes zoster pain

Ultrasound therapy for the pain of acute herpes zoster has been used with encouraging results.^{1,2} Although the pain of shingles can be severe, it must be remembered that pain disappearing spontaneously early in the illness is often witnessed and there appears to be an urgent need for controlled trials before ultrasound therapy becomes a standard part of management.

A recent case suggests that caution may be necessary before using ultrasound in early disease. A 60-year-old man in generally good health developed right-sided abdominal shingles and on the third day was given ultrasound treatment following which on the fourth day the rash was disseminated (Figure 1). There was no clinical or haematological evidence to suggest immunosuppression which is usually present when there is extensive dissemination, in contrast to the occasional vesicle on other parts of the body which is often found especially in the elderly. It may be that the dissemination had nothing to do with the ultrasound therapy but ultrasound causes vasodilatation and increased cell permeability³ which would seem to be an ideal way of releasing virus from infected cells. If sufficient virus were released to overwhelm the immunological response established following

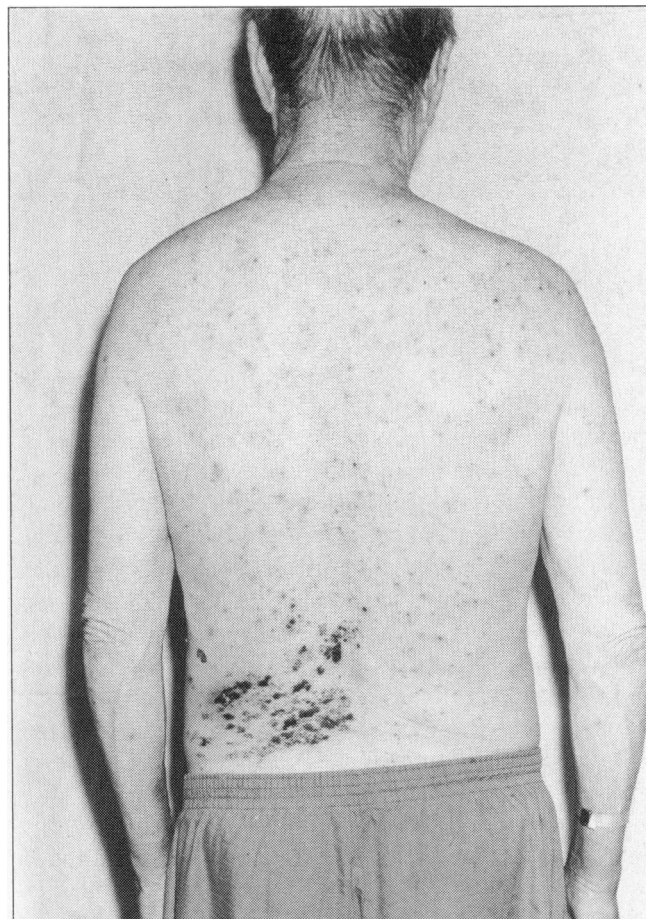


Figure 1. Disseminated herpes zoster after ultrasound therapy.

the original varicella infection, this may explain why lesions occurred in other parts of the body. The patient made a good recovery with parenteral acyclovir.

If further experience and control studies confirm that ultrasound is effective in providing pain relief in this condition, possible side-effects must also be considered.

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Doctors and nuclear war — a point of view

Sir,

To any observer in outer space, the behaviour of mankind on this planet must appear utterly incomprehensible and absurd. In a large part of the world the population is starving, while the opulent superpowers are spending untold wealth on building up greater and greater nuclear arsenals, which neither side can really afford. Like the proverbial lemmings, they seem bent on self-destruction. Perhaps one may concede that 30 years ago, the ownership of a few atom bombs did offer a safeguard of sorts in a war weary world in which millions of lives had been lost and many fine cities destroyed; furthermore the real meaning of war was still a horrid memory to the survivors. Today things are quite different, and the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons is an illusion. As neither side can agree as to what constitutes equality in armaments, the conflict for supremacy between the USA and the USSR continually escalates, and it has become a grotesque and dangerous power struggle. It is as if the super-powers and their allies were building dams to withstand some deluge. Unfortunately the dam is never high enough or strong enough, so the wealth of nations is being squandered on adding more and more to their protective walls. It is obvious that in the long run this exercise must be self defeating, as one day a wall in the dam will crack, and civilization or even life itself, will be swept away in the flood.

It seems as if politicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain are not seriously thinking in terms of a real solution to the problem; they are content with threats and counter-threats. When one side makes a suggestion, it is rejected brusquely in a matter of days or even hours. There seems little hope of the contenders sitting down for long and

meaningful discussion. An intelligent and dispassionate look at the problem, combined with a determination step by step to find a way out, seems beyond the capability of the negotiators. Lip service is paid to the United Nations, but any practical suggestion by that body falls on deaf ears. Surely with all our native wit we should be able to find a real and lasting solution. Unfortunately the intelligence of the thinking man is always superior to that of any group. Crowds are unable to reason, they are swayed by emotions, and rarely give heed to constructive arguments. The morals and ability of most gatherings tend to be those of the lowest common denominator, rather than the best efforts of individuals present. This applies to politicians, who in general have to abide by a common policy if they are to earn any promotion, and as a result of this nothing constructive is done. Those with good ideas are often muted by the party, or ejected from office. A modern example of this apathy was shown in the reluctance of any party to insist on the wearing of safety belts by car drivers. It has taken years for them to accept expert advice, and yet once adopted, within a month of their use, the morbidity figures for accidents fell significantly. This sterile attitude of mind applies to most of the world leaders, motivated as they are by an overweening desire for power, combined with a determination to stay in office. They pay far more attention to vote catching than they do to the dull grind of solving difficult problems.

In this depressing situation, what can the thinking man do? It is clear that the most pressing problem of this age is the danger accruing from the stock piling of nuclear armaments. It has been estimated that the present stores on both sides contain the equivalent of two and a half tons of TNT for every man, woman and child on this planet. This enormous hazard will not disappear if we just pretend it does not exist.

The cream of the intelligentsia lies largely among the professions, and they all bear a heavy load of responsibility. All thinking people must pay far more attention to this issue. Somehow or other nuclear disarmament must be accomplished, and this will only be achieved if there is give and take on both sides in an atmosphere of trust. This basic attitude of mutual respect is in fact attainable today, but only in certain quarters. When people of different nations meet with a strong common interest, respect is soon established. The cultural barrier between East and West has been successfully breached by athletes when they meet and mix freely on easy terms, as do the musicians and artists of all kinds. In the scientific world there is some communication, and this sort of activity needs to be extended by meetings between members of the same professions. There are a number of such organizations such as the Medical Association for the Prevention of War,* and these bodies exist in the USA, USSR, Britain and many other lands. These groups need to be encouraged and enlarged. The medical profession,

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