morbidity as well as variations in drug treatment and patient management. Researchers are welcome.

General practitioner colleagues from different urban practices working with and for each other are motivated towards good patient education and management as well as satisfactory immediate treatment. Incidentally this working together, often for the first time, is an effective form of continuing medical education and peer review.

We hope that in the long term the philosophy of cooperative out-of-hours care will appeal to general practitioners in all urban areas. This may lead to more appropriate usage of out-of-hours services.

A.W. ALLEN

Leeds Doctors Co-operative
575 Meanwood Road
Leeds LS6 4AH

Parvovirus infection causing arthralgia

Sir,

During an outbreak of parvovirus infection (slapped cheek disease, fifth disease, erythema infectiosum[1]) in Plymouth this summer, two adults with arthralgia caused clinical concern owing to uncertainty in immediate diagnosis and prognosis. Arthralgia is described as a complicating feature of parvovirus infection in adults but the clinical picture is not defined.[2,3]

A 35-year-old woman whose daughter had parvovirus infection, developed a rash (without red cheeks) six days after a 48-hour spell of high temperature, generalized aching, abdominal pain and diarrhoea. The rash lasted only three days and was followed by stiff and painful ankles, knees, elbows, wrists and fingers, with slight swelling of the joints. Ibuprofen (400 mg) was given thrice daily, and five days later she was substantially better and subsequently made a full recovery. There was no adenopathy. Rubella immunoglobulin (Ig)G antibody was present in an early serum sample (tenth day of illness from first presentation) indicating past infection, but rubella specific IgM was not detected, excluding recent infection. Parvovirus specific IgM was present (tenth day serum sample), consistent with recent parvovirus infection.

A 40-year-old woman developed slight redness of the cheeks and a rash after feeling off colour for one week. The right knee and the proximal inter-phalangeal joints of both middle fingers became stiff and painful at the same time. There was no adenopathy. Ibuprofen (400 mg) was given thrice daily, and three days later she experienced aching wrists, a transient carpal tunnel syndrome and pain in the knees and ankles when climbing stairs. However, all joint symptoms had disappeared after seven days. She continued to feel off colour, and both the rash and the redness of the cheeks waxed and waned for a further three weeks before complete recovery. Rubella specific IgM was not detected; latex fixation was negative; and parvovirus specific IgM was present.

In addition to the arthralgia, both patients exhibited a prodromal illness and a constitutional upset, contrary to the findings in children in whom the illness is most commonly seen.

M.T. EVERETT

Compton Lodge
132 Eggbuckland Road
Plymouth PL3 5JT

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A case of piles?

Sir,

Mr X, a single 25-year-old hotel manager, came to my surgery one busy afternoon. He was a new patient. He appeared self confident and looked embarrassed as he said, 'my piles are at me doctor — they're sore about three weeks now and I've had some bleeding on and off as well . . . I can't understand why they are giving me so much trouble because I'm on a high-fibre diet. They are so bad I'm finding it hard to sit down sometimes.'

Expecting to see prolapsed haemorrhoids I was surprised when the initial inspection of his anal margin was unremarkable. Digital rectal examination was also normal. I explained to the patient that I was about to do proctoscopy when he said in a worried voice: 'Actually doctor, I've got two other problems'.

Thoughts of proctoscopy rapidly disappeared as he pointed to two lumps in the right groin which had been present for about three weeks. These were 1 × 2 cm rubbery non-tender nodes below the inguinal ligament. He had further smaller nodes above the left inguinal canal. None of the other lymph nodes were enlarged.

'This is my other problem' he said, removing his shirt. Over his trunk and upper arms was a diffuse maculopapuler ham-coloured rash. His face, palms and soles were spared and the rash was not itchy. It looked similar to pityriasis rosea except that there was no surface scale and there had been no herald patch. The rash had been present for five days.

Apart from the above three problems the patient was feeling well and had no history of malaise, influenza or headaches. On further examination I noted some pink macules over the glans penis and penile shaft. I could find no evidence of hair loss and inspection of the oral cavity revealed no abnormality.

He then remembered having a small painless mark on the corona of his glans penis about four months earlier — it had disappeared with no treatment. He had never noticed any ulceration or discharge from the penis. He had had several 'one-night stands' with different girls in the past eight months. To his knowledge none of these partners had had a venereal disease.

In view of the history and the presence of painless lymphadenopathy with generalized non-pruritic maculopapular rash I sent off a serological screen for syphilis. The results for both the non-specific and specific tests were strongly positive.

When I discussed this diagnosis of syphilis with the patient he was relieved to find that the disease was easily treatable and said he was happy he would 'not end up like Maupassant'! A week after he first presented the rash extended to his palms and feet and he attended a special clinic for contact tracing and treatment.

Lessons learnt from this case:

1. This consultation had an interesting evolution from piles to secondary syphilis and illustrated that the initial symptom in general practice is often not the main problem.

2. With increasing sexual promiscuity in society one must always consider homosexual contact as a source of sexually transmitted disease. Although this patient denied homosexual practice, in retrospect, it is possible that his anal symptoms might have been due to rectal trauma if he were a practising homosexual.

3. This patient was a strong reminder to me that not all papulosquamous rashes are psoriasis, pityriasis rosea or tinea versicolor and it is worthwhile bearing in mind the other manifestations of secondary syphilis in anyone presenting with such a rash — mucous membrane patches, condylomata lata, lymphadenopathy, systemic illness and patchy alopecia.

BART RAMSAY

Glenmore
38 Wilson Road
Mount Merrion
Dublin
Ireland