

Chickenpox and shingles

There is still sometimes confusion about the relationship between these two diseases both caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It seems clear that primary infection is usually symptomatic and results in typical chickenpox although sometimes the lesions are so scanty that they may be missed or confused, for example, with insect bites. As with the other viruses of the herpes group (*Herpes simplex*, Epstein-Barr, cytomegalovirus) persistence within the body is usual. Reactivation can occur years, often decades, later, usually along a skin dermatome, and results in shingles. Chickenpox can be contracted from patients with shingles, but it is inconsistent with our understanding of the natural history to suggest that shingles can be contracted from chickenpox. However, it is possible that renewed contact with the virus could act as a 'trigger' for shingles to appear in someone with dormant infection. Shingles can occur in young children usually after primary infection in infancy and second or third attacks are well documented.

Complications occur both with chickenpox and shingles. Secondary infection with streptococci or staphylococci can result in cellulitis or septic/pustular lesions. Encephalitis in chickenpox usually with ataxic features has a good prognosis but in shingles the outlook is less predictable. Varicella pneumonia is probably much more common than is recognized and occurs both in chickenpox and 'disseminated' shingles (generally in preg-

nant or immunocompromised patients). Auscultation rarely reveals lung abnormalities although dyspnoea and anoxia can be considerable. This complication has recently been shown to be more likely in smokers and can be life threatening. When chickenpox occurs during the last few days of pregnancy the infant can also be severely affected.

The management of serious varicella-zoster infections has been dramatically improved with the advent of acyclovir. This drug must be given in adequate dosage, usually parenterally, and can be lifesaving. It arrests the rash at the point to which it has evolved and early treatment is therefore essential. Hyperimmune immunoglobulin has a place in prevention and can be given to a pregnant or immunosuppressed person immediately after contact with, for example, an infected child or sibling. This special immunoglobulin preparation is in short supply and the blood transfusion services are always eager to hear from willing blood donors who have recently recovered from either chickenpox or shingles.

Pneumocystis pneumonia in AIDS patients

This opportunistic infection can often be treated very effectively if recognized early. The high doses of cotrimoxazole or pentamidine which are most commonly used in treatment can be very toxic and an accurate diagnosis and early referral are necessary. A cough or shortness of breath in someone with known human

immunodeficiency virus infection or in one of the at risk groups must therefore be taken seriously. The lungs are commonly normal on examination. Empirical use of the usual antibiotics for chest infections in this situation can delay effective treatment until it is too late to be lifesaving.

Influenza

This is the influenza season in the southern hemisphere. New Zealand has recently experienced a major outbreak of influenza A. In Australia deaths in young persons have occurred. At the time of writing South Africa is also affected. 'Risk groups' who warrant influenza vaccination in the UK and are travelling to these regions during our summer months should be considered for vaccination.

Meningococcal infection in Africa

It was incorrectly stated in the 'Infectious diseases update' in the July *Journal* that these epidemics are usually due to meningococcus *type C* which should have read *type A*. The vaccines available in the UK cover both strains.

Suggestions for topics to include in future updates are welcomed and should be passed to the contributor, Dr E. Walker, Communicable Diseases (Scotland) Unit, Ruchill Hospital, Glasgow G20 9NB (041-946-7120), from whom further information about the current topics can be obtained.

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