

amenable to management by the primary care team.

Cost is the bugbear of this therapeutic development. Artificial nutrition accounts for 1% of the pharmaceutical market in the UK. Home total parenteral nutrition for one year costs approximately £40 000 per patient, home enteral nutrition £3500. No uniform policy currently exists as to who bears the costs of home nutritional support. Some units lean heavily upon the general practitioner to pick up the responsibility, others continue to provide supplies but may now seek reimbursement from the patient's district health authority. The principle that the act of prescribing implies acceptance of clinical responsibility must surely be pre-eminent.

There is a need at district and regional level to identify funds specifically for artificial nutrition, though the concept of allocating part of the national drug budget to the development of this facility finds favour in some quarters. A national fund would stop the present wrangles over treatment costs but would mean difficult allocation decisions would have to be made.

A policy document on artificial nutritional support is at the draft stage, defining ways in which a national service should be planned, coordinated and financed. The role of home care will be an important feature of the report and the views of general practice need to be made clear at this stage. Those wishing to make representations on this subject should write to me at the address given.

G P RUBIN

Primary Care Society for Gastroenterology
The Health Centre
Trenchard Avenue
Thornaby
Cleveland TS17 0BZ

References

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2. Wilcock H, Armstrong J, Cottee S, *et al.* Artificial nutrition in the Cambridge health district with particular reference to enteral tube feeding. *Health Trends* 1991 (in press).

Salmeterol therapy in mild asthma

Sir,

Dr Weaving's letter makes a number of useful points about the treatment of asthma (*August Journal*, p.346). However, by making these points in the form of a criticism of our study (letters, *May Journal*, p.214) he misinterprets our research.

Our study simply showed that the ad-

dition of salmeterol to a patient's standard therapy (with and without prophylactic drugs) improved quality of life as measured by the living with asthma questionnaire.¹ Dr Weaving writes 'It would be logical that such a group of patients would feel better with additional bronchodilator therapy'. First, our dependent variable was quality of life, not 'feeling better', and although there are affect-related items in the living with asthma questionnaire, these items did not show any greater improvement than items describing functional limitation. A 'feeling better' question was included in the study, and showed a significant improvement with salmeterol, but that was not what we reported in our letter. Secondly, the relationship between a drug and its effect is an empirical not a logical relationship. Quality of life trials among patients with other diseases sometimes fail to produce significant effects, and there is a good possibility that it is the method of measurement rather than the treatment which is responsible for this failure. Our study is the first to report that the living with asthma questionnaire is capable of detecting differences in a clinical trial.

Dr Weaving goes on to write 'It would be more appropriate, however, and in keeping with the British Thoracic Society guidelines, to treat them with increased doses of anti-inflammatory drugs such as disodium cromoglycate or inhaled steroids'. We did not make any treatment recommendations in our letter, we merely reported the first quality of life study with an asthma specific questionnaire. Whether it is more 'appropriate' (presumably this means that a similar improvement in quality of life would be obtained) to use steroid therapy is an empirical question to which the answer is as yet unknown. The British Thoracic Society guidelines were drawn up before the development of a quality of life assessment for asthma and before salmeterol became available.

More research is needed on quality of life among asthmatics and on the effects of salmeterol before treatment recommendations can be based on quality of life as an outcome variable. Quality of life is just one outcome variable, which provides the patient's perspective. It should be considered by the physician when selecting therapy in addition to the outcomes of morbidity and mortality.

Finally, Dr Weaving mentions the cost implications of salmeterol therapy with an estimate of cost which was not based on data from a study of cost effectiveness which examines both costs and benefits. Our study did not address the question of cost effectiveness and valid discussion of

this topic must await the results of future studies.

M E HYLAND

Department of Psychology
Polytechnic South West
Plymouth PL4 8AA

K P JONES

Primary Medical Care
University of Southampton
Aldermoor Close
Southampton SO1 6ST

Reference

1. Hyland ME, Finnis S, Irvine SH. A scale for assessing quality of life in adult asthma sufferers. *J Psychosom Res* 1991; 35: 99-110.

Asthma care in general practice

Sir,

The editorial by Jones and the papers by Charlton and colleagues and Barritt and Staples (*June Journal*, p. 224, 227, 232) stress the benefits of treating asthma. However, there is a catch in the form of over-diagnosis and over-treatment which readers may not have met. Many candidates for the armed forces have to be rejected because of a history of use of an inhaler in the previous four years (the forces' limit for acceptance). Only too often the inhaler was prescribed on what now seem flimsy indications or was allowed to continue long after it was no longer needed, leaving the individual labelled as 'asthmatic' and later disappointed because he or she cannot follow his or her chosen career.

I am not expressing the views of the armed services but write as an individual medical examiner.

JOHN L STRUTHERS

27 Kellett Road
Southampton SO1 2PS

Sir,

Dr Charlton and colleagues have carried out an interesting study on asthma clinics which has produced impressive outcome data (*June Journal*, p. 227). However, the study has one major flaw that was not addressed by the authors — no external controls were provided during the period in which the clinic was in operation. It could well be that there was a reduction in the profile of asthma in the catchment population resulting from other factors, such as reduced atmospheric pollution. Thus, possible confounding factors would have been controlled for had the authors used the experience of asthma consultations in an external practice as a standard