

NEWS IN BRIEF



COLONOSCOPY: DOES LENGTH (OF TIME) MATTER?

Colonoscopy is a common screening method for cancer. To assess the performance of colonoscopy screenings, Barclay and colleagues studied the results within a private group practice in gastroenterology.

While the overall rate of detection was similar to previous results elsewhere, the provocative component of the study was the comparison of different endoscopists.

Between the 12 practitioners, they found significant differences in detection rates and times of withdrawal of the colonoscope. Furthermore, shorter withdrawal times correlated with lower detection rates for neoplasia. Significantly lower rates of detection were associated with a colonoscopic withdrawal time of less than six minutes during normal examinations, compared to withdrawal times of six minutes or more. (11.8% vs 28.3% for detecting any neoplasia, and 2.6% vs 6.4% for advanced neoplasia.)

The associated Editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* notes that this research demonstrates the meaningful role of audit and research, even in the busy clinical practice. This finding may also have medico-legal implications in cases where colorectal cancer develops following a reported normal colonoscopy.

(Source: NEJM (2006) 355:2533-2541 and (2006) 355:2588-2589)

CARDIAC VALVE REGURGITATION AND PARKINSON'S DRUGS

Case reports and echocardiographic studies have suggested a correlation between cardiac-valve regurgitation and the ergot-derived dopamine

agonists pergolide and cabergoline. These drugs are used in the treatment of Parkinson's disease.

Schade and colleagues studied a cohort of 11,417 patients who were prescribed anti-parkinsonian drugs. Each patient with newly diagnosed cardiac valve regurgitation was matched against control subjects within the same cohort, to calculate ratios.

Of the 31 cases with newly diagnosed cardiac-valve regurgitation, 12 had ongoing exposure to either cabergoline or pergolide (with each drug having six cases each). The remaining 19 had not been exposed to any dopamine agonist within the previous year.

Schade calculated incidence-rate ratios, and concluded that the use of pergolide and cabergoline is associated with a significantly increased risk of newly diagnosed cardiac-valve regurgitation. The risk was particularly high among patients who had taken daily doses exceeding 3 mg. Increased risk was seen only among those who had taken either drug for more than six months.

In another study on the same topic, a group led by Zanettini performed a prevalence study in 155 patients taking dopamine agonists for Parkinson's disease. Echocardiograms were performed. Zanettini's group found that the same two drugs (pergolide or cabergoline) were associated with significantly greater frequency of clinically important regurgitation. Furthermore, ergot-treated patients with severe regurgitation had received higher cumulative doses than patients with lower grades.

These findings raise issues about the risk-benefit ratio for treating Parkinson's with ergot derivatives.

(Source: NEJM (2007) 356:29-38 and 356:39-46)

CHILD-SIZED FOR LIFE

Parents of a severely disabled child in the United States have revealed their intention to keep their mentally disabled daughter child-sized. The 9-year-old girl was born with severe and permanent brain damage. The press has reported her as having static encephalopathy, and the mental ability of a 3-month-old baby.

The parents have given her hormonal therapies to limit her growth, and also opted for surgery, including a hysterectomy and excision of breast buds. They say that restricting her size will make it easier to move her around, bathe her, and involve her in family activities.

The decision has sparked controversy. An ethics committee from the University of Washington in Seattle, which gave the go-ahead for treatment, says that the committee agreed “because the parents convinced (them) it was in fact in this little girl’s best interests”. On the other hand, a spokesperson for the United Kingdom’s Disability Rights Commission has criticised it as “unnecessary medical treatment to deal with what is essentially a social problem”, in view of “the poverty and lack of support” faced by families with disabled children.

(Source: BBC News Online)

ARE SURGEONS BETTER LOOKING THAN PHYSICIANS?

The Christmas edition of the *British Medical Journal* featured a comparative study of male surgeons, physicians and film stars who play doctors. An all-female committee assigned them a “good looking score” from one to seven (seven being best looking). The study found that the film star controls (mean score 5.96) had significantly higher good looking scores than surgeons (4.39), who in turn did better than physicians (3.65). Male surgeons were also taller on average than male physicians.

The authors of this tongue-in-cheek article have speculated as to the cause of this. Possible reasons cited were the practice of “confidence based medicine” by surgeons, and the environment of the operating theatre, which is cleaner, cooler and has higher oxygen content. However, the temperature of the ambient atmospheric air at the authors’ institution was not measured.

(Source: BMJ (2006) 333:1291-1293)

HEALTHCARE WORKERS SENTENCED TO DEATH IN LIBYAN AIDS TRIAL - INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE DISALLOWED AS 114 NOBEL LAUREATES PROTEST

A Libyan court has condemned to death five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor accused of spreading HIV among hundreds of children in hospital.

The accused had worked at Al-Fateh hospital in Benghazi, a seaside city in Libya. The healthcare workers were alleged to have deliberately infected 426 children with HIV.

The defence team had argued that the HIV infections occurred prior to the accused workers starting work at the hospital.

Supporting the defence position is a study published in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature*, where genetic analysis was performed on the HIV strains involved. The analysis suggests that the Al-Fateh hospital had a longstanding infection control problem, and that the HIV strains responsible were being spread prior to the arrival of the foreign medical staff.

Independent scientific evidence has been disallowed by the Libyan court. This includes the *Nature* analysis and a prior 2003 report written by Luc Montagnier, co-discoverer of the HIV virus. An open petition by 114 Nobel Laureates was also sent to Colonel Gaddafi, leader of Libya.

(Sources: Channel NewsAsia 20 December 06; *Nature* (2006) 444:836)

SMOKING AND CANCER IN CHINA

Chinese state media has warned of increasing cancer rates if smoking and pollution are not brought under control. According to the Chinese Ministry of Health, there were 120,000 new lung cancer patients in the past five years – and that the figure might rise to over one million a year by 2025 in the absence of adequate policy measures.

More than two thirds of adults in China are smokers, and some surveys have shown that over half of these smokers are unaware of the lung cancer risk. More than one third of the world’s estimated 1.3 billion cigarette smokers are in China.

(Source: Channel NewsAsia, 4 January 2007) ■