has been unequivocally in the treatment of bleeding peptic ulcer.

One of the important reasons given for lack of efficacy of conventional medical regimens in the control of bleeding from peptic ulcer is their inability to control intragastric acidity by failing to maintain sustained intragastric achlorhydria, which has been shown experimentally to be essential for stabilisation of clot. Peterson and Richardson have shown that sustained achlorhydria can be achieved only with hourly intravenous bolus injections of cimetidine (100 mg) with continuous nasoantral infusion of an antacid at the rate of 0.5 m/min and not with conventional doses of H₂ antagonists with or without antacids. In a preliminary prospective randomised study in patients with bleeding peptic ulcer using the above regimen we have recently shown that not only could achlorhydria be maintained but also a higher rate of control of bleeding than that obtained with the standard regimen could be achieved. Furthermore, using such a regimen for all subsequent patients with bleeding peptic ulcer we achieved an 80% control of bleeding in 75% of patients compared with 56.7% in the historical controls.

We believe that there is increasing evidence that a relation exists between intragastric acidity and peptic ulcer bleeding.2,3,4,5,6,7 Surprisingly, however, there has been no study of patients with bleeding peptic ulcer treated with an intensive medical regimen, aimed at complete neutralisation of acid and pepsin, in an attempt of preventing clot dissolution and rebleeding. Since such a regimen is expensive, easily available, and safe, we think there is an impending need for evaluating its efficacy in a large number of patients presenting with bleeding peptic ulcer.

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But was the procedure really necessary?

Sin.—Lee and Berhenne report 46 patients rendered stone and fragment free with cholecystolithotripsy (Gut 1991; 32: 536–8). Seven patients developed recurrent calculi yet six remained asymptomatic. Of the 29 gall stone free patients, 26 were asymptomatic and six complained of persistent abdominal pain similar to that before treatment. Seven other patients rendered pain free still complained of various abdominal symptoms including bloating, cramps, indigestion, nausea, and dyspepsia.

After reading this article, I am suspicious that the symptoms suffered by many of these patients had nothing to do with the gall stones.

The fact that some had apparently improved after cholecystolithotripsy does not establish that the procedure should have been done in the first place. Improvement could have been due to the painful placebo response of the cholecystolithotripsy.

Before evaluating this study we need to know the indications for cholecystolithotripsy. Some of the patients had persistent abdominal pain similar to that before treatment. This raises the important question: Were the symptoms which permitted entry into this trial due to the gall stones? Persistent right upper quadrant abdominal pain commonly occurs in the absence of gall stones and may be due to a functional disorder of the upper gastrointestinal tract.1 Furthermore, several studies have clearly shown that the prevalence of dyspepsia is similar in those who have and do not have gall stones.2

It seems unlikely that cholecystitis (is there such a thing as chronic cholecystitis?) was an indication for lithotripsy since such patients are quite ill and usually require surgery fairly urgently. Their gall bladders would be unlikely to contract. We are not told that any of the patients were jaundiced or had pancreatitis, so the only remaining indication for removal of the gall stones would be biliary colic. It is possible, of course, that all the patients reported on had typical biliary colic, but this is not stated in the article.

Health ministries, third party payers, and increasingly the public are questioning the introduction of expensive new technology without proper validation. In this study cholecystolithotripsy seems to have taken place on some patients without indications for gall stone removal. Claims for the improvement of symptoms other than biliary colic are not substantiated by a double blind trial and go against experience.2 If, indeed, there were valid indications for lithotripsy in the patients reported, then the authors should have made these indications explicit in the article. If not, one wonders if the patients would have been better off with no treatment at all.

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BOOK REVIEWS


The modern medical curriculum lays increasing emphasis on ‘communication skills.’ When I first encountered this jargon, I thought it something to do with computers, but was reassured to find that it simply means the ability to talk to people. Either as a consequence of this educational initiative, or of the ‘holistic’ philosophy behind it, medical students seem to be better at history taking. This should be good news for gastroenterology in which, more than in any other branch of internal medicine (if only because the physical signs of disease are so often vague or absent), we need to ‘listen to the patient – he will tell you the diagnosis’ holds true. But it isn’t, because the modern science of gastroenterology attracts the gadget minded and the would be surgeon and rebels
But was the procedure really necessary?

W G Thompson

Gut 1991 32: 1430
doi: 10.1136/gut.32.11.1430

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