Adult coeliac disease, dermatitis herpetiformis and smoking

EDITOR.—Snook and colleagues report that cigarette smoking seems to exert a protective effect against the development of adult coeliac disease (Gut 1996; 39: 60–2). Dermatitis herpetiformis is an uncommon, blistering skin disease of unknown aetiology. Importantly, gluten sensitive enteropathy is present in almost 100% of patients after gluten loading, giving rise to the hypothesis that coeliac disease (an age of onset of around 100 years) and dermatitis herpetiformis (the median age of onset was 59–12). Because the enteropathy is usually mild in dermatitis herpetiformis, overt malabsorption is rare. We therefore wanted to assess whether the finding by Snook et al was also present in patients with dermatitis herpetiformis, as this would provide further evidence of a link between dermatitis herpetiformis and coeliac disease.

Twenty nine patients, 20 male and nine female, with dermatitis herpetiformis were identified. Only patients with histological and direct immunofluorescence findings compatible with a diagnosis of dermatitis herpetiformis were included in the study. Patients were interviewed to identify their cigarette smoking history, permitting determination of the number of days smoked (one pack year=20 cigarettes a day for one year). Twenty nine patients in whom controls with atopic eczema were also recruited and cigarette smoking history determined in the same way. A Wilcoxon sign ranked matched pair test was used to analyse pack year smoking data. The median age at the time of the study was 59–12 years (SD 14–12). We found that patients with dermatitis herpetiformis smoked significantly less than controls (p<0.0009, median difference 10 pack years).

This finding has not been reported before and gives further support to the hypothesis that dermatitis herpetiformis and coeliac disease may be points on a spectrum of disease. Our study was on a small series of patients and it would, therefore, be useful to corroborate these findings in a larger cohort. Why patients with dermatitis herpetiformis and adult coeliac disease smoke less is uncertain. Snook et al suggest that, in adult coeliac disease, smoking may be important and this would also be relevant to dermatitis herpetiformis. Most patients with dermatitis herpetiformis and coeliac disease will have been referred to a dietitian and so receiving counselling and general health advice may be a possible contributing factor, although this seems an unlikely explanation for the magnitude of the effect seen. Further confirmation of this finding is needed, both in coeliac disease and dermatitis herpetiformis.

Risk factors for pancreatitis

EDITOR.—Dr S De Beaux, Carter, and Palmer in their thought provoking editorial have examined a number of possible risk factors for pancreatitis occurring after ERCP (Gut 1996; 39: 799–800).

However, several studies have failed to show that factors commonly thought to be at fault do actually present a risk, for example, the use of contrast agents. Of course, the pancreas, bacteraemia, etc. phenol of Oddi manometry does seem to be a risk factor as does sphencterotomy for stones, although this does not seem to be related to duct clearance. It is clear therefore that pancreatitis is a disease that is not uniformly for diagnosing pancreatic duct involvement, the cause of post-ERCP pancreatitis is unknown. We would like to propose the possibility that glutaraldehyde residues remain after duct closure, could be at fault.

This hypothesis is based on our own experience following an outbreak of pancreatitis related to changes in our duct closure method. Our usual rate of diagnostic pancreatic duct involvement of approximate 1% increased to 15% with a change from manual cleaning and use of the Keymed autodisinfector (Keymed, Stock Road, Southend on Sea), to an automatic circular circuit washing machine (Custome Ultrasomcs Automatic System 83–2, Specialist Endoscopy Equipment, Ormskirk, Lancashire). After a worrying six week period and based on the knowledge that even small doses of glutaraldehyde are toxic to mucous membranes and colonic epithelium, we very carefully examined our change in cleaning practice. It became apparent that rinsing the elevator wire channel (forceps changer) was not done sufficiently. Our practice now is to rinse the elevator wire channel manually with at least six rinses of sterile water. Since then, examination of our pancreatic duct infection rate for the past year has shown that of 309 ERCPs, there was one case of pancreatitis in 174 diagnostic ERCPs (including 123 pancreaticograms). An incidence of 0–6%. The one case in a 15 year old girl with recurrent pancreatitis since infancy. Of 74 patients undergoing stent insertion, with or without access sphincterotomy, there was one case of pancreatitis (1–3%). There were four cases of high pancreatitis among 61 sphincterotomies for stones (an incidence of 6–5%). This appeared unrelated to success or otherwise of duct closure. Four cases were mild with discharge of the patient from hospital within five days. One case where duct clearance was inadequate was however, severe.

We believe that there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that glutaraldehyde might be implicated in the aetiology of post-diagnostic ERCP pancreatitis. Proof of this hypothesis will require an animal model, but in the meantime we recommend that units carrying out ERCP, carefully evaluate their rinsing procedures and consider the possibility of changing them if they are found to be less than satisfactory.

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Letters

LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR


Gastric ulcers

EDITOR.—Interest in the effects of corticoste-

roids on the healing of gastric ulcers goes back a long time. The paper by M Carpani deKaski and colleagues is a valuable contribution to this area, which demonstrates that corticosteroids do reduce the reparative repair of the epithelium in experimental cryoprobe-induced ulcerations in the rat stomach (Gut 1995; 37: 613–6). The earliest work they cite on the healing of experimental ulcer with prednisone is that of Kuwayama and Eastwood, published in 1988.1

But their memories do not go back far enough. My colleagues, with Franklin Holland and I presented what we believed was the only extant report at that time (1957) on the effects of cortisone and corticotropin on the healing of gastric ulcers in an experimental study in the dog.2 Using explants of the entire gastric wall of this species transplanted to the anterior abdomi-

nal wall, and protected by a mechanical metal guard, we induced circular ulcers whose diameters ranged from 5 to 25 mm and included the muscularis mucosae. Doses of cortisone of 10 or 20 mg/kg, or ACTH of 5 or 10 mg/kg, significantly delayed the healing but did not completely inhibit it. So we believed, on presentation of this previous report on some of the mechanisms that may be operative in the healing of human gastric ulcers is indeed a welcome addition to our knowledge.

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