Letters

Re: Intra-alveolar haemorrhage in sudden infant death syndrome: a cause for concern?

I have read with considerable interest the paper by N Yukawa et al concerning intra-alveolar haemorrhage in infant deaths,1 and Professor Berry’s editorial response. I also applaud the authors’ ambition to bring some scientific objectivity to this controversial issue.

The results of their investigation are extremely difficult to interpret, however, because the authors have carried out morphometric analysis of the area of the alveolar space occupied by blood when biased by some prior knowledge of the diagnostic category of each case. The authors concede their impression that pulmonary haemorrhage is a marker of asphyxia. Armed with this preconception and the knowledge of the initial diagnosis made in a case, there is an unavoidable tendency to “select” for analysis from a microscopic field a “random” alveolus that supports the observer’s opinion. Indeed, each case was placed in an initial diagnostic category based no doubt to some extent on the subjective degree of pulmonary haemorrhage. Furthermore, we are not told how many alveoli were analysed from each case, nor whether lung tissue was sampled randomly at postmortem examination.

Their data in this paper would have been more robust if each case had been assigned a diagnostic category based on criteria excluding the histology, only after blinded morphometric analysis of lung tissue. Resolution of the hypothesis that lung haemorrhage in a baby is a marker of upper airway obstruction awaits such rigorous scrutiny.

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The authors reply

I have read with considerable interest the article “Gynaecological effects of tamoxifen” by Sezgin M Ismail.2 The article reviews the current knowledge on gynaecological side effects by summarising studies measuring cervical, endometrial and ovarian effects in women taking tamoxifen.

Ismail cites a small study of 16 women and implies a relation between ovarian cancer and tamoxifen use. In fact, the literature suggests that the incidence of ovarian cancer in women on tamoxifen is not increased and might even be lower than in women not on tamoxifen.3,4 In the national surgical adjuvant breast and bowel project P-1 (NSABP-P-1) trial, there were 11 ovarian cancers in the placebo arm and 10 ovarian cancers in the tamoxifen arm.5

The author states that there is still uncertainty regarding the aggressiveness of endometrial cancers that develop in women on tamoxifen. Reviewing three small studies (n = 15, n = 6 and n = 15), Ismail notes that a significant proportion of women taking tamoxifen were diagnosed with endometrial cancers that carried a poor prognosis. In fact, the author goes on to note that a larger case control study that noted an “excess of well differentiated tumors in tamoxifen users”.6,7 To mention that two other sizable studies support this claim. The bulk of the evidence points to uterine cancers seen in women on tamoxifen being early stage, well differentiated, and highly curable.8,9 Furthermore, the author comments that the “tamoxifen treated endometrium is notoriously hard to biopsy” and suggests that tamoxifen exposure complicates the biopsy procedure.

Although tamoxifen is associated with endometrial thickening, it is not associated with difficulties in sampling the uterine cavity. Tamoxifen does not obscure or complicate sampling the uterine cavity, and neither does it obscure the pathologist’s interpretation of the specimen.

To suggest that tamoxifen is related to ovarian cancer or an aggressive subtype of endometrial cancer in the absence of new data is incorrect, and will only confuse and concern women who are taking tamoxifen for legitimate medical reasons.

5 Love RR. The national surgical adjuvant breast and bowel project P-1 study of endometrial cancer. Cancer Causes Control 1997;8:559–64.
6 Love RR. The national surgical adjuvant breast and bowel project P-1 study of endometrial cancer: review of all patients. Cancer Causes Control 1997;8:565–70.

The author replies

I am pleased at the interest shown by Jerry P Lewis in my recent article and regret that I must refute all the points he has raised.

(1) Tamoxifen and ovarian cancer: far from implying a relation between breast cancer and tamoxifen use, my article emphasises that the study cited is small, that women with breast cancer might have a familial predisposition to ovarian cancer, and that the link between tamoxifen and ovarian cancer might even be lower than in women not on tamoxifen.5 Love RR. The national surgical adjuvant breast and bowel project P-1 study had it not been terminated prematurely.

(2) Tamoxifen and endometrial cancer: I would reiterate my statement that “there is still some uncertainty about the pathological features of tamoxifen associated endometrial cancer”. As clearly stated in my article, a number of sizeable studies have been unable to show a definitive association between tamoxifen and poorly differentiated or aggressive endometrial carcinomas, but a number of small studies have raised this possibility. Once raised, this possibility cannot be ignored, however inconvenient it might be for Zeneca Pharmaceuticals. The uncertainty raised by these small studies can only be settled by a large, well designed, long term, prospective study such as the American breast cancer prevention study had it not been terminated prematurely.

(3) Biopsy of tamoxifen treated endometrium: I disagree with Dr Lewis’s assertion that tamoxifen is not associated with difficulties in sampling the uterine cavity. As mentioned in my article, Cohen and colleagues were able to obtain adequate endometrial tissue in only 29% of tamoxifen treated breast cancer patients even though 99% of the women had ultrasonographically thickened endometrium. The findings of these authors accord well with our own experience here in Cardiff.

There is no doubt that tamoxifen is an effective drug that is immensely useful in the setting of breast cancer. Like all effective drugs, however, it has important side effects. In the interests of the patients I challenge the manufacturers of tamoxifen to consider financing independent research into these side effects.

Re: Gynaecological effects of tamoxifen

Jerry P Lewis

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