Adolescent development

Advice in ABC of adolescence is potentially misleading

Editor—Christie and Viner say that delayed puberty in boys can be quite distressing but is almost always a normal variant. They say that boys aged 15 or over with a testicular volume of 4 ml or more can be reassured that puberty is beginning and, by inference, do not require referral to a specialist. This advice is potentially misleading.

For all that it is a variant of normality, constitutional delay in growth and puberty can have adverse psychosocial and skeletal consequences. To deny an apubertal teenager the opportunity to choose low dose androgen treatment until he is in his 16th year would be unusual by present standards. Given the likely ensuing timescale, his doctor might as well refer him straight to an endocrinologist instead of a paediatrician. A testicular volume of 4 ml is well within the range found in boys with irreversible hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism and therefore by no means necessarily indicates that puberty is beginning. Many boys with hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism start puberty but fail to progress beyond the early stage. Moreover, a history of cryptorchidism (especially if bilateral) or anosmia should prompt an even earlier referral.

Neither does a family history of pubertal delay necessarily support a diagnosis of constitutional delay in growth and puberty, given the high prevalence of constitutional delay in growth and puberty among first degree relatives of patients with hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism. A recurring theme in the personal stories posted on the www.Kallmanns.org website by men with irreversible hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism is how difficult it was for them as teenagers to screw up the courage to go to see their family doctor about a lack of secondary sexual characteristics. On being told “not to worry, because it’s only pubertal delay,” many felt (or were made to feel) so crushed and foolish that they then put off seeing a doctor until many years later.

Richard Quinton consultant endocrinologist
Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle on Tyne NE3 2NJ
richard.quinton@nuth.nhs.uk

Competing interests: None declared.

Cognitive behaviour therapy for adolescents with chronic fatigue syndrome

Data are insufficient and conclusion inappropriate

Editor—I have concerns about the design and interpretation of the study reported by Stulemeijer et al on cognitive behaviour therapy for adolescents with chronic fatigue syndrome. The trial arms were not matched for the number of contacts with healthcare professionals. Experience from larger and more carefully controlled randomised interventional trials of patients with chronic fatigue syndrome has clearly shown that short term improvement in symptoms is related directly to the maintenance of regular contacts with healthcare professionals rather than the therapeutic effect of the intervention itself and consequently, the improvement is not sustained once the contact has been lost.

The authors did not offer patients in their waiting list the opportunity to meet therapists regularly for five months but without having cognitive behaviour therapy. Few follow up data on patients in the intervention arm show that the specific treatment benefit was carried forward without regular contacts with the therapists. A cautious approach is essential in inferring direct benefit from cognitive behaviour therapy in the intervention arm (as opposed to short term benefit from close contact with therapists).

The level of activity in some of their participants whom the authors considered to be passive remained unclear.

In their summary points the authors claim that cognitive behaviour therapy was effective by challenging patients’ belief that activity aggravated symptoms. Epidemiological data, however, confirm that fatigue made worse by exercise is a characteristic feature of chronic fatigue syndrome. Encouraging activity in disabled patients is entirely different from challenging an accepted feature of the disease. A rhetorical approach towards a characteristic feature of adolescents at risk of chronic fatigue syndrome does not help recovery and only encourages therapeutic failure.

Abhijit Chaudhuri
senior lecturer in clinical neurosciences
University of Glasgow, Institute of Neurological Sciences, Glasgow G51 4TF
ac5@p@udel.gla.ac.uk

Competing interests: None declared.

References


Author’s reply

Editor—Quinton acknowledges that apparent pubertal delay is a normal variant in most boys seen by general practitioners or by paediatric endocrinologists. However, he says that our advice, that boys aged 15 or over with a testicular volume of 4 ml or more can be reassured that puberty is beginning, is potentially misleading, as 4 ml testes are within the range found in adult men with the uncommon condition of irreversible hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism.

Our advice is appropriate for boys who present to general practitioners. The absence of any signs of puberty, or lack of further progression through puberty over the next six months should, of course, be viewed with suspicion and merit referral to a paediatric endocrinology service for full investigation, including consideration of conditions such as hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism.

Quinton thinks that even the normal variant of constitutional delay in growth and puberty can have adverse psychosocial consequences. However, newer larger studies have shown that boys who are small or whose adolescence is delayed are not psychologically disadvantaged. Rather than overtreating numbers of normal boys, we focus on improving the communication skills of general practitioners in discussing issues such as pubertal timing with young people.

Russell Viner consultant in adolescent medicine and endocrinology
University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Great Ormond Street Hospital NHS Trust, London WIT 3AA
rviner@ich.ucl.ac.uk

Competing interests: None declared.
from cognitive behaviour therapy and were all patients. We believe that our study clearly have one treatment that leads to recovery in helping the patient. Relatively active patients, based on actometry, activities in a systematic and safe way. Our regulate and increase their physical and other activity related cognitions, activity regulation the condition, is dysfunctional in the longer term, and maintain activity avoidance and symptoms. By challenging these and other activity related cognitions, activity regulation is possible. Thus, patients are taught to activity related cognitions, activity regulation the first phase of the condition, is dysfunctional in the longer term, and maintain activity avoidance and symptoms. By challenging these and other activity related cognitions, activity regulation is possible. Thus, patients are taught to

Early epidurals increase caesarean rate, meta-analysis shows

Editor—The study reported by Mayor in her news item uses the term “neuropsychal analgesia” and claims that early epidurals do not increase the rate of caesarean deliveries. This is confusing as the study was not of early epidural analgesia versus patient-controlled intrauterine analgesia during labour. 

While Declercq et al think that research should be done to elucidate whether the risks of primary caesarean delivery in cases of no indicated risk will be offset by associated benefits, we hope that an equal amount of time and effort will be spent on developing and testing methods that might safely prevent, or lower, rates of caesarean delivery performed for this and the other more traditional indications.

James M Nicholson assistant professor james.nicholson@uphs.upenn.edu Lisa C Kellar first year fellow Peter F Cronholm clinical instructor Department of Family Practice and Community Medicine, 2 Gates, Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, 3400 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

Competing interests: None declared.

Ten Hoor et al have focused on non-specific serotonergic antidepressants. In attempting to describe the new adverse drug reaction, Clomipramine, a potent serotonin reuptake Clomipramine and neuroleptic Clomipramine is not a neuroleptic and therefore by definition cannot cause this syndrome (any more than it can cause antidopaminergic reactions). The description is consistent with serotonin toxicity, a well described adverse reaction to serotonergic antidepressants. In attempting to describe a new adverse drug reaction, Clomipramine, a potent serotonin reuptake inhibitor, has been associated with hyperthermia, but was more correctly labelled a serotonin toxicity. Muscle rigidity and raised muscle enzyme activities also occur in severe serotonin toxicity.

Neuroleptic malignant syndrome is an idiosyncratic reaction to therapeutic doses of neuroleptic agents. A pragmatic clinical approach is to withdraw the drug and support the patient if necessary. Patients should be told about the possible occurrence of this reaction and asked to stop the therapy and seek medical advice if they experience these symptoms. 

Competing interests: None declared.

1 Mayor S. Epidurals do not lead to more caesarean sections, study shows. BMJ 2005;330:393. (8 February.)


description of the syndrome includes four primary features: autonomic lability, hyperthermia (pyrexia) without other cause, extrapyramidal syndrome (cog-wheel or lead pipe rigidity), and encephalopathy. Despite superficial clinical similarities between neuroleptic malignant syndrome and serotonin syndrome, they are usually easily differentiated on the basis of careful neurological examination. Neuroleptic malignant syndrome is associated with lead pipe rigidity, bradykinesia, and other extrapyramidal features. Conversely in serotonin syndrome there is hyperkinesia, hyperreflexia, and clonus.

Descriptions of adverse reactions to psychotropic drugs need detailed clinical descriptions of neuromuscular, central, and autonomic features. Using ambiguous or non-specific criteria to label adverse reactions as a particular syndrome while ignoring the pharmacology of the implicated drug may lead to false associations between particular drugs and clinical syndromes and to inappropriate treatment.

Geoffrey K Ishibest clinical toxicologist
Newcastle Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Edith Street, Waratah, NSW 2308, Australia
gsbite@ferntree.com

Nicholas A Buckley associate professor
Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology, Canberra Hospital, PO Box 11, Woden, ACT 2606, Australia

Competing interests: None declared.


Risks of gene therapy should be weighed against lack of alternatives for many diseases

Levinson and Sternaabach and referenced in our article.1

We described in this patient an earlier diagnosed episode of serotonin syndrome, and no clinical evidence of rigidity was found on that occasion.

In view of the action at dopamine sites of clomipramine, and the statement in the BNF from the BMA and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, we would continue to support our diagnosis of neuroleptic malignant syndrome in this informative case.

Alison Haddow consultant in old age psychiatry
Royal Cornhill Hospital, Aberdeen AB25 2ZH
alison.haddow@gper.Gramrail.net.scot.nhs.uk

Martin Wilson clinical lecturer
Department of Medicine for the Elderly, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB25 2DD

Competing interests: None declared.

both arms in proportions reflective of the population that will perform the operations. Academics can analyse the “expertise” subgroups, while the rest of us can look at the overall results to determine how an operation will really perform.

Eric Lim  specialist registrar
Papworth Hospital, Papworth Everard, Cambridge CB3 8RE
ericlim@cvset.org

Competing interests: None declared.


Surgical research shares many similarities with psychotherapy research

Editor—Of course the expertise based randomised trial, mooted for surgical proce-dures by Devereaux et al., is the norm in psychotherapy research when comparing two different psychotherapies. A similar debate on the interpretation of such trials occurred in the psychotherapy literature.1

Research in surgery and psychotherapy share other similarities beyond having to account for practitioner expertise. There is the issue of blindness—hard to achieve for both patient and doctor in these disciplines—as well as the “why test it, it’s obvious it makes a difference” argument. Both disciplines could learn from each other about the design and analysis of clinical research.

Simon Hatcher  senior lecturer in psychiatry
Department of Psychological Medicine, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1, New Zealand
shatcher@auckland.ac.nz

Competing interests: None declared.


Target SHOs and registrars for communication skills training

Editor—Kidd et al argue that undergraduates need to learn clinical and communication skills side by side.1 Every doctor needs communication skills, from pathologists to surgeons and physicians. In the Netherlands undergraduates spend considerable time on how to communicate with patients. But I think that this is targeting the wrong group, and time is taken away from essential preclinical and clinical studies. Students learn to talk to simulated patients, with, for example, a Duke’s D colon cancer, at a time in their studies when they don’t know what cancer is, what a Duke’s D colon cancer means, and what the impact is on a patient. Students receive this kind of training in their second year and have forgotten about it when they become senior house officers.

Senior house officers (SHOs) and registrars should be doing the training. We do the damage in our “bad news” talks. We know what we are talking about, and we do it daily. We should be the ones filmed on camera and evaluated. This should be done with cli-nicians with experience, together with “communicators,” and not only by people who studied communication skills who have never had to tell anybody that they have cancer and are dying, or let a family know that a patient has died. The impact of this is greater than most people can imagine, and I think poor communication on those sub-jects often reflects the inability of the doctor to deal with his or her own feelings.

The same goes for communicating with colleagues. In my hospital, emergency departments are now filmed in major trauma cases, and the people on the floor are actually the ones being filmed. Evaluation is then done by the surgeons, together with a psychologist.

Communication skills are essential, but not at the expense of medical students’ pre-clinical and clinical curriculum. The target groups should therefore be senior house officers and specialist registrars.

Erik T Walbeehm  specialist registrar plastic surgery
Rotterdam, 3022 BC, Netherlands
etwalbeehm@mac.com

Competing interests: None declared.


Old docs and new tricks

Seasoned doctors may be better than young doctors at some things

Editor—Spurgeon reports that the doctors’ standards of care drop with years in practice.1 When I began clinical practice in the late 1980s I thought that one key to being a “good doc” was keeping up with the latest drugs and technologies. I was then able to see seasoned colleagues who were slow to change.

I then saw many new drugs get pulled from the market (rofecoxib is not the first non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug to be withdrawn) and various medical fads come and go. Evidence based medicine appropriately shed light on the poor evidence available to support most things that physicians do.

Armed with this keener analytical approach, I came to realise that most claims of benefit are greatly exaggerated compared with absolute incremental changes and that most patients are not like trial subjects. Although an intervention might benefit a population, it is much less certain that it will benefit the patient who sits before me.

I suspect that seasoned doctors are better than their junior colleagues at some things, and worse at others. Maybe the ability to see the big picture, diagnostically and therapeutically, is enhanced by experience. Meanwhile the emphasis on the newest treatment detail might wane. Perhaps that is a reason why I have conflicting opinions about whether doctors get better with time.

Louis B Jacques  physician
918 Barrancata Cove, Annapolis, MD 21401, USA
JacquesL3@georgetown.edu

Competing interests: None declared.


Efficiency is important

Editor—In British general practice, where everyday demand exceeds capacity, the efficient general practitioner is king. That is one thing that experience should bring. If all general practitioners followed every guide-line the system would collapse, and although a few patients would have exemplary care, many would have no care at all as they would just not get seen because they would find the wait intolerable. Perhaps this is what happens now in secondary care, where care delivered is often very good but access is less and less.

A perceived practice is often developed for a “one issue patient.” Reality means multi-issue patients, who themselves have limited ability to follow all the investigation and “treatment” recommended by the single issue academic establishment. Many indications for treatment are immediately met with contraindications. Experience allows general practitioners to cut back on too much excess investigation and treatment while still striving to meet the guidelines.

Protecting the patient from the iatro-genic harm of excess health care used to be a core skill of the general practitioner. Is this being taken away from us as well?

A system that fails to value the soft end points and often efficient and effective care that experience brings will have to restruct-ure to meet the demand and that inevitably will lead to a hugely expanded system with resource implications. I am not disputing the findings of the paper reported by Spurgeon, that the standard of care may drop with years spent in practice,1 but the immediate common sense logic of the hypothesis and conclusions make me advise to proceed down this route with caution. Being a doctor is already a difficult job. Being advised that all your thoughtful patient experience has actually made you a worse doctor is demoti-vating. Perhaps experienced doctors and patients would have a different set of criteria about what good care is?

Graeme M Mackenzie  general practitioner
Whitehaven CA28 7RG
graeme.mackenzie@gp-a82041.nhs.uk

Competing interests: None declared.