Sildenafil for "blue babies". Such unlicensed drug use might be justified as last resort

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Undisclosed payments in research

Patients have the right to know motivations of researchers

Editor—Rao and Sant Cassia discussed the ethics of undisclosed payments to doctors recruiting patients in clinical trials.¹ For many years now the greater Glasgow community and primary care local research ethics committee has insisted that reference to doctors’ payment is included in the patient information sheet that goes to all potential participants. I object to the payment being hidden behind such phrases as “your doctor’s research fund will be paid,” which a number of medical research ethics committees allow, and I note that the phrase “for the additional work involved” often appears.

Although the NHS and NHS Scotland are the remit of two different parliaments, cross border acceptance of approval by medical research ethics committees exists. Patients are also likely to see the NHS as a whole and the ethical principles of doctors and other healthcare professionals as not having regional variations. In the interests of equality (as well as informed consent) British guidelines need to be developed on this and other minimum requirements of information to be given to patients. This could include the amount of payment. My quick, non-random survey of my non-medical family and friends shows that the size of the payment and the potential overall income are underestimated.

Other types of personal gain exist for researchers that I also believe potential participants should know about—when the work forms part of the requirements for a degree. Some people who already have a professional qualification and who are using “their” patients in research do not always believe that it is necessary to inform patients that they are registered for a degree for which this research is necessary. Such research may not always reach publication and may be designed as a learning experience rather than a complete piece of research. If patients are to be expected to take part in research for altruistic reasons they have a right to know what reasons motivate the people carrying out the research.

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¹ Rao JN, Sant Cassia LJ. Ethics of undisclosed payments to doctors recruiting patients in clinical trials. BMJ 2002;325:36-7. [0 July]

Guidelines already exist

Editor—I write as a member and former chairman of the ethical issues committee of the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine, a former medical director of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, and a member of two research ethics committees. Rao and Sant Cassia make several points that disregard the truth about phase IV clinical trials and do not differentiate between phase IV clinical trials and the safety assessment of marketed medicines, both of which are subject to strict guidelines.¹ These should be familiar to members of research ethics committees but are clearly unfamiliar to the authors of this paper.

Phase IV clinical trials, soon to be covered by the national legislation that follows the adoption of the European directive on clinical trials, are scientific projects already subject to ethical review. They are conducted in accordance with protocols submitted to medical and local research ethics committees as appropriate, and payments to be made are clearly included in the application for ethical review. Neither they nor safety assessment studies are designed solely to familiarise doctors with new and recently licensed medicines. They may well be required by the licensing authority to be conducted to establish a more robust safety database for a new medicine.

Rao and Sant Cassia seem to be ignorant of what they can already do about the concerns they express. This year’s BMA annual meeting endorsed the need for the suggested fee for clinical research to be widely published so that research ethics committees, among others, can have up to date independent advice on an agreed benchmark for payment to doctors taking part. Every phase IV study sponsored by a pharmaceutical company must be submitted to the appropriate research ethics committee(s), which can turn down an application if the payment is thought to be coercive. Studies into the safety assessment of marketed medicines do not need review by research ethics committees, but a BMA suggested payment exists for these, too. If a third party believes that a study is a marketing exercise masquerading as a research project or a safety assessment study, a complaint can be referred to the Prescription Medicine Code of Practice Authority and the company sanctioned if the complaint is upheld.

I agree that undisclosed payments to doctors recruiting patients in clinical trials would be unethical. However, payments must be disclosed to research ethics committees, which must therefore ensure that disclosure is complete and what is disclosed is acceptable.

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¹ Rao JN, Sant Cassia LJ. Ethics of undisclosed payments to doctors recruiting patients in clinical trials. BMJ 2002;325:36-7. [0 July]

Sildenafil for “blue babies”

Such unlicensed drug use might be justified as last resort

Editor—We were disappointed to hear that a doctor in India has been criticised for treating pulmonary hypertension in three neonates (so called blue babies) with the phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitor sildenafil (Viagra), a drug not licensed for this purpose.²

Many drugs are widely and appropriately used outside their product licence.² Such prescribing practice is common in adult medicine, but is particularly prevalent in paediatrics because companies rarely undertake the work necessary to gain a licence for children. The decision to prescribe outwith a drug’s licence should be supported by evidence of safety and potential benefit and, when possible, by a reasonable body of supporting professional opinion.

Of course, controlled clinical trials should be performed when possible to evaluate new treatments for specific indications. But these data are not always available, and then clinicians must make difficult decisions as to whether other information, such as efficacy and safety in other groups of
patients, justifies unlicensed drug use. Subsequently, case reports should be published, facilitating scientific debate and informing the design of clinical trials.

Evidence is growing that sildenafil acts as a vasodilator in the pulmonary circulation and is effective in lowering pulmonary artery pressure in pulmonary arterial hypertension. This effect has been shown in adults with pulmonary hypertension and healthy volunteers with pulmonary hypertension induced by hypoxia.

Intravenous sildenafil also normalised pulmonary artery pressure in an animal model of neonatal pulmonary hypertension.

The evidence currently available is not sufficient generally to recommend the use of sildenafil in neonates with pulmonary hypertension. Assuming, however, that sildenafil was used as a last resort, after standard treatment, we believe that there are sufficient data to support the actions of this doctor. Perhaps the publicity that has arisen about this action will encourage further clinical research into the potential of inhibiting phosphodiesterase type 5 as a treatment for neonatal pulmonary hypertension, which may ultimately result in wider benefit to patients.

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Ethics, conscience, and science have to be balanced against limited resources

Editor—The unlicensed use of sildenafil (Viagra) by an Indian doctor to save “blue babies” has recently been the topic of a heated debate. Before passing any judgment it is important to note that most neonatal nurseries in the developing countries cannot afford either to document or to treat persistent pulmonary hypertension in newborn infants by the currently accepted standards. Access to pulse oximetry and cardiology echocardiography is difficult, and very few units are equipped for ventilation and surfactant therapy.

Transfer to regional centres is almost impossible given the lack of neonatal transport services. Advocating a theory of failure of conventional management before resorting to experimental treatments after informed consent is easy. It must, however, not be forgotten that the use of hyperventilation, muscle paralysis, bicarbonate infusion, and specific vasodilators such as magnesium sulphate, prostacycline, glyceryl trinitrate, and sodium nitroprusside in the conventional management of persistent pulmonary hypertension in newborn infants is not based on evidence from any randomised controlled trials. The use of the most popular non-specific pulmonary vasodilator tadalafil has also been serendipitous, stemming from the original case report of persistence of the fetal circulation in 1969 rather than from controlled studies of its efficacy, kinetics, or safety.

The current expensive gold standard—using specific pulmonary vasodilator treatment and inhaled nitric oxide—is unlikely to be available or affordable in developing countries in the near future. Moreover, nitric oxide has also not proved to be the single magic bullet for persistent pulmonary hypertension in newborn infants. Nearly 20-30% of cases do not respond to nitric oxide, especially those with severe parenchymal lung disease (as in meconium aspiration and pneumonia) or pulmonary hypoplasia (as in congenital diaphragmatic hernia). The recent addition of adenosine, pentoxifylline, and dipridamolone as possible therapeutic options for persistent pulmonary hypertension in newborn infants is also based on case reports or series rather than randomised controlled trials.

Given the lack of resources, a conscientious doctor in a developing country may unsurprisingly resort to an experimental but potentially promising treatment in a desperate attempt to save a blue baby with possible persistent pulmonary hypertension when conventional treatments have failed. The issue of defining appropriate conventional treatments for persistent pulmonary hypertension in newborn infants in developing countries is extremely complex.

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Letters


Making the best of health advocates and interpreters

Telepho n e interpreting is not an acceptable solution

Editor—I agree with Adam’s assertion that it is unacceptable to neglect to use interpreters with non-English speaking patients. As she acknowledges, telephone interpreting is not ideal and should be used only if there is no other solution—for example, out of hours or in an emergency. Telephone interpreting does not allow any checking on the quality of the translation unless you are using a telephone with a loudspeaker or two handsets.

In an ideal world interpreters would all be university trained and completely reliable, but good interpreters in most of the languages used by refugees are few, most being self taught. So keeping an eye on key words used, length of delivery, tone of voice, and other markers is crucially important for an adequate and complete interpretation.

Telephone interpreting is also impractical during examinations. It interrupts the flow and is not conducive to building rapport between doctor and patient. To most patients (and doctors) it seems somewhat artificial.

Since refugees were first assimilated in Glasgow in April 2000 our practice has provided medical care to refugees. Currently we have about 3200 refugees and asylum seekers registered with us. We arrange about 160-200 appointments weekly with (face to face) interpreters. We now have few (if any) difficulties in accessing interpreters, maybe because we refused any and all involvement with telephone interpreting services.

Patient focused approach may help

Editor—The debate on making the best use of health advocates and interpreters can be broadened by considering the point of view of non-English speaking patients. In Adam’s second scenario, in which a distressed non-English speaker wishes to terminate her pregnancy, the patient may prefer her general practitioner to use a telephone interpreter rather than talk face to face with an interpreter or advocate.

Some non-English speakers take great comfort from the anonymity of a telephone interpreter, particularly in small or closely knit ethnic communities. One of the factors contributing to the patient’s distress in this scenario could be cultural or social pressures from within her community. If the patient is forced to talk to her general practitioner with another member of her community in the room, even if that person is a professional interpreter, she may feel unable to speak openly and honestly.

Another key issue is the number of non-English speakers who have health problems but never see a healthcare professional. The main reason is that non-English speakers are unable to access healthcare services by themselves. Either they must rely on friends or family members to help them or they must simply turn up and hope that a receptionist can put them in contact with an interpreter, health advocate, or bilingual member of staff.

At EFTI we are talking to a number of primary care trusts and health authorities about a new service that allows non-English speakers far greater access to healthcare services. A series of telephone hotlines have
Homosexual related legislation does not reduce suicidal intent in sexual minority groups

Editor—Bagley and D’Augelli contend that suicidal behaviour in bisexual, gay, and lesbian youth is an international problem associated with homophobic legislation.1 Heretofore, no data existed to examine this. I recently found considerable variation in suicidal behaviour by sexual orientation cross culturally.2 I re-examined the data to determine whether variations in suicidal behaviour are associated with national legislation on homosexual (a) adoption, (b) military service, (c) employment, and (d) marriage or domestic partnership.

A more detailed description of participants and methods can be found elsewhere.1,4 Four English speaking countries were selected from the intercontinental sample4 of the males, and it is therefore unreliable.1 Data analysis of a sex difference with age is more complex than simply presenting mean values from uncontrolled populations. Close inspection of the ferritin data in part C of Waalen et al’s study shows a large number of women “falling off” the lower end of the distribution. The haemoglobin difference between the sexes was of the range 15–20 g/l, which represents a significant proportion (30%) of the female distribution having a serum ferritin concentration below the lowest male value. In part B, the transferrin saturation data for 26–55 year old menstruating women show a significant difference in haemoglobin concentration of 15–20 g/l with a transferrin saturation below 20%, the accepted cut-off point for iron deficiency. In postmenopausal women (part D) 29% were affected. Ten per cent were classified as normal (haemoglobin concentration > 120g/l) but were clearly iron deficient on the basis of having transferrin saturations < 10%.

Iron deficiency is a significant and seemingly neglected factor in women’s health. Why should the lower reference level be sex dependent? What compelling evidence is there to support this apparent anomaly? In

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<th>Percentage of people with suicidal ideation and who attempted suicide, by sexual orientation and country, with national index scores for legislative policies on homosexuality, Pearson product moment correlation across countries, and associated probabilities</th>
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<td><strong>Legislation scores</strong></td>
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*P<0.05

We found similar variability in orthopaedics and cardiology. Referral rates can be reduced in many ways. The aim should be for the right patients to have access to the right level of skill at the right time without necessarily going to a hospital. The means to achieve this include better education, more community-based expertise, mature clinical networks, and better use of technology such as clinical decision support (including referral guidelines) and telemedicine. There is plenty of room for improvement.

Tailored exercise is key to preventing falls

Entorr—The role of exercise in effectively preventing falls has had a mixed press. Profound conclusions have been drawn from research studies with severe limitations, including non-selection of those who had falls, brief intervention periods, and exercise of insufficient intensity to stimulate improvement. Many were alarmed by a trial in which those who had falls fell more often after being encouraged to walk—if the authors had prescribed the balance, gait, and strength exercises used in New Zealand before walking, this unfortunate outcome could have been avoided.1 Today, scepticism about the true impact of exercise still remains among professionals and decision makers in the United Kingdom.

The study by Day et al is a welcome addition to the literature countering this alarmist view.1 In the United Kingdom the soon to be published falls management exercise (FaME) trial by Skelton et al found that in women aged over 65 with a history of falls who participated in prolonged specific group exercise, falls decreased by 60% and injuries due to falls by 79%. Prescribed exercises included those used by Campbell et al, as well as dynamic endurance, balance training, floor exercise, and coping strategies after a fall.2 An accredited training course is now available nationally which covers the specific exercises used (see details below). To test these study findings outside the research environment we set up a falls and injury prevention exercise service for people who had had falls and were living in the community (average age 81 years) in London in January 2000. Participants showed significant improvement in several known functional risk factors for falls and injuries, in addition to significantly increased scores in the SF36 domains of social contact, mental health, and change in health. Improvement in functional capacity is directly relevant to quality of life. As one participant said: “I can walk upstairs now. I haven’t been able to walk upstairs for four years. I do my exercises every day at home. I know it’s doing me good.”

Primary care trusts and social services departments are under pressure to promote the independence of their older residents. They would do well not to overlook the broad impact of tailored exercise in this area.


Being difficult is not necessarily a bad thing

Entorr—The tenor of King’s article on dealing with difficult doctors is that being difficult is a bad thing.3 I have two role models, one fictional and one real—Jesus Christ and the little boy who suggested that the emperor was wearing no clothes. They were both probably thought of as being difficult.

George Bernard Shaw said: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”4 The NHS needs more difficult or unreasonable doctors, not fewer.

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Rapid responses
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Guidelines partly explain differences in referral rates

Entorr—Forrest et al provide a useful insight into the variation in specialty referral rates between the United Kingdom and the United States.5 However, their assertion that, given the low referral rates in the United Kingdom relative to the United States, referral guidelines are unlikely to dramatically enhance the capacity of specialties by giving the little boy who suggested that the emperor was wearing no clothes. They were both probably thought of as being difficult.

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