Discussion

Radiosynoviorthosis aims at satisfactory irradiation of the synovium with minimal irradiation of other tissues. Of the yttrium radiocolloids, the silicate is best retained in the knee⁸ and is associated with least chromosomal damage.⁴ Further attempts to reduce extra-articular leakage have included using longer periods of bed rest and encasing the limb in plaster-of-Paris after injection, which considerably increase the nursing work load and the patient's discomfort.

This study has shown that a firm, light splint on a mobilised patient minimises extra-articular spread. The chromosomal damage observed in mobilised patients is comparable with that found in other studies of fully immobilised patients.^{4, 5}

We thank Dr Norman Veall for his continuing encouragement and

support, Mr D G Altman for statistical advice, and Mr D Hinge for technical help.

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(Accepted 26 February 1979)

SHORT REPORTS

Air embolism after accidental removal of intravenous catheter

Serious and even fatal complications of central venous catheterisation have often been described but remain little appreciated. We report a case of air embolism that occurred in unusual circumstances.

Case report

A 38-year-old woman with a long history of depression was admitted to our intensive care unit after an overdose of drugs. She was deeply unconscious with an unstable cardiac rhythm and shortly after admission developed ventricular tachycardia leading to cardiac arrest. She was intubated and ventilated with oxygen and was successfully resuscitated after 15 minutes of external cardiac massage and electrical defibrillation. Ventilation was continued and over the next few days her consciousness improved. Initially she had a peripheral venous drip, but this tissued, so an intravenous catheter was substituted to permit measurement of central venous pressure. It was inserted via an introducer cannula into the right internal jugular. Both the catheter and the introducer were stitched firmly to the skin to prevent accidental removal.

Five days after the cardiac arrest we attempted to wean the patient off the ventilator. She was awake and co-operative, but after an hour sitting up and breathing spontaneously with her nasotracheal tube still in place she became confused and began pulling at the nasogastric tube, endotracheal tube, and central venous line. As her colour deteriorated we decided to resume ventilation. In her confusion she suddenly pulled out the venous catheter, leaving the introducer in the vein. Despite being immediately laid head down on her left side she again suffered cardiac arrest, presumably due to massive air embolus. The electrocardiogram showed acute right heart strain. She was again resuscitated but over three months later remained unconscious, breathing spontaneously but with all the other clinical signs of brain death.

Comment

This case demonstrates the dramatic effect of connecting the internal jugular vein to atmosphere via a 13-gauge introducer cannula; this has a bore of 1.6 mm. The catheter had a male Luer hub, which had originally been firmly engaged in the female hub of the introducer. Nevertheless, the patient disconnected them. The complication might have been prevented by using a different type of catheter. It is feasible to use a long (15 cm) cannula in the right internal jugular vein, passing down the right innominate vein into the superior vena cava. Alternatively, a catheter may be introduced over a guide by the Seldinger technique. In either case a stiff catheter with a sharp, tapered end must be used, with the serious risk of perforating the great veins. In our unit we usually use a soft, flexible 20 cm catheter with a rounded end and side holes, which is unlikely to damage veins.¹ This type of catheter is inserted through a plastic cannula which remains in place around the external end of the catheter, providing valuable reinforcement of the vulnerable junction of the catheter with its hub. Correct location of the catheter depends in part on a firm attachment to the hub of the cannula, so that the two will move only as a single unit. We strongly recommend withdrawing this combined unit so that

the tip of the introducer no longer lies within the vein, thus preventing the possibility of air entering if the catheter alone is removed. We also believe that catheters should always be firmly stitched in place and that all devices attached to them, such as drip sets or central venous pressure manometers, should have locking hubs.

Mr H G Wallace, who makes our venous catheters, has produced a modified design incorporating a locking ring on the catheter hub, which is also much easier to stitch down. This should prevent the catheter being removed accidentally without also removing the introducer (see figure).

Designs of catheter and introducer. Top: Present design, with simple male-female junction between catheter and introducer. Bottom: New design with addition of locking ring.

We are grateful to Mr H G Wallace for his prompt response in modifying the design of the catheter and introducer.

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(Accepted 9 February 1979)

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Digoxin dosage in infants

In infants digoxin is a life-saving medication, but the demarcation line between therapeutic and toxic doses is narrow, and the clinical response to the drug varies greatly. Hence it is crucial to assess how the child has responded to the first dose before giving any more.

Regimen

At the Radcliffe Infirmary our practice is to use digoxin injection paediatric BP, 100 mg/l. The initial loading dose advised is 10 µg/kg (0.1 ml/kg) intramuscularly every four hours to a total of four to six doses—that is,