PRACTICE OBSERVED

Essays on Practice

Cervical screening: a do it yourself job for general practice

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Cancer of the lung and of the cervix are the only common malignancies that are amenable to preventive measures on a large scale. Whereas lung cancer is prevented by stopping smoking (primary prevention), the progression of premalignant cervical neoplasia can be arrested by screening (secondary prevention). Primary prevention is preferable to secondary, but in cervical cancer it is hampered by uncertainty as to the exact cause. Cervical cancer is known to be commoner in heavy smokers. More importantly, it is known to be associated with the use of oral contraceptives, multiple sexual relationships, and pregnancy outside marriage.¹ The confidence with which doctors discourage smoking and advise reducing the consumption of animal fat evaporates when confronted by these uncomfortable associations. Sexual mores are a *no go* area into which educational, medical, and governmental intervention is difficult and largely unacceptable. Consequently, secondary prevention by screening is likely to remain the chief means of fighting cervical cancer.

The screening programme in north east Scotland has shown that results matching those in Iceland, Finland, parts of the United States, Canada, and Denmark can be achieved in Britain.²⁻⁴ But it is disappointing that in Britain mortality from cancer of the cervix has only dropped from 2434 deaths in 1968 to 2068 in 1980.⁵ The reason is not that too few smears are being done. In the number rose from 687 000 in 1965 to 2 982 000 in 1980, and general practitioners increased their contribution 20-fold during this period.⁶ That all this industry has not resulted in a substantial reduction in mortality is not due to a failure to provide facilities but to a failure to promote them among groups most at risk, particularly women aged 40-49. An audit of my own patients showed that 6.8% of eligible women over 35 years have never had a smear, and 24.5% have not had one for over five years.

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Whose responsibility?

There is no shortage of policy making and recommendations on cervical screening.⁷⁻¹¹ But now that the recall system that was operated through the National Health Service Central Register has been abandoned there is no national system for implementing comprehensive screening. A working model exists in the form of the Eastern Family Practitioner Committee Computer Unit, which is funded by the Department of Health and Social Security, but it may take up to 10 years for all family practitioner committee databases to become computerised and provide a national recall system. Until then the initiative lies largely with general practices. As a high proportion of patients with invasive cervical cancer have never had a smear,¹² the immediate priority is recruiting women into a screening programme, especially those between 35 and 65 who have never been screened.¹³

How to do it

In *Cervical Screening: a Practical Guide* Ann McPherson describes clearly how a recruitment and recall system may be organised in general practice.¹⁴ Reluctant general practitioners cannot plead expense and lack of a computer as reasons for continuing to screen haphazardly. Neither can they plead lack of time. The 70% reimbursement for employees and the present fee system for quinquennial smears should more than cover the cost of identifying women who have not been screened from the age-sex register and setting up a nurse's clinic, where not only smears may be done but other preventive measures undertaken, such as detecting hypertension, teaching breast self examination and giving advice on smoking and weight. A substantial minority of patients prefer a nurse or midwife to do their smears.¹⁵

The practice, however, needs to be flexible, and doctors should be willing to accommodate women, knowing it is more convenient to attend an ordinary surgery. Dr McPherson gives practical suggestions for ensuring proper communication of results to

patients and operating a reliable recall system. There are vital to avoid the inadequate follow up, which has been implicated in many cases of invasive cancer of the cervix.¹⁶ She also suggests how to invite patients for screening and how to explain abnormal results. Carrying out a similar audit, Stammers and Mercer achieved a 96% screening rate for all eligible women.¹⁷

An epidemic of smears in younger women?

In 1980 the rate of "positive" smears (severe dysplasia/carcinoma in situ) was 8 per 1000 smears examined; there was a maximum rate of 11.4 for women in the age group 30 to 34 years. The rates in 1973 were 4.3 and 4.5 respectively.¹⁸ In 1985 seven out of the 258 women on my practice list aged between 20 and 35 had smears showing "severe dysplasia/carcinoma in situ" and required either laser treatment or cone biopsy. It is of doubtful statistical value to extrapolate from such a small number and claim a positive smear rate of 24 per 1000 women under 35. But these figures echo the worrying evidence that women who were born around 1951 and later are prone to a considerably higher frequency of disease than those born earlier.¹⁹ Perhaps more disturbing is the possibility that the preinvasive stage may be shorter in some younger women.²⁰ It may be that the "excessive" screening of younger women has resulted in the observed increase in the incidence of clinical cancer in women under 35 being much less than it might have been.²¹ The question arises whether screening should be carried out more often than every five years, particularly in the younger age group. The cohort of women who were born after 1951 will continue to have high positive rates throughout their life.

The fact remains that in the immediate future the greatest gains in preventing cervical cancer will come from recruiting eligible women over 35 who have never been screened. In absolute numbers these women still have the greatest incidence of invasive cancer and the greatest mortality. But policies of cervical screening will need to be reviewed constantly and may need to be altered as the 21st century approaches. Establishing a comprehensive and reliable system of

recruitment and recall in general practice will provide the essential framework to cope with increased demands.

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100 YEARS AGO

Seldom has it been given to any officer by his death to bequeath a larger legacy of honour to the corps which he belonged, than in the case of the late Surgeon General, who fell by the Burmese darts in carrying his wounded comrade from the field. He has shown that to every military surgeon is open the triple path of duty, attendance on the sick, succour of the wounded, and rescue of the wounded; and he has added another name to the roll of those who have already proved that in the day of battle the military surgeon has no more honourable or more interesting career can scarcely be offered by any other branch of the national service. He can be embodied in the words of the poet, "he who saved his wound for these duties are becoming every day more adequate and more liberal is a matter for sincere congratulation; since, although there are many ready to perform these services, there are few out of whom humanity has been to be spiritualised as to render them indifferent to the public and substantial recognition of them. Under these circumstances, the moment may not be long before the military surgeon will be better illustrated than by supposing that Surgeon Head and Lieut. Armstrong had both served the corps, and that a year hence, both being unfit for service, were placed on temporary half pay in accordance with the Army Circular, March 1st, 1880, the officer placed on half pay on account of ill health, incurred in and by the service, may reckon time on half pay, not exceeding one year, towards full pay retirement," whereas the medical officer, who received his wound on the same battlefield who risked his life to save a comrade, and who qualified for the highest reward of valour which his Sovereign can bestow, could reckon nothing towards retirement, because in official despatch he is only a "non-combatant." The absurdity still remains, that the man whose duty calls upon him to lay down his life under the fire of the enemy is a non-combatant. (*British Medical Journal* 1886; 1:161.)

In a paper read at a recent meeting of the Liverpool Chemists' Association, Mr. R. M. Sumner related some personal experiences as to the use of cocaine, both as a preventive against, and a remedy for, sea-sickness. Mr. Sumner professed to have had considerable acquaintance with coca leaves for many years, both in business and in personal use, and to have believed strongly in the exhilarating and stimulating effect which they have upon the nerves. Owing, however, to the nauseous character of the pharmaceutical preparations of the leaves, he had personally been in the habit of chewing the leaves without alkali. The report of the trials made last autumn by Professor Masson, of St. Petersburg, with a solution of cocaine, induced him, being very subject to sea-sickness, to test its efficacy on himself, during some cross-channel passages he made. Having dissolved 3 grains of cocaine hydrochloride in 1½ ounces of water, he took half a drachm of this solution before starting, and another third soon after leaving land; and, although the weather was boisterous, he declares that he not only felt no inconvenience from the trip, but even enjoyed the motion of the vessel. Satisfied with the results obtained, and wishing to find a more permanent solution, he next used a solution of cocaine in camphor water, with which, after being kept four weeks, he obtained like good results with a smaller dose than formerly. But, though the camphor-water proved an excellent preservative for the cocaine, it was not pleasant to the taste, besides which a solution was sometimes vomited up, and he took half a drachm of this solution before starting, and another third soon after leaving land; and, although the weather was boisterous, he declares that he not only felt no inconvenience from the trip, but even enjoyed the motion of the vessel. 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