Managing drug dealers who swallow the evidence

B Marc, R K Gherardi, F J Baud, M Garnier, O Diamant-Berger

Forensic Emergencies Department, Hôtel-Dieu de Paris, 1 place du Parvis Notre Dame, 75004 Paris, France

B Marc, MD, physician
M Garnier, MD, physician
O Diamant-Berger, MD, physician in charge

Forensic Medicine Unit, Department of Pathology, Henri Mondor Hospital, 94010 Créteil, France
R K Gherardi, MD, physician

Toxicologic Intensive Care Unit, Fernand Widal Hospital, Paris VII University, 75010 Paris, France
F J Baud, MD, physician

Correspondence to:
Dr Marc.

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Drugs that are concealed by dealers or "body packers" in the gastrointestinal tract for smuggling can be detected by several methods.¹⁻³ Analysis of urine,² radiography of the abdomen,^{1,3} and natural clearance¹⁻³ have been reported. Little has been reported on managing dealers who quickly swallow packets of drugs at the time of arrest³⁻⁵ apart from an occasional fatal overdose.⁵ Unlike those swallowed by body packers, the drugs ingested by "quick swallows" are not in wrappings designed for ingestion.

We evaluated the usual methods of drug detection in 50 subjects who were suspected of quick swallowing of drugs and we also gave them an emetic.

Subjects, methods, and results

Sixty five subjects were referred to the forensic emergencies department in 1988 on suspicion of having swallowed packets of drugs up to two hours before admission. Fifty accepted both a urine analysis and an oral emetic drug. A urine sample was analysed on admission as previously described.² A dose of 15 ml ipecacuanha syrup was given with 200 ml water and repeated once if necessary. In 20 of the 50 subjects supine plain abdominal films were taken to try to detect foreign bodies. Quick swallowing of drugs was considered proved when wrappings or packages were recovered in emesis. The results of drug detection by urine analysis and by abdominal radiography were categorised as follows: (a) positive—positive urine result and wrappings recovered; (b) false positive—positive urine result and no wrappings recovered; (c) false negative—negative urine result and wrappings recovered; (d) negative—negative urine results and no wrappings recovered. The accuracy of both tests was estimated by the sensitivity ($a/(a+c)$), specificity ($d/(b+d)$), and percentage of correct classifications ($((a+d)/n)$ divided by number of results).

All but three subjects were conscious and their

cardiorespiratory signs normal. One of the three presented with an isolated transient bradycardia, one in a state of drowsiness, and one with delayed overt heroin overdose. Eight had contracted pupils and two had reactive dilatation of the pupils. In 14 electrocardiographic findings were normal. Emesis occurred within 30 minutes of taking ipecacuanha in 47 of the 50 subjects. Wrappings were recovered after emesis in 21 of those, 19 of whom had swallowed heroin only, and two of whom had swallowed heroin and cocaine. From one to 13 packets were recovered (mean of three). They were of two types: (a) single doses wrapped in paper or aluminium foil containing 250 mg heroin or 1 g cocaine of the type sold on the street (16 of 21 subjects); (b) heroin in packets of one to four single doses, wrapped in a piece of heat sealed plastic dustbin bag (five of 21). The table gives the results of drug detection in urine and in abdominal x ray film. No drug was detected in the urine of subjects who vomited type (b) packets. Radiological images of the packets were usually poorly defined.

Comment

Ten of 50 subjects had evidence of toxicity from ingesting drugs—a higher incidence than in cases of body packing of packets that are made to be ingested.³ The methods of managing drug ingestion in body packers are unsuitable for dealers who quick swallow their drugs because drug concentrations were not consistently detected in urine samples—a sensitive but non-specific test—and the images on radiographs were not distinct. Subjects who conceal drugs by swallowing require quick evacuation of gastric contents to avert toxicity. We tried using a stomach tube, but most subjects did not comply, whereas they usually accepted induced emesis. As performed in alert subjects, this seemed to be safe, and packets or wrappings were retrieved in half of the suspected subjects.

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Results of drug detection in urine samples and in abdominal radiographs in concealment by quick swallowing (figures are numbers of subjects)

Detection of drug	Results of emesis		Analysis of results (%)
	Recovery of packets	No recovery of packets	
In urine sample:			
Positive*	16	15	Sensitivity 76 Specificity 42 Correct classification 57
Negative	5	11	
In abdominal radiograph:			
Positive	2	2	Sensitivity 33 Specificity 86 Correct classification 70
Negative	4	12	

*Results included 25 positive for opiates, one for benzoylecgonine (the main urinary metabolite of cocaine), and five for both drugs.

Correction

Influence of past reproductive performance on risk of spontaneous abortion

Three authors' errors occurred in this paper by Dr Lesley Regan and others (26 August, p 541). The numbers in the bottom line of table III (primigravida) should have read 3, 54, and 6, not 13, 154, and 16 as published.