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Catheterisation: your urethra in their hands

R Carter, M Aitchison, G R Mufti, R Scott

Department of Urology,
Glasgow Royal Infirmary,
Glasgow G4 0SF

R Carter, FRCS, registrar
M Aitchison, FRCS, senior registrar
G R Mufti, FRCS, consultant urologist
R Scott, FRCS, consultant urologist

Correspondence to:
Mr Carter.

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The emphasis in undergraduate medical education is often on the theoretical aspects of medicine rather than the practical aspects. Practical procedures are commonly taught informally, the teaching being passed from one junior to the next.¹ The philosophy is of "See one, do one, teach one." Urethral catheterisation is a procedure that requires a certain amount of skill, knowledge, and experience and is not without complication,^{2,4} yet it is usually delegated to the most junior and inexperienced medical staff, the junior house officers.

Subjects, methods, and results

To assess the level of competence at catheterisation among junior medical staff house officers at this hospital were interviewed with a structured questionnaire, covering three aspects of the procedure: the degree of undergraduate and postgraduate instruction, the practical and theoretical aspects of catheterisation, and, finally, problems and complications encountered.

Thirty junior house officers (graduates of five medical schools) were interviewed. Eighteen were male and 12 were female. The replies to the questionnaire showed that none of the interviewees had received any formal instruction regarding any aspect of urethral catheterisation as an undergraduate. Practical postgraduate instruction in 24 was limited to supervision of a single catheterisation, and four subjects were unsupervised. Although those interviewed had performed a mean of 28 (range 6-100) catheterisations in male patients, only four of them had catheterised female patients.

Despite the large number of procedures performed there was appreciable ignorance of the practical and theoretical aspects of catheterisation. Twenty five interviewees were unaware of the availability of short term and long term catheters or of the duration for

which they may be safely left without being changed. Three interviewees simply used the catheter that was provided by the nursing staff, and one did not know that different sizes existed.

Twenty eight interviewees initially used force when meeting resistance to the passage of the catheter, and 13 stated that the development of fresh urethral bleeding would not deter them from a further attempt at catheterisation. Eighteen were happy to attempt catheterisation in a patient who had a known urethral stricture. Five interviewees were unaware of the difference between a phimosis and paraphimosis.

Despite the lack of formal tuition all had developed what seemed to be a satisfactory aseptic technique. None, however, was aware of the nature of the antiseptic fluid or the strength of the local anaesthetic gel, but simply used what was provided by the nursing staff.

Nineteen of the interviewees had encountered bleeding and six had had patients in whom a paraphimosis had developed after catheterisation. A particularly disturbing finding was that, although 14 interviewees had requested help from senior medical staff, seven were reluctant to seek advice, because of their impression that difficulties with catheterisation were not worthy of disturbing senior staff. Eight of the 12 female medical staff had encountered problems with male patients becoming sexually excited during the procedure.

Discussion

The results of our survey suggest that the technique of urethral catheterisation is poorly taught, and in the light of these results we are preparing a short teaching video to be shown to every house officer at the start of their preregistration post.

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Oestrogenic effects of plant foods in postmenopausal women

Gisela Wilcox, Mark L Wahlqvist,
Henry G Burger, Gabriele Medley

Crops grown as animal pasture are known to have oestrogenic activity,¹ and some foods contain potential oestrogenic analogues such as the isoflavonoids (isoflavones and coumestans), lignans, and resorcylic acid lactones,² which may be activated or inactivated.³ We studied the effect of three foods reported to

induce vaginal oestrus in laboratory animals⁴ in postmenopausal women not taking oestrogen replacement therapy.

Subjects, methods, and results

We studied 25 postmenopausal women who were non-smokers, in good general health, and taking no drugs known to affect oestrogen state (mean age 59 (range 51-70); body mass index 24.4 (range 18.7-31.6) kg/m²; years after menopause 8.1 (range 1-20)). The protocol was a latin square design with a two week run in period and a six week experimental period. The women recorded their normal diet for 14 days and were asked to repeat the fortnightly diet throughout the study. During the experimental period the diet was

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