Autologous transfusion does not provide a cheaper alternative to transfusion of allogeneic blood. The cost of producing a unit of autologous blood in our centre is currently about twice the cost of an equivalent allogeneic unit. This difference is due to the staffing and transport costs of the autologous clinics, which are located at several hospitals within the region to allow easy access for patients. If the programme were to expand, allowing venesection of more donors at each clinic, the collection cost per unit would fall.

Unused autologous units were not made available for any other recipient. Most of our autologous donors were taking drugs which would make their blood donation unacceptable for allogeneic use. Also, most autologous units were transfused, those not transfused being held for potential autologous use until expiry or patient discharge. Thus very few units would ultimately be suitable for crossover and procedures for their retrieval are not justified.

We have shown the feasibility of a regional autologous donation programme coordinated by a blood transfusion centre. Main factors which prevented autologous donation failure were to attend the clinic, anaemia, and cardiovascular disease. The main factors which restricted the provision of blood by those who donated were late referral and post-donation anaemia. The aim of avoiding allogeneic blood transfusion was achieved by most patients who donated blood.

We are grateful to the Northern Regional Health Authority for funding and thank all clinicians who entered patients into the programme. We also thank Dr J Conn, Dr J Liston, Dr S Rusby, Sister P O'Brien, Staff Nurse P Jackson, Staff Nurse H Gennais, Mrs C Jefferies, Mrs P Lander, and Mrs S Masterman; the staff of all departments of the Northern Region Blood Transfusion Service; the staff of participating hospital blood banks; and Mr D Robinson, of Conway Robinson Associates, for statistical advice.


(Accepted 6 October 1992)

Heterosexual transmission of hepatitis C virus in family groups without risk factors

G M Peano, L M Fenoglio, G Menardi, R Balbo, D Marenchino, S Fenoglio

Alter et al reported finding antibodies to hepatitis C virus (anti-HCV) in most patients with post-transfusion non-A non-B hepatitis. Similar findings have been recorded in patients having haemodialysis and in drug misusers. Furthermore, hepatitis C virus may also be detected in patients with chronic liver disease, hepatocellular carcinoma, and chronic alcoholism who have no history of blood transfusions, and variable rates of infection have been recorded in healthy blood donors. We may therefore surmise that risk factors other than direct blood transfusion exist. Hepatitis C virus may be transmitted by sexual intercourse. Other studies, however, have failed to confirm this or showed that it occurred only rarely.

Many of these studies were carried out on heterogeneous groups (homo- and bisexual, drug misusers, haemophilic patients, family groups, etc), so that we still lack conclusive results. We report the role of heterosexual activity and of household contacts in the spread of hepatitis C virus as determined by studying viral markers in partners and other family members of anti-HCV positive blood donors without known risk factors.

Subjects, methods, and results

Eighty six blood donors (49 men) were evaluated based on the following criteria: presence of anti-HCV; absence of hepatitis B surface antigen and anti-HIV; no history of drug abuse; in a stable heterosexual relationship (range eight months to 40 years). The subjects were studied in two groups, group 1 being separated into subgroups 1a and 1b. Subgroup 1a comprised 29 cases (16 men) of hepatitis C virus related chronic hepatitis confirmed histologically or from a histological abnormality in a serum sample with high anti-HCV titres values (above 60 IU/L) for more than six months. Subgroup 1b comprised 14 subjects (eight men) with a chance finding of abnormal serum alanine aminotransferase activity in the absence of evidence of liver disease. Group 2 comprised 43 subjects (25 men) without a clinical history of liver disease or enzyme abnormality. Sixty eight randomly selected anti-HCV negative blood donors (40 men) served as controls (group 3). Other criteria for selection as controls were as in groups 1 and 2.

Blood donors’ partners (n=154; 65 men), who were negative for HIV, had no history of drug abuse or other known risk factors, and engaged only in heterosexual activity, were accepted after accurate history taking.

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BMJ 1992;305:1473-4
Acute compartment syndromes resulting from anticoagulant treatment

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Anticoagulants are commonly used both prophylactically and to treat venous thrombosis. Because such treatment increases a patient’s susceptibility to haemorrhage comparatively minor trauma may result in disproportionate intracompartmental bleeding and the development of a compartment syndrome. This requires prompt diagnosis and rapid treatment to avert a potential disaster. Compartment syndromes have been reported in association with anticoagulants, but always after arterial puncture for blood gas analysis.1 To heighten awareness of this potential complication we report seven cases of compartment syndrome after minor trauma in patients who received anticoagulant treatment.

Case reports

The table gives details of the seven cases. Four patients were taking anticoagulants when the minor trauma occurred, and three were given them after the trauma occurred because venous thrombosis was diagnosed erroneously. In only one case was the dosage of anticoagulant above the normal therapeutic range for the particular clinical indication. In the six cases in which compartmental pressures were measured the slitting catheter technique was used as described by Barnes et al.3

Four of the seven patients underwent urgent fasciectomy, and only one had permanent postoperative nerve damage and muscle necrosis. In this case compartmental pressure was not measured until three days after the trauma. In case 1 no action was taken because the compartmental pressure was not particularly high (58 mm Hg) and was falling. In case 5 blood flowed freely from within the compartment when a slitting catheter was inserted to measure the pressure; aspiration of 65 ml blood reduced the pressure to normal so that surgery was avoided. In case 7 the patient presented 12 days after injury for a surgical opinion. Foot drop had been established for several days and it was considered too late for fasciectomy.

All the injuries were minor, either being pulled muscles or resulting from everyday impacts, but were sufficiently severe for the patients to present at the accident and emergency department. None of these patients suffered the type of fracture or major soft tissue injury that is normally associated with an acute compartment syndrome.

Comment

The complication of anticoagulant treatment described is not common, but the disabling effects of untreated or late treated compartment syndrome justify vigilance at all times by the attendant clinician.