We report persistent galactorrhoea and raised prolactin in a woman taking methadone, which is commonly prescribed for the treatment of opiate dependence. A heroin smoking 28 year old mother of two (younger child aged 4), with hepatitis C (of nine years’ duration), weighing 50 kg, was first prescribed 30 mg methadone a day for opiate dependence. She reported newly emergent galactorrhoea after four months of taking methadone, when the dose was increased to 40 mg. The subsequent persistent galactorrhoea required her to use breast pads. Her prolactin concentrations over the next year were unremarkable head magnetic resonance imaging scan was normal. The child aged 4), with hepatitis C (of nine years’ duration), A heroin smoking 28 year old mother of two (younger child aged 4), with hepatitis C (of nine years’ duration), weighing 50 kg, was first prescribed 30 mg methadone a day for opiate dependence. She reported newly emergent galactorrhoea after four months of taking methadone, when the dose was increased to 40 mg. The subsequent persistent galactorrhoea required her to use breast pads. Her prolactin concentrations over the next year were persistent galactorrhoea, and two years later, she still takes methadone and has galactorrhoea. We found no breast abnormalities other than tenderness; a negative pregnancy test; normal thyroid status; normal range concentrations of oestrogen, follicle stimulating hormone, and lutetinising hormone; and an unremarkable head magnetic resonance imaging scan with contrast. So, she remains amenorrhoeic.

Hyperprolactinaemia with chronic methadone use is described in three reports to the UK Committee for the Safety of Medicines but is not mentioned in the British National Formulary or the summary of product characteristics for methadone. Tols and colleagues (in 1978) showed a clear rise in plasma prolactin after acute administration of methadone in humans, reversed by dopamine agonists.¹

Pituitary prolactin release is tonically inhibited by dopamine receptors, thereby increasing release of prolactin.² This case suggests that tolerance does not occur to the prolactin enhancing effect of methadone, consistent with experimental studies.

Drug rechallenge could not be done, so causality is not proved. But together with previous reports and experimental findings, this case indicates an association between galactorrhoea and methadone use.

Galactorrhoea and other effects of hyperprolactinaemia may be under-reported in patients using methadone.

Funding: None. Competing interests: None declared.


(Accepted 20 February 2006)

Ditch the digraph

A surgeon uses a ligature to tie off a bleeding vessel, although the word is somewhat archaic and conjures up an image of John Hunter tying off a popliteal aneurysm. Yet lexical ligatures cast a long shadow, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Medical language is full of words containing ae and oe; although these pairs are now printed as separate vowels (digraphs), a look in an older text will reveal their earlier form as ligatures. The digraph, thus smelted into one unit, was used inconsistently for the digraph ae, which was found both in native words and in imported words that in their original Greek form had the digraph αε. Old English used αe as a distinct intermediate vowel; having fallen into disuse in the English language, this sturdy ligature made a comeback in Renaissance scholarly neologisms. Its use hailed back to one of its classical forms, the Greek αε. Thus Cyprio became haem-o. In due course the ligature αe morphed into the digraphs ae, and so became haem-o. Perhaps this was because of the very strangeness of the ligature, or perhaps the ligature lost out simply because it required an extra print character. Classical scholars concur that the correct pronunciation of the sound is a long e as in sheer. This is respected in haemoglobin, but not in haemorrhoid. Moreover, the ae digraph clashes with the Latin plural suffix –ae (as in fistulae), which church Latin pronounces like ye. Furthermore, its non-medical use in British English is in decline, a notable example being the demise of encyclopaedia in favour of encyclopedia. Americans binned the ae digraph a long time ago, and one must admit a sneaking admiration for their revolutionary spirit.

Use of the digraph oe is just as questionable. In earlier borrowings the ligature αe, also pronounced as a long e, was used to represent the Greek digraph αe. The ligature rapidly morphed into α alone, thus economy became economy. In later medical borrowings the ligature was also popular, but in due course it morphed into the oe digraph, thus oesophagus. Derivations can, however, show remarkable inconsistency. Coeliac and coeliacus both come from κοιλία (hollow); but, while the former took the ligature-digraph route, the latter did not. Anyway the oe digraph has great potential to confuse. Recently, I was shocked and saddened to hear a healthcare colleague pronounce oedema with the first syllable like toe.

On grounds of phonetic utility and historical consistency, surely the time has come to call time on this use of ae and oe. Hard as it is to accept, perhaps our US colleagues got it right when they replaced both with a simple e. Might I suggest that the BMJ, proponent of all things progressive in British medicine, sets an example by ditching these dodgy digraphs?

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