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In this issue...

Dr Mark L Levy

The measurement of oxygen saturation (SpO₂) with a pulse oximeter, is now much more widely accepted by health professionals in primary care. The new BTS/SIGN British Asthma Guidelines¹ suggest the use of SpO₂ as a guide to the need for assessing arterial blood gases and as a means of classifying acute asthma severity. Chavannes, in his editorial on page 2, discusses further uses of pulse oximetry in assessing patients with COPD, community acquired pneumonia as well as acute severe asthma. Jones and colleagues (pp 4-5) report a pragmatic study, in 17 practices, which aimed to investigate the usefulness of pulse oximetry in general practice. They found that the measurements helped the GPs to decide on management, and reassured the majority of patients as well as the GPs themselves. In my own experience I have found oximetry very useful in assessing and monitoring preschool children presenting with acute asthma.²

Acute asthma management in primary care is not managed fully according to guidelines; this was a conclusion of the pilot study by Pinnock and colleagues (pp 7-11). While the practices and organisations participating in this study clearly demonstrated improvement in asthma care, many patients were not assessed or treated according to current guidelines, both in primary and secondary care. At the follow up audit, six months after education and discussion sessions, nearly 40% of patients with acute asthma had peak flow measurements taken and in over 40% of cases, the health professionals did not make reference to the patients' usual peak flow. Less than 30% and slightly more than 40% of patients were treated with bronchodilators during the attacks at baseline and at the follow-up audit respectively. While the authors have concluded the results were encouraging, and I would certainly agree there was improvement, it could be argued that the educational methods employed in this study were not very effective. On a more positive note, the study has clearly defined a method for evaluating change after educational intervention and could serve as a model for similar studies.

Dr Montalto reports an Australian study (pp 12-15) on the safety of managing 44 patients with pneumonia in their homes, during a two year period. An interesting approach to the management of patients with acute respiratory illness, in their own

homes or in elderly residential settings. This study does not report an economic evaluation, which is a pity; hopefully, one will follow. The idea may be worth considering in other countries, certainly in the UK, where a similar system may alleviate the demands on accident and emergency departments and in-patient beds during the winter.

Onno Van Schayck and colleagues' comprehensive, well referenced, review of COPD (pp 16 - 20) provides an excellent summary of the practical aspects of epidemiology, diagnosis and management of this disease in primary care. The review is in fact based on a symposium at the International Primary Care Respiratory Group's (IPCRG) conference in Amsterdam last year.

Felix Ram in his review of randomised trials on Self Management Plans for Asthma, concludes that there is insufficient evidence from randomised trials to show that written action plans produce better outcomes than no written plans. This is in contrast with the clear statement in the new BTS/SIGN British guidelines¹ that these have been shown to improve health outcomes.

Mike Thomas has written the next paper in our series 'Stop Think' and discusses ways of recognising and treating patients with dysfunctional breathing. His paper is illustrated with a detailed patient example.

The news section includes a brief report from the GPIAG Research Team in Aberdeen and details of our two newest committee members.

I would also like to draw your attention to the announcement of (page 3), and call for papers for, the GPIAG Scientific Meeting in Cambridge, 20th - 21st June. Abstracts can be submitted via the website at www.gpiag.org. This meeting has always been an enjoyable event, providing a very favourable atmosphere to meet old friends and discover what's new in the respiratory world.

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2. Levy ML, Hilton SR. Asthma in Practice, London: Royal College of General Practitioners, 1999.

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ISSN: 1471-4418

The General Practice Airways Group (GPIAG) is an independent, multi-funded, GP-led member organisation that aims to improve respiratory care and is a company limited by guarantee (Company No. 4298947).

The peer reviewed *Primary Care Respiratory Journal* is published by GPIAG Publishing and is the official journal of the GPIAG and International Primary Care Respiratory Group (IPCRG).

All correspondence concerning this journal should be addressed to the Editor.

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