More research needs to be devoted to prediction of who will develop toxic reactions. Studies such as those noting the association of valproate toxicity with young age (especially under two years) and polytherapy may reduce the number of patients with valproate liver failure by limiting the use of the drug in this higher risk group. Caution in using phenytoin in patients undergoing radiotherapy may decrease some of the severe exfoliative dermatitis problems induced by phenytoin. It is probable that some patients will continue to suffer severe adverse effects from anticonvulsants regardless of the number of contraindications that are proven. However, routine blood and urine screening does not appear at all likely to prevent these disasters.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Before starting an anticonvulsant patient should be informed, preferably in writing, of the possible severe adverse reactions and the early symptoms of the reaction. They should be warned to contact their physician immediately if these symptoms develop.

2. Prior to treatment, baseline liver function tests and a complete blood count and platelet count may be worthwhile to avoid exacerbating an unrecognized underlying problem or to help interpret abnormal tests at a later date.

3. Routine blood and urine screening for severe anticonvulsant reactions is of no proven value and is not recommended in asymptomatic patients receiving antiepileptic medications.

4. Patients receiving anticonvulsant medication should contact their physician if they have a rash or an unexplained illness. At that time, blood and urine tests could be considered.

5. Further research is needed to identify patients at risk for serious anticonvulsant reactions.

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**REFERENCES**


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**Screening of the Epileptic Patient - Is it worth the trouble?**

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Anyone who treats epileptic patients with anticonvulsants is wary of their potential side-effects which on rare occasion can cause death due to aplastic anemia, Stevens-Johnson syndrome or hepatotoxicity. Current dogma suggests that newly treated patients be followed with routine blood tests, including a complete blood count and liver function studies, particularly during the initial several months of treatment. It is the hope that an abnormal test will identify patients at risk for serious drug reactions and that promptly discontinuing the anticonvulsant will prevent the serious consequences. Unfortunately, such is not the case, as most deaths appear to be idiosyncratic and may occur in the face of relatively normal laboratory data. However, there are reports of patients who tolerate an anticonvulsant for months and then suddenly develop symptoms of toxicity. Some of these patients did not have routine blood screening nor symptoms of an idiosyncratic reaction prior to death. Would screening have prevented fatal illness in such patients?

Camfield et al suggest that routine screening of asymptomatic patients is unwarranted as the exercise will not likely identify patients at risk and furthermore the costs would be prohibitive. They recommend that education of the parents or patient as to the early warning symptoms of an idiosyncratic reaction fol-
lowed by immediate withdrawal of the drug is likely to be much more effective. While we agree with the general principles advanced by Camfield and colleagues, we take exception to the theme that screening has no role to play in the identification of at-risk patients.

Certain groups of patients are statistically more likely to have severe drug reactions to anticonvulsants. For example, epileptic children less than two years of age with an underlying neurological disorder, developmental delay or mental retardation who are treated with several anticonvulsants, including valproic acid have a 1/500 risk of developing fatal hepatotoxicity compared to the overall risk of 1/10,000.6,7 A recently published follow-up study shows that the overall fatality rate has decreased significantly (1/49,000) possibly because more patients are receiving valproic acid as monotherapy and fewer high risk patients are prescribed the drug. Nonetheless, young patients remain at risk whether treated with monotherapy or polytherapy.4 Although monotherapy is associated with less risk and routine screening may not identify the child who might succumb from valproic acid toxicity, it would be prudent to observe this group of children closely for clinical and laboratory evidence of an abnormality. Departure from the norm of any parameter should be cause for immediate removal of valproic acid in this cohort of patients.

Smith et al reported 6 deaths in children 3 to 10 years of age following an episode of status epilepticus.5 Each had received multiple anticonvulsants (valproic acid in only one) for chronic and recalcitrant seizures. Examination of the liver indicated massive hepatic necrosis which was not pathognomonic of a specific cause such as anoxia or an idiosyncratic reaction. No one drug could be implicated. It was hypothesized that a metabolic event (such as accumulation of a neuropeptide in the brain) following a prolonged seizure may have produced increased vulnerability to the anticonvulsants. Apparently no patient was routinely monitored so that it is impossible to know whether the irreversible hepatic failure could have been prevented.

It is well known that some antiepileptics induce dose and concentration-dependent alterations in liver function.6,7 Although these changes do not lead to severe idiosyncratic reactions and are reversible by decreasing or discontinuing the drug, the clinical consequences of prolonged elevation of liver enzymes in the asymptomatic patient is not known. Could these changes be the harbinger of chronic liver abnormalities or susceptibility to a more serious drug reaction?

Patients with an idiosyncratic reaction to either phenytoin, carbamazepine, or phenobarbital may or may not be sensitive to the other two drugs. Recent studies by Spielberg et al in our institution successfully predict such cross reactivity using a lymphocyte test.8 It appears that such patients have a genetic absence of an epoxide-hydrolase enzyme necessary for metabolizing a toxic intermediate. This screening test, which has enormous potential in predicting rare but serious adverse effects, will soon be available for large scale screening.

We conclude that certain high risk groups (eg., children less than 2 years of age on polytherapy including valproic acid or patients with a prolonged history of poorly responsive seizures that require multiple anticonvulsants) should undergo routine screening tests. Future investigations and experience will likely uncover additional at risk populations of patients who might benefit from such testing. Furthermore, studies are required to determine the long-term sequelae of chronically elevated liver function enzymes in asymptomatic patients. Finally, the methodology will soon be available to identify those patients who have had a severe reaction to an anticonvulsant and who are potentially at risk from the other conventional antiepileptics. Until further investigations clarify the issues noted above, we advocate screening of at risk groups of patients as well as education programs aimed at identifying the early symptoms of a severe adverse reaction.

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