

The Network's NEWSLETTER

Association for the Rational Use of Medication in Pakistan

Network Council

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The Network's mission is to promote rational use of medication and essential drugs concept in Pakistan in order to optimize the usefulness of drugs and help bring equity in their access.

HEPATITIS B: Much to be desired

Hepatitis B is assuming an alarming proportion in Pakistan and the number of cases is on the rise. In various studies carried out in different parts of the country the prevalence rate of Hepatitis B carrier varies from 3 - 10%. The prevention of this potentially fatal disease should be a priority of the Government.

An important strategy to control Hepatitis B is screening of blood for transfusion. Although the Government of Punjab has recently started screening blood supplied in the Government hospitals but other provinces have yet to make such a provision. Most of the private blood bank services do not provide screened blood to their patients. Legislation is required to make it mandatory that no blood should be supplied unless it is screened and certified.

The second major strategy to control spread of Hepatitis B is to prevent repeated use of the same syringe to inject different patients. This is particularly important for the plastic syringes which are being indiscriminately reused for different patients without sterilization. Recent reports in the national press have brought to light another dimension of this problem arising from used disposable syringes being repacked and resold in the market by unscrupulous elements.

Although vaccine for Hepatitis B is available in the market but the present price is beyond the reach of the majority of the population. The international price of the vaccine for an adult is approximately one dollar per dose. But in Pakistan the vaccine is being marketed by the multinational companies which charge 8 to 10 dollars per dose.

The Federal Ministry of Health was approached in this regard and the Federal Secretary very graciously listened to the presentation regarding the inclusion of Hepatitis B in the EPI programme. He then called the National EPI Programme Manager and directed him to give a plan to get the Hepatitis B immunization included in the next year's EPI programme. Since then there is not much progress and we hope that the Ministry will expedite the matter to start the immunization from the next financial year to save the population from this highly dangerous but totally preventable disease.

Hepatitis B has reached scandalous dimensions in the country and needs immediate Government attention (and intervention!).

Calcium channel blockers: Warning demanded

Public Citizen, a US based consumer organization with about 90,000 members, has petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to immediately add a box warning and change the labelling on all calcium channel blocking drugs licensed in the United States to include recent evidence linking these drugs to an increased risk of heart attack and death. The petition refers to scientific evidence appearing recently in issues of medical journals like *JAMA*, *J Am Geriatric Soc*, *Arch of Intern Med*, *BMJ*, *Lancet*, *Eur Heart J*, *Br Heart J* and *Circulation* and others. The suggested warning label reads as follows:

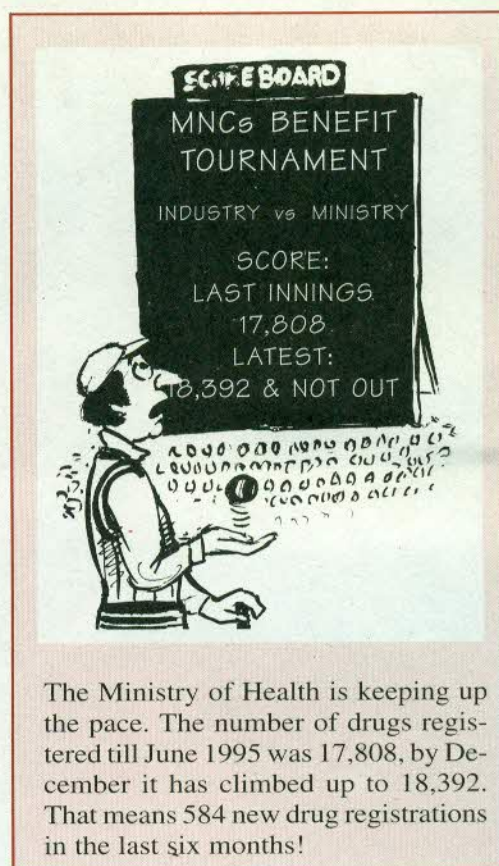
"Emerging evidence shows a consistent association between the use of the immediate release dosage forms of calcium channel blocking drugs and an increased risk of adverse cardiovascular events including myocardial infarction and death. The evidence to date most strongly implicates the immediate release dosage form of nifedipine in moderate or high doses, but there is no evidence that an extended release dosage forms are safer as far as patient mortality is concerned. Consequently, it is prudent to consider that this warning should apply to all calcium channel blocking drugs, regardless of chemical class or dosage form (immediate or extended release).

The calcium channel blocking drugs should not be used in patients with recent myocardial infarction and congestive heart failure.

Drugs from alternative classes of agents for the initial treatment of stable or unstable angina pectoris or hypertension - diuretics and betablockers - have reduced major cardiovascular events and mortality in well controlled trials in hypertensive patients. Other agents, including the calcium channel blockers, have not been shown to reduce the incidence of stroke, myocardial infarction or death. Consequently, the Fifth Report of the Joint National Committee on Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure recommends diuretics and beta blockers as the preferred drugs for treating hypertension."

The petition also calls for a change in the package insert.

We will keep our readers informed about the progress of this case.



The Ministry of Health is keeping up the pace. The number of drugs registered till June 1995 was 17,808, by December it has climbed up to 18,392. That means 584 new drug registrations in the last six months!

Seminar on rational use of benzodiazepines

The Department of Psychiatry and Division of Medicine, Shaikh Zayed Hospital, Lahore organized a seminar on "Rational Use of Benzodiazepines" on 13th November, 1995. The seminar was reportedly attended by a large number of doctors and was addressed by Profs Zafar Iqbal, Aijaz Haider, I.A.K. Tareen, Rashid Chaudhry and Afzal Javed.

The message to take home was: use benzodiazepines only when really needed. Many situations, particularly those associated with day to day stress, are self limiting and generally resolved simply by reassurance, support and active listening and thus do not require prescription of drugs. Particular emphasis was laid on misuse and abuse potential of these drugs and the resulting dependence and addiction.

The Network would like to congratulate the organizers of this seminar for their efforts in the promotion of rational drug use and take this opportunity to urge others to take similar initiatives in their institutions and

