Letters to the Editor

AGGLUTININS TO THE CAUSATIVE ORGANISM OF CONTAGIOUS EQUINE METRITIS 1977 IN HUMAN SERUM

Sir,—In 1977 with veterinary colleagues we reported the isolation of a small fastidious gram-negative coccobacillus from the uterine cervix of thoroughbred mares with a form of metritis not previously described. Later a similar bacterium was recovered from the external genitalia of associated stallions which did not show any clinical signs of disease. A full description of the organism, which does not identify with any known bacterium, will be published elsewhere. Inoculation of description of the organism, which does not identify with any known bacterium, will be published elsewhere. Inoculation of a pure culture of the organism into the uterine cervix of healthy pony mares results in an identical clinical condition in 2–3 days. Powell has given an account of the clinical and epidemiological features of the disease.

We have lately been seeking evidence of infection of humans with this organism. As far as we know people handling or otherwise in contact with infected horses have not shown any clinical evidence of infection likely to be caused by it. Moreover we could not detect agglutinins to the organisms in the serum of four veterinary surgeons who have been in very close contact with infected horses. We have found agglutinins to the organism in the serum of patients attending a genito-medical clinic, including some known to be sexually promiscuous; in healthy adults; and in women attending an antenatal clinic.

We prepared an antigen by culturing contagious equine metritis (C.E.M.) strain 61717/77 (NCTC 11184) for 4 days on heated blood chocolate, agar at 37°C in an atmosphere containing 5–10% v/v carbon dioxide. From the growth so obtained a suspension of organisms corresponding in density to Brown's tube number 8 was made in saline (0.85% sodium chloride in purified water). The suspension was heated at 56°C for an hour, and phenol to a concentration of 0.5% was added as a preservative. The final product, which was agglutinated by a 1/640 dilution of an antisera obtained by inoculating a rabbit with a killed suspension of the organism, was stored at 4°C.

To 1 ml of a 1/20 dilution of each human serum in a 100 mm × 12.5 mm glass tube was added one drop (0.05 ml) of antigen by means of a dropping pipette. Positive and negative controls were included with each batch of tests. The positive control consisted of a titration of a positive human serum having a titre of 1/160. The negative control serum at its end-point dilution. Agglutination did not take place at any time in the negative control.

The percentage of persons with agglutinins in the different groups varied from 2% among women attending an antenatal clinic to 22% among women attending a genito-medical clinic (see table). There was a rate of 7% among healthy adult females. Of men attending the genito-medical clinic 13% were positive compared with only 4% of healthy adult males.

The significance of these preliminary findings is open to speculation. The fact that the human population from which the serum samples we tested were derived was in the same general geographical locality as that of many of the infected horses suggests the possibility of direct transmission from horses to humans, at least in some instances, but our failure to find agglutinins in the sera of four veterinary surgeons in exceptionally close contact with infected horses is against this explanation. Among many questions, however, that need answering is the following: might there be yet another and hitherto unrecognised sexually transmitted disease of man caused by an organism identical with or antigenically related to the causative organism of contagious equine metritis 1977?

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MULTIPHASIC SCREENING IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Sir,—Dr Dubois’ letter (April 15, p. 822) confirms my concern that the findings in the South-East London Screening Study 1 and your editorial of Jan. 7 would confuse and, more important, discourage those whom Prof. W. W. Holland likes to call evangelists.

Leaving aside the tedium of the semantic distinction between “screening” and “case-finding”, implementing none of the recommended measures for preventing coronary heart-disease carries a greater cost than inaction. Hypertension is the most important asymptomatic risk factor. The table characterises the detection and management of hypertension in...