Aside from sensitivity to wheat, the rates of SPT positivity to food allergens were much lower than those to the inhalant allergens. It is interesting to note that milk sensitivity occurred least commonly, even though it is the one food which parents most frequently implicate as being responsible for food-induced symptoms. In addition, soya, the milk these children use after discontinuation of cow’s milk, caused twice as many positive reactions as the latter. Sensitivity to peanuts, eggs and fish was also infrequent.

**Conclusion**

This study has allowed us to compare asthma presentation in two different ethnic communities from neighbouring cities. The similarities in presentation are striking, in particular the high prevalence of cough as the commonest presenting symptom. A disturbing finding was the misdiagnosis or failure to diagnose asthma and the high frequency with which other diagnoses are made, leading to unnecessary and costly treatment. In addition, three studies have now reported irreversible reduction in lung function parameters if there is delay in asthma diagnosis and treatment. A survey of this nature highlights the manner of asthma presentation to the practicing physician and will hopefully result in earlier diagnosis with the introduction of the correct medicines.

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**Halothane hepatitis in a South African population — frequency and the influence of gender and ethnicity**

Michael David Voigt, Bambi Workman, Carl Lombard, Ralph E Kirsch

**Aim.** To review post-anaesthetic hepatitis in a South African population, given that halothane use is restricted in other countries because of the high mortality and morbidity of its associated type II (idosyncratic) hepatitis, even though it is still widely used in South Africa.

**Study design.** Descriptive, retrospective analysis.

**Patients and methods.** Hepatitis cases that occurred after inhalational anaesthetic use were identified by means of a computer search of Groote Schuur Hospital records, 1980 - 1994. Cases of hepatitis caused by circulatory failure and viral hepatitis were excluded.

**Results.** Twenty-six episodes occurred in 22 patients (mean age 49.05 years, range 32 - 65 years), of whom 15 were women. This gave an estimated incidence of 3.53/100 000 anaesthetics (95% confidence interval 2.06 - 5.0/100 000). All had pyrexia (mean 38.7 ± 0.72°C), malaise, anorexia or nausea and vomiting, with onset a mean of 4.27 ± 3.5 days after exposure. Jaundice occurred in 86%, rash in 13.6%; 17 patients (77%) were obese. Alanine and aspartate aminotransferase levels were raised 47.49 ± 61.8 and 55.9 ± 54.5 times the upper limit of normal. Seven patients died and 1 underwent liver transplantation. Hepatitis occurred after the first exposure in only 2 patients (9%). Men and women had a similar risk, but the estimated relative risk for whites v. black or coloured patients was 3.33 (95% confidence interval 1.45 - 7.23; P = 0.003) controlling for gender. Awareness of the condition was suboptimal, and in 3 patients re-exposure to halothane occurred after an initial episode of typical halothane hepatitis.

**Conclusion.** Halothane hepatitis remains a major cause of morbidity and mortality in South Africa. It is more common in whites, but there was no gender-related excess risk.


MRC/UCT Liver Research Centre, Department of Medicine, Groote Schuur Hospital and University of Cape Town

Michael David Voigt, MB ChB, MMed (Med), FCP (SA)

Bambi Workman, RN, Nurse

Ralph E Kirsch, MB ChB, MD, DSo (Med), FCP (SA)

MRC Centre for Epidemiological Research in Southern Africa, Tygerberg, W Cape

Carl Lombard, MEC, PhD
Halothane (2-chloro-2-bromo-1,1,1-trifluoroethane) is a commonly used general anaesthetic which is thought to be significantly more hepatotoxic than other halo-alkane general anaesthetics. While halothane may cause minor increases in serum transaminases in 25 - 30% of patients (type I hepatitis), the important problem associated with its use is the idiosyncratic, massive liver cell necrosis that frequently leads to fulminant hepatic failure (type II hepatitis). Concern about this complication has led to the restriction of its use in many countries, including the UK and the USA.

The prevalence of and risk factors associated with halothane use have not been established in South Africa, where the agent remains widely used and where ethnic and genetic factors may influence the risk of type II hepatitis.

This study was therefore performed to establish the frequency, clinical features and outcome of hepatitis associated with inhalational halo-alkane anaesthetic use, and to identify the potential risk associated with race and sex in a South African population.

Patients and methods

All cases of hepatitis or jaundice that were documented within 1 month after exposure to an inhalational anaesthetic between the years 1980 and 1994 were identified using a computer-based search of Groote Schuur Hospital records. Cases were excluded when there was evidence of concomitant hepatotropic viral infection, circulatory failure, sepsis or another cause of postoperative jaundice. As Groote Schuur is a referral centre, prevalence was determined using only those cases where the anaesthetic was given at Groote Schuur Hospital or its associated hospitals. All referred patients were included in the clinical analysis, however.

The Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel statistic was used to establish the significance of differences between men and women and between different ethnic groups.

Results

Five hundred and fifty-three cases of postoperative jaundice were identified from the hospital records, of which 26 episodes of halo-alkane anaesthetic hepatitis were diagnosed in 22 patients (mean age 49.05 years, range 32 - 65 years), of whom 15 were women. All cases were due to halothane, and 4 had been referred to Groote Schuur.

Twenty-two of the 26 episodes of hepatitis occurred in Groote Schuur and related hospitals. During the same period 623 638 inhalational anaesthetics were given, yielding an estimated frequency of 3.53 hepatitis cases per 100 000 anaesthetics (1 case in 28 329 anaesthetics, 95% confidence interval (CI) 1 in 48 543 to 1 in 20 000). Clinical features are shown in Fig. 1. Fulminant hepatic failure occurred in 9 cases, and halothane was the fourth most common cause of acute liver failure during this period (17%). Seven patients died and 1 underwent liver transplantation (36% mortality rate). Hepatitis occurred after the first exposure in 2 patients (9%).

Case reports

Case 1

A 35-year-old genetically female patient with gender dysphoria underwent 7 operations between 1988 and 1993 for gender reassignment. Halothane was given on three occasions without causing any fever or any documented rise in transaminase levels. In 1993, 1 day after halothane anaesthesia, she became pyrexial and was noted to be jaundiced on day 5. Prior to surgery, aspartate aminotransferase (AST) (20 lU/l) and alanine aminotransferase (ALT) (20 IU/l) levels were normal (normal < 25 for AST and ALT). Total and conjugated bilirubin concentrations rose to 138 and 77 µmol/l respectively, AST to 713 IU/l and ALT to 530 IU/l; international normalised ratio (INR) was 2.2. Hepatitis serology was negative and liver biopsy showed submassive necrosis with collapse fibrosis, in keeping with toxic hepatitis. Testosterone hepatitis was diagnosed and she made a full recovery over the following
6 weeks. Isoflurane was used for a subsequent operation in October 1993, and the postoperative course was uneventful. In February 1994 halothane was again administered. On day 1 postoperatively, the patient's temperature rose to 38.5°C, and AST and ALT levels to 2 218 and 990 IU/l respectively. Levels peaked on the 3rd postoperative day, the INR rose to 1.4 and the patient made an uneventful recovery over the following 5 weeks.

The case illustrates the association between multiple, recent exposures to halothane and the onset of hepatitis. In addition, this case was not unique in that the diagnosis was not even entertained, despite its classic presentation; a subsequent halothane anaesthetic was given, with a consequent recurrence of typical hepatitis.

**Case 2**

An obese 41-year-old lecturer underwent arthroscopy in March 1994 and 3 weeks later had an anterior cruciate ligament repair. On both occasions, halothane was used. The course was uncomplicated after the first operation, but he became pyrexial, confused and developed acute liver failure on the first day after the second operation. Transaminase levels rose to over 2 500 IU/l, the INR to 8, and creatinine to 111 mmol/l. He had a successful orthotopic liver transplant on the 5th postoperative day and made a full recovery following this.

Repeated halothane anaesthetics in close succession may cause severe hepatitis. His acute severe liver failure had a short latent period, indicative of a poor prognosis; liver transplantation was probably life-saving.

**Discussion**

This is the first series of halothane hepatitis reported from South Africa. The overall incidence of 3.53/100 000 (1 in 28 329) with a 95% CI of 2.06 - 5.00/100 000 (1 in 48 543 to 1 in 20 000), is similar to that reported by the National Halothane Hepatitis Study but lower than the frequency of 1/3 500 suggested by some authors. It is possible that incomplete case-finding may account for this difference. However, care was taken to screen all patients in whom postoperative hepatitis or jaundice was documented, even when a diagnosis of halothane hepatitis had not been made at the time. It is unlikely that any severe cases were missed, but it is possible that mild cases discharged before the onset of symptoms, or not investigated for postoperative symptoms or fever, could have been missed. Our figures therefore represent the minimum frequency of the disease in a South African population. In addition, no exact figures were available for non-halothane anaesthetics given during the period of the study, but it is estimated that < 10% of all anaesthetics were non-halothane. The incidence may therefore have been up to 10% higher than given.

All ethnic groups are at risk of developing halothane hepatitis, but in this study ethnicity was found to be associated with a significant difference in this risk. White patients had a higher risk of developing halothane hepatitis than coloured and black patients (risk ratio 3.24; CI 1.47 - 7.23, P = 0.003). This factor has not previously been documented, but most previous studies have been performed in more homogeneous populations. A genetic predisposition to halothane hepatitis has been suggested and the different frequencies that we have demonstrated in different ethnic groups may support this suggestion. However, the retrospective nature of the study does not allow for firm conclusions, as we could not control for other factors which could potentially have influenced the incidence of hepatitis cases, such as the number of repeated anaesthetics, and the prevalence of obesity in the black and coloured patients compared with white patients.

Our finding that women did not have a greater relative risk of halothane hepatitis is at variance with the findings of most previous studies. Although more than twice as many women as men developed hepatitis (15 women, 7 men) in our series, women also underwent significantly more anaesthetics (365 021 v. 258 617), and the estimated relative risk for men compared with women, adjusted for ethnicity, was 0.63 (95% CI 0.26 - 1.54, P = 0.3). Previous studies have not given a sex-related incidence of disease, but overall, 66% of reported cases have been in women. The large number of patients screened in this study makes it unlikely that the result is due to a lack of statistical power.

We have confirmed that, with rare exceptions, hepatitis only develops after multiple exposures to halothane, often when these are given over a short period of time. All but 2 patients had had at least 1 previous halothane anaesthetic (mean number of previous exposures 2.54 ± 2.4). Previous studies have shown that the risk of hepatitis may be significantly reduced if repeated exposure, especially within the space of 1 month, is avoided. Clinical features were similar to those previously described. All our patients had fever, anorexia and nausea, and jaundice was present in 86%. Eosinophilia and rash occurred in fewer than 20%, and these features were not diagnostically useful. The mortality rate in our series was 36%, which is similar to that reported in previous series (1 - 79%, average 52%). Three patients with halothane hepatitis were misdiagnosed despite their having a classic presentation; they underwent subsequent halothane exposure, with fatal consequences in 1 case. This indicates that a high index of suspicion should be maintained at all times and, when doubt exists as to the diagnosis, subsequent halothane use should be avoided.

**Conclusion**

This is the first reported series of halothane hepatitis from South Africa. The frequency of hepatitis following anaesthesia in similar to or slightly lower than that reported in the UK and USA. There is a higher frequency in whites than in blacks and patients of mixed race, but women and men had a similar risk. Obesity and repeated halothane exposures were almost universally present in those who developed hepatitis. Awareness of the condition was suboptimal and in many cases hepatitis could have been avoided if standard international guidelines on halothane use had been followed, in particular the avoidance of repeated exposures in a short space of time, and avoidance of halothane use in patients who report even mild prior postoperative adverse reactions to anaesthetic.
Incidences and frequency rates of childhood cancer in Namibia

Glynn Wessels, Peter B Hesseling

Objective. To estimate the extent of paediatric malignancy in an African country and to compare these findings with paediatric cancer rates in other countries.

Design. A retrospective descriptive study which calculated incidence and frequency rates from the data obtained from a 6-year survey of childhood cancer in Namibia.

Setting. Children from the general community who were referred by primary care physicians or clinics and diagnosed in peripheral district hospitals or a tertiary care institution.

Patients. A total of 163 children less than 15 years of age diagnosed with any malignant neoplasm, intracranial tumour or histiocytosis between 1983 and 1988.

Intervention. None.

Main outcome measures. The minimum overall incidence of childhood cancer recorded in Namibia was lower than the rates usually reported by economically privileged countries. The rates of certain malignancies corresponded to the rates recorded in other African countries.

Results. The overall incidence of childhood cancer was 55.5 per million. Tumours of the central nervous system occurred most commonly (18%), followed by renal tumours (14%), leukaemia (12%) and lymphoma (11.5%). The 5.8 per million incidence rate of retinoblastoma was similar to the rates recorded in other African countries but higher than in the UK or the USA. The incidence rates per million children for renal tumours, malignant bone tumours and soft-tissue sarcomas were 7.4, 4.8 and 5.2, respectively, which correspond with the rates in Western Europe and the USA. The incidence rate of CNS tumours was only 9.3 per million. Both leukaemia (6.5 per million) and lymphoma (6.3 per million) had rates far lower than those recorded in central Africa or developed Western countries.

Conclusion. The incidence pattern of childhood cancer in Namibia demonstrates features of both the patterns described as typical for Africa and those described for industrialised countries.


Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Stellenbosch and Tygerberg Hospital, Tygerberg, W Cape
Glynn Wessels, MB ChB, MMed (Paed), MD
Peter B Hesseling, MB ChB, MMed (Paed), MD

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