

Letters to the Editor

HOW INFECTIOUS IS SECONDARY DAPSONE-RESISTANT LEPROSY?

Sir,

There is a growing view, supported especially by work in South India, that dapsone resistance does not pose such a serious threat to leprosy control as has been believed. One question which has to be answered unequivocally concerns the infectivity of secondary dapsone-resistant leprosy and, as far as I can ascertain, this has not been investigated. It is well known, of course, that skin smears from active lesions in a case of dapsone-resistant relapse show both BI and MI strongly positive, whereas those from clinically normal skin are generally negative, thus supporting a hypothesis that the total bacillary load is probably less than in an untreated lepromatous case. The frequency of positive nasal smears and nose blows, which would be more generally acceptable as an indicator of infectivity, has, however, not been recorded.

One study¹ investigated the bacteriology of the nose in 62 lepromatous patients treated for varying periods with dapsone monotherapy. Nasal smears were examined from a total of 49 cases but in only one was the MI positive. Dapsone sensitivity was not investigated in this series.

I have myself reported infiltration and nodules of the palate and laryngeal involvement in patients with clinical evidence of secondary dapsone resistance.² In these cases, however, nasal smears were not done.

In my opinion, there is a need for a well-planned study to determine the proportion of secondary dapsone-resistant cases which excrete viable *Mycobacterium leprae* from their nasal mucosa and thus constitute a potential source of transmission of disease. Such a study should be linked to an investigation of the probable index case in all patients with proven primary dapsone resistance.

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References

- ¹ Barton RPE, Rees RJW, McDougall AC and Ellard GA. The nose in lepromatous leprosy, bacteriological and histopathological studies of patients treated with dapsone monotherapy for varying periods of time. *Int J. Leprosy*, 1982; **50**: 58–67.
- ² Wheate HW. Dapsone-resistant leprosy as seen in Africa. *Quaderni di Cooperazione Sanitaria—Health Co-operation Papers*, 1981; **1**: 41–6.