

LETHAL COMBINATION

The recent meta-analysis of the effects of antipyretics on mortality, when taken by subjects with suspected influenza, should reopen the debate regarding the use of antipyretics by the general public¹. This is especially pertinent since the most commonly used drugs – aspirin, paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) – are widely available over the counter without a prescription. Furthermore, the British National Formulary (BNF) doesn't so much as offer a whisper of caution about the possible catastrophic effects if these drugs are taken in the presence of a potentially lethal pathogen.

The association of *Streptococcus Pyogenes* infection with NSAID usage and life threatening consequences² merits a wake up call to the BNF. I suspect there may well have been similar cases which have not been published, not least because of medico-legal considerations.

The administration of antibiotics for suspected but unproven bacterial infections is generally discouraged, although prescribing parenteral benzyl penicillin without waiting for microbiological confirmation is accepted where meningitis is the likely diagnosis. Likewise, in a sick patient in whom the signs of infection may have been masked by the use of paracetamol and/or a NSAID, there would be justification for prescribing parenteral benzyl penicillin before microbiological results are available. I recall a patient admitted with a "flu like illness" who had received antipyretic medication including a NSAID and died 36 hours later with proven *Streptococcus Pyogenes* septicaemia, but who had exhibited none of the usual signs of infection. The blood culture result came only a few hours before he died and too late for the tardy administration of benzyl penicillin to save him. If more case reports, like the one I have described, were published then there would be no excuse for withholding information from the public about the potentially lethal consequences of treating fever with symptomatic remedies.

1. Evers S, Weatherall M, Shirtcliffe P, Perrin K, Beasley R. The effects on mortality of antipyretics in the treatment of influenza infection: systematic review and meta-analysis. *J R Soc Med* 2010; **103**: 403-411
2. Voss L. Necrotising fasciitis associated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. See <http://www.medsafe.govt.nz/Prof/puarticles/necf.htm>