

Botulism in heroin fear

The Public Health Laboratory Service of England and Wales has reported three suspected and one confirmed case of wound botulism since the end of January among injecting drug users. The Scottish public health authorities have reported one case. The Department of Health has alerted drug agencies and user groups.

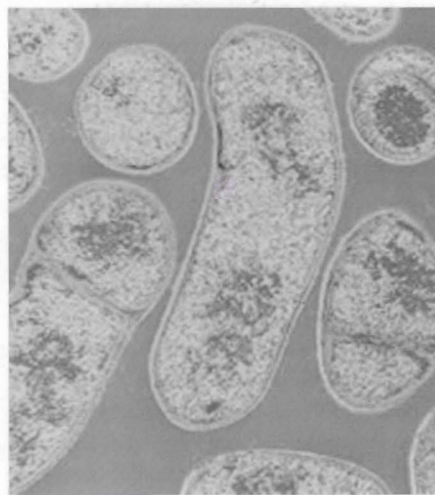
Botulism is a rare but serious paralytic illness caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*.

Symptoms begin with blurred vision and difficulty in swallowing and speaking, but sometimes diarrhoea and vomiting can occur. The disease can progress to paralysis and breathing problems. More than 90% of cases are treated successfully but it can prove fatal. The recovery period can be many months.

The bacterium is anaerobic – it only grows in the absence of oxygen. Wound botulism in injecting drug users tends to occur when the drug user injects into muscle rather than into veins. If the bacterium gets into the muscle it can grow easily there because it is an oxygen-free environment.

It is believed that an infected batch of heroin may be the cause of the outbreak. GPs, hospitals and drug services across the UK are being informed of these cases to ensure they are vigilant for symptoms of botulism.

More detailed information can be found on the Public Health Laboratory Service website at <http://www.phls.co.uk/advice/IDU.htm>



Clostridium botulinum

The Public Health Laboratory Service have advised injecting drugs users to be particularly careful. They state:

- There is no way that you can tell if your heroin is likely to cause this infection.
- Smoke heroin instead of injecting.
- If you must inject, do not inject into muscle or under the skin: make sure you hit the vein – your blood is better at killing bacteria than your muscle.
- Do not share needles, syringes, cookers/spoons or other 'works' with other drug users.
- Use as little citric acid as possible to dissolve the heroin. A lot of citric acid can damage the muscle or the body under the skin, and this damage gives bacteria a better chance to grow.
- If you inject more than one type of drug, inject each at a separate place on your body and with clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs (e.g. cocaine) could give bacteria in heroin a better chance to grow.
- If you get swelling, redness, or pain where you have injected yourself, or pus collects under the skin, you should get a doctor to *check it out immediately*, especially if the infection seems different to others you may have had in the past.

Prozac addiction warning

The makers of a leading antidepressant of the Prozac type (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs) have been forced to issue a new warning to patients and doctors, acknowledging that some people can become dependent and might suffer severe side effects when they try to stop taking it.

GlaxoSmithKline, the British drug company which makes the best-seller Seroxat, was also found to be in breach of the industry's code of practice by misleading the public after one of its executives said on television that reports of withdrawal symptoms were 'very rare'.

The new warning for Seroxat was demanded by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It is a severe blow to the makers of SSRIs, which when launched in the 80s were said to have none of the addiction problems of the benzodiazepines such as Valium.

The warning says that patients must be monitored for side effects associated with physical dependency on the drug. 'A gradual reduction in the dose rather than abrupt cessation is recommended whenever possible,'

it says, and if 'intolerable symptoms occur' the patient might have to go back on the full dose and be weaned off more gradually.

Recent trials for new uses of the drug found that even with a gradual reduction in the dose, at least two in every 100 people suffered abnormal dreams or pains resembling electric shocks, and seven in every 100 experienced dizziness, the FDA said. It added that similar side effects had been reported for the other SSRIs.

GlaxoSmithKline has long denied that its drug could cause dependency. Last year one of its executives stated on ABC television in the US that 'it happens very rarely'. The British watchdog Social Audit complained that the comment was misleading and breached the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Associations code of practice.

The case went to appeal, but the Federation found GlaxoSmithKline to be in breach of the code, ruling that the comment constituted promotion of the drug and that it was wrong. Side effects did not occur 'very rarely' (technically one in 10,000 cases) but were

'rare' (one in 1,000 cases), the federation said.

Charles Medawar of Social Audit welcomed the ruling but noted that the industry was still dragging its feet, because the FDA warning on Seroxat acknowledged that side effects occurred 'frequently' (more than one in 100 cases).



Mr Medawar called for drug companies to investigate what happened to the people prescribed SSRIs for months or years. Their information was mostly over 10 years old and obtained from trials on volunteers taking the drugs for short periods. His website (www.socialaudit.org.uk) contains testimony from about 500 people who had distressing side effects and were usually not believed by doctors, because of the absence of any warning from the manufacturer.