Letter to the Editor

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Hepatitis B immunity in medical students

Dear Sir,

Hepatitis B is an infectious blood borne virus and transmission has been reported from patients to healthcare workers and vice versa [1]. In 1998, the Council of Heads of Medical Schools (CHMS) recommended a statement of national guidelines on immunization of medical students against hepatitis B be included in all medical school prospectuses [2].

The issue of testing viral load for hepatitis B e antigen negative applicants [3] arose after the guidance was prepared. Subsequently, the General Medical Council (GMC) has stated that the core practical skills required for provisional registration do not include exposure prone procedures (EPPs) [4], implying non-infectivity is not necessary to complete undergraduate training in medicine. More recently, the Department of Health (DoH) has produced draft guidance on health clearance of new healthcare workers for serious communicable diseases [5] that includes guidance on testing new EPP workers for hepatitis C but reiterates the GMC advice that medical students do not need to undertake EPPs.

On 7 August 2003, we surveyed the internet prospectuses of all UK medical schools for information on hepatitis B immunity requirements for prospective medical students, particularly for evidence of the CHMS guidelines. If the information was not obvious from navigating the site, a site-specific search for any of the terms ‘hepatitis’, ‘hep B’ or ‘HBV’ was conducted using the website’s own search tool (where available) or the Google search engine.

Of the 28 medical schools in the UK (counting Warwick with Leicester and Keele with Manchester), 27 had at least one comment regarding some form of health screening (11 stating this must be satisfactory) and 25 made specific statements about hepatitis B. However, the amount of information, and the ease with which it could be uncovered, varied considerably. Only four schools followed the CHMS recommendation to include their specific statement on hepatitis B, although nine mentioned that they were following DoH or GMC guidance.

Ten schools recommended the prospective student consult their general practitioner prior to commencing their medicine course. Seven required the prospective student to have started a course of immunization before commencing their studies and 11 required the student to have completed such a course. Others allowed the student to complete immunization by specified points during the course.

Fifteen of the websites stated the applicant must be non-infectious. Ten stated the prospective student must test negative for hepatitis B surface antigen and only five required the presence of hepatitis B antibody. Five commented on the individual being hepatitis B e antigen-negative and three of these also commented on the viral load. Eight stated an authenticated laboratory report was acceptable and five added that this could be up to 1 year old. Three of the eight reserved the right to re-test. Three others stated the student would be tested on or after arrival.

There were two clear errors; one prospectus asked students to demonstrate they were not carriers; another asked for proof the individual was negative for hepatitis B c antigen.

Despite all 28 medical schools having some form of prospectus on their websites, very few included the CHMS statement, despite its recommendation to them 5 years previously. The quality and amount of information and guidance on hepatitis B available through university websites was variable. With the introduction of further DoH guidance on health clearance of new healthcare workers for serious communicable diseases, we recommend that all medical schools review the advice given to prospective medical students against current recommendations to ensure it is consistent and accurate.

David Fox and Ian Aston
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References


### OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE CALENDAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Contact Address</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005 January 25–27</td>
<td>International Conference on Occupational Health Services</td>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.ttl.fi/Internet/English/Information/OHS+2005/default.htm">www.ttl.fi/Internet/English/Information/OHS+2005/default.htm</a></td>
<td>Helsinki, Finland</td>
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<td>March 22–24</td>
<td>Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome. Course jointly organized by the Institute of Occupational &amp; Environmental Medicine, University of Birmingham, and the Department of Occupational Health, University of Kent at Canterbury</td>
<td>Janie Acton. Tel: +44 121 414 6021; fax: +44 121 414 6217; e-mail: <a href="mailto:J.Acton@bham.ac.uk">J.Acton@bham.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
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<td>April 7–8</td>
<td>Joint meeting with RSM Section/SOM Spring Meeting</td>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.som.org.uk">www.som.org.uk</a></td>
<td>London</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 13–15</td>
<td>10th European Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care</td>
<td>Tel: +44 20 7383 6409; e-mail: <a href="mailto:quality@bmjgroup.com">quality@bmjgroup.com</a>; website: <a href="http://www.quality.bmjgroup.com">www.quality.bmjgroup.com</a></td>
<td>London</td>
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<td>April 27–29</td>
<td>IOSH International Conference and Exhibition: Health and Safety—Red Tape or Radical?</td>
<td>Tel: +44 20 7017 5521; website: <a href="http://www.ioshconference.co.uk">www.ioshconference.co.uk</a></td>
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<td>July 5–8</td>
<td>SOM Annual Scientific Meeting</td>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.som.org.uk">www.som.org.uk</a></td>
<td>Manchester</td>
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<td>August 23–26</td>
<td>The Second ICOH International Conference on Psychosocial Factors at Work: EAST MEETS WEST: 'Job Stress Prevention in a Global Perspective'</td>
<td>Dr Akizumi Tsutsumi.Tel: +81 86 235 7173; fax: +81 86 235 7178; e-mail: <a href="mailto:esc@md.okayama-u.ac.jp">esc@md.okayama-u.ac.jp</a>; website: <a href="http://www.wops2005.jp">www.wops2005.jp</a></td>
<td>Okayama, Japan</td>
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