LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thalassaemia and influenza: a consideration

Thalassaemia is an important congenital haematological disorder characterised by defective globin chains in the haemoglobin molecule. The disease is prevalent in the Mediterranean and in Southeast Asia and it is estimated that over 1 million people either have the disease or carry the genetic defect.

Influenza infection and its prevention among people with thalassaemia is of interest. Patients with thalassaemia manifest the classical clinical signs and symptoms of influenza—including high fever, malaise, runny nose, sneezing, and coughing, but it is expected they will suffer more severe infection. It has been observed for a long time that patients with Cooley's anaemia have severe influenza.[1]

Autoimmune haemolytic anaemia may occur during the course of influenza A infection[2] and if this occurs it may pose a major problem for people with thalassaemia. In France, annual influenza vaccination is recommended and free of charge for children with chronic disease, including thalassaemia.[3] In countries where thalassaemia is endemic, such as Thailand, it is also recommended that all people with thalassaemia be vaccinated against influenza.

At present, the new H1N1 influenza virus, or swine flu, is posing a global threat, with many cases reported in many different countries.[4] At the end of July 2009, the Thai Ministry of Public Health reported that there were about 8000 infected cases with 65 deaths. Three of those who died had underlying illnesses such as thalassaemia. This implies that thalassaemia may be an important risk factor contributing to severe swine flu infection and death.

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