

Introduction

The liver is an extraordinary organ that plays an essential role in homeostasis and energy balance, detoxification of endogenous and exogenous potentially injurious molecules, and a host of other vital functions. Hence, it is not surprising that liver injury is associated with significant morbidity and mortality. Emphasizing this fact is the present hepatitis C epidemic. The purpose of this issue of *clinical CORNERSTONE*[®] is to provide the primary care physician with an understanding of common liver disorders and to describe rational approaches to their diagnosis and management. We offer the generalist tools to manage many patients alone or, when necessary, in concert with a hepatologist.

In the first article, Fedja A. Rochling, MD, reviews one of the more perplexing questions facing physicians—how does one interpret an abnormal liver test? Dr. Rochling takes a practical approach to explaining what the commonly used tests measure and what elevations in these values signify. It is important to understand that some tests measure liver cell injury, whereas others are indices of hepatic function. Dr. Rochling provides algorithms detailing logical, cost-effective testing that will either yield the correct diagnosis or suggest the need for more invasive tests, like liver biopsy.

F. Martin Moix, MD, and I continue the discussion of the diagnostic approach to the patient with liver disease by examining the role of liver biopsy. We provide a brief overview of available methods to obtain liver tissue and explain current indications and contraindications for biopsy with reference to specif-

ic disorders for which liver biopsy has been shown beneficial. We also address instances in which biopsy is not likely to be helpful or cost-effective. A detailed illustration depicts the histologic progression of hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is the most common chronic hepatic disorder. Millions of Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus. Sumalatha Satoor, MD, and I review what is known regarding the natural history of this infection, and current approaches to treatment. Recognizing the severe impact of hepatitis C on quality of life, we provide resources that should be of help to physicians and patients alike.

Although effective vaccines are decreasing the disease burden in the United States, hepatitis B remains a common worldwide problem. Vivek Raj, MD, MRCP (UK), reviews the serologic markers of infection and describes the advantages and disadvantages of the 2 approved treatments for chronic hepatitis B. A detailed algorithm provides an easy-to-follow stratification of patients and therapy.

In the last article, Brent A. Neuschwander-Tetri, MD, discusses an emerging cause of liver injury—nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). Providing a rational approach to diagnosis based on his extensive clinical experience, Dr. Neuschwander-Tetri explores what is known about NASH and notes that much remains to be learned regarding the cause and treatment of this increasingly common liver ailment.

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