EDITORIALS

Hypertension Control
The Challenge is Now

The once puzzling medical enigma of hypertension is beginning to yield some of its mystery. Although its cause and cure remain elusive, pragmatic approaches to control are now well within our grasp. We cannot, however, abandon pursuit of our ultimate goal, primary prevention of hypertension, but some of the urgency is removed because we can protect our patients from the risks associated with this condition by controlling their blood pressure while we continue the search.

The recently revised "Joint National Committee Report on Detection, Evaluation and Treatment of High Blood Pressure" presents one carefully considered approach to high blood pressure control. It was developed through consensus among several major medical organizations, updated in light of recently completed clinical trials, and includes a discussion of recently approved antihypertensive agents. This report and its approach are recommended as guidelines for all practitioners by the Coordinating Committee of the National High Blood Pressure Education Program.

We are aware that this is not the only approach a practitioner might use to diagnose and manage hypertension. It is not absolutely definitive; the current state-of-the-art does not permit such definition. It is not a textbook which addresses every alternative. However, in a way that many experts agree is acceptable, it does:

1) present a clear, science-based rationale for decision-making;
2) integrate dietary and pharmacologic therapies;
3) present a preliminary definition of and management recommendations for mild hypertension;
4) include guidance for managing hypertension in patients with complicating co-morbid conditions such as stroke, renal disease, and coronary artery disease;
5) suggest practical ways of enhancing blood pressure control through patient education and counseling; and
6) show sensitivity to cost issues in terms of both patient and practitioner time and needs.

Few guideline documents have addressed so many issues so well in so few words, but readers should beware of equating brevity with lack of need for action. Data from recent U.S. and Australian clinical trials suggest that some 60 million Americans are at risk due to hypertension and can benefit from therapeutic control. No sustained elevation above 140/90 mm Hg is without increased risk. No sustained elevation above 140/90 mm Hg can be casually dismissed as needing no intervention, and any elevation that is treated should be treated to achieve a specific goal blood pressure.

It has been estimated that between 60,000 and 80,000 premature deaths each year may be averted if these recommendations are followed. But it will take the diligent efforts of all the nation's health professionals to achieve this goal. The means are at hand. The challenge is ours to accept.

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