Matters arising

Seasonal variations in the incidence of photoparoxysmal response

Sir: The phenomenon of seasonal variability in photosensitivity of epileptic patients, reported by Danesi1 is at variance with the findings from two other British centres2 and is not corroborated by our data from the Netherlands.

Since 1980 we have conducted a prospective study of photosensitivity and its clinical implications in 100 photosensitive patients (Kasteleijn-Nolst Trenité, thesis in preparation) and no such consistent seasonal variability has been found. Table 1 lists the number of newly identified photosensitive patients against the total number of new EEG referrals for EEG investigation of epilepsy per season. Apart from a slight autumnal excess in incidence of photosensitivity (p < 0-1, chi-square), there is no seasonal difference. Moreover, unlike Danesi, we quantified the degree of seizability by measurement of the photosensitivity range3. From Danesi’s model one might expect not only the prevalence but also the degree of photosensitivity to be greater during winter time, yet when our 100 patients are divided into two equal groups according to their photosensitivity ranges at the time of the first examination, no such seasonal effect is present (table 2).

Dr Danesi’s hypothesis of increased photosensitivity during the winter season is thus not supported by the findings of three other centres. On the contrary, in our material a weak seasonal effect appears to result from patients presenting with visually-induced seizures during the summer who then attend for EEG investigation in the autumn. This issue is not of purely academic interest as Dr Danesi’s hypothesis leads to the prediction that chronic exposure to high levels of ambient lighting may have adverse effects on people with photosensitive epilepsy.

DGA KASTELEIJN-NOLST TRENİTE
CD BINNIE
J OOSTING
W VAN EMDE BOAS
Achterweg 5,
Heemstede,
The Netherlands

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