Is the Application of an Esmarch Bandage Justified?

To the Editor.—In the recent literature there were reported three cases\textsuperscript{1,2,3} of massive pulmonary embolism (two of them fatal\textsuperscript{2,3}) following the application of an Esmarch bandage. In two patients\textsuperscript{1,2} this event was preceded by 2 weeks of immobilization without anticoagulation. The third patient, however, was anticoagulated and not immobilized for a week before her fatal embolism. Dislodgement of a venous thrombus during application of the Esmarch bandage was most probably the direct cause of embolism in all three cases.

The necessity of a bloodless operative field in limb surgery is indisputable. There are two common means to achieve this goal: 1) exsanguination through an Esmarch bandage and application of tourniquet ischemia; and 2) drainage through vertical positioning of the limb for a few minutes and application of tourniquet ischemia.

There is no doubt that in the second case some blood still remains in the extremity. However, this is manifested only by slight oozing during the incision. Later, there is no bleeding.

Seeing no important differences between these two methods, I do not think the application of an Esmarch bandage prior to tourniquet ischemia is necessary. Especially, not if the possibility of thrombus dislodgement is obviously present. Three reported cases of pulmonary embolism within 2 years should be a serious warning for our surgeons.

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Acute Tolerance to Thiopental is Alive and Well

To the Editor.—Hudson et al.,\textsuperscript{1} using power spectral analysis of the electroencephalogram (EEG) to measure the effects of thiopental on the brain, were unable to demonstrate the development of acute tolerance during three sequential infusions of thiopental, 9.6 ± 2.0, 5.6 ± 0.9, and 5.2 ± 1.2 mg.kg\textsuperscript{-1}, respectively. But does this disprove the existence of acute tolerance to thiopental? I think not.

We\textsuperscript{2,3} first encountered acute tolerance to thiopental in humans more than 30 years ago. Plasma thiopental concentrations at awakening in subjects receiving large doses (43–67 mg.kg\textsuperscript{-1}) of thiopental were considerably greater than those at awakening in the same subject after smaller doses (22–40 mg.kg\textsuperscript{-1}) (fig. 1, table 1). Indeed, extrapolation of point 4, "orientation," from curve BB ("3.25 grams") to curve AA ("2.0 grams") in figure 1 shows that awakening after the larger dose occurred at a plasma drug level corresponding to deep anesthesia following the smaller dose in the same subject. Dundee et al.,\textsuperscript{4} later reported analogous findings in surgical patients receiving smaller doses (2–15 mg.kg\textsuperscript{-1}): the larger the dose, the higher the plasma thiopental level at awakening.

Earlier studies in dogs by Shideman et al.,\textsuperscript{5} demonstrated a related form of acute tolerance to thiopental: when doses of 10 mg.kg\textsuperscript{-1} were repeated at short intervals after apparently complete recovery from the depressant effects of the previous dose, the plasma levels at which the righting reflex returned were successively higher with each additional dose. Altenburg et al.,\textsuperscript{6} also found another form of acute tolerance to thiopental in dogs, using CMRO\textsubscript{2} rather than awakening as the parameter of interest: pretreatment with thiopental decreased sharply the rate of decline of CMRO\textsubscript{2} produced by subsequent infusion of the drug.

All of the above studies validate the concept of acute tolerance to thiopental by comparing the effects of two
or more different dosages in the same or different individuals. The phenomenon cannot be recognized by strict adherence to a single dosing regimen, as illustrated with subject N in Table 1, whose three large doses of thiopental (50, 54, and 65 mg·kg⁻¹) administered at weekly intervals were associated with identical plasma levels at awakening. To the untrained this too would negate the concept of acute tolerance.

Note in passing the clinical corollary: to avoid invoking acute tolerance, keep the doses and increments of thiopental small.

Why did Hudson et al. fail to demonstrate the phenomenon in their elegant study? For two reasons—1) while their first dose was not small, they did follow the clinical corollary to a degree by decreasing the dosage of thiopental in their second and third infusions, thereby avoiding further development of acute tolerance (their protocol thus differed from that of Shideman et al. who repeated the full dose each time their dogs awoke and did show acute tolerance with each successive dose); 2) they used a deep stage of thiopental anesthesia (a flaw that they recognized but chose to accept), rather than the lighter levels (awakening) examined by us and others. Consider point 1, “corneal reflex” in Figure 1: extrapolation of this point from curve BB to curve AA shows very little difference, i.e., minimal tolerance, for this sign of deep anesthesia, in contrast to the marked difference, i.e., obvious tolerance, with point 4, “orientation,” permitting awakening at relatively high plasma drug levels.

How might Hudson et al. utilize their sophisticated technology to demonstrate acute tolerance to thiopental? They might modify their protocol to start with a larger priming dose of thiopental, deliberately overreaching their present EEG end point and following the subsiding plasma levels as the spectral edge receded to its previously chosen position (acute tolerance would predict this to occur at a higher plasma level). Alternatively, although I am less certain of this, they might extend their present protocol for (say) another six or seven repetitions of thiopental dosage to the same EEG end point to determine whether or not the plasma levels remain the same. (Brand et al. showed duration of sustained exposure to thiopental could be a factor: using an early EEG-controlled servo apparatus to administer thiopental, they found in many subjects gradually increasing plasma drug concentrations in the face of constant EEG patterns and clinical signs, again validating acute tolerance.)

In sum, with their excellent model and a little extra effort, Hudson et al. probably could demonstrate acute tolerance...
tolerance to thiopental in humans. In any case, the phenomenon does exist.

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