BREAST CANCER

Concern about potential applicability of findings in laboratory animals to cancer of the breast in women is based on the following observations: ovariectomy leads to regression of pre-existing metastatic breast cancer in 30 to 50 per cent of premenopausal women (2, 7) ; a similar proportion of premenopausal women with breast cancer will exhibit biochemical evidence of exacerbation of disease following administration of exogenous estrogen (20, 37) ; about 50 per cent of postmenopausal women and a few premenopausal women will experience regression of disease following administration of exogenous estrogen (8, 27). It is therefore clear that women with breast cancer may exhibit a positive or negative response to exogenous estrogen.

It is, however, completely unknown whether exogenous estrogens or progestins significantly alter the preclinical phase of breast cancer detectable by mammography (14). However, qualitative alterations in epithelial elements of the breast have been observed in surgical material taken from patients taking oral contraceptives (15). Yet no valid data are available to confirm a causal relation between oral contraception and the occurrence of such lesions. In addition, an unknown proportion of women taking oral contraceptives complain of increased tenderness and turgidity of the breasts, but measurable enlargement of the breasts is rarely demonstrable.

The Task Force recommends appropriately devised retrospective case-controlled studies as well as prospective studies to resolve the problem of an effect of oral contraceptives on the incidence and course of mammary lesions.

CONCLUSION

Lacking definitive information regarding the potential applicability of existing animal data to women, the Task Force believes that neither the exclusion of a potential carcinogenic role of oral contraceptives nor affirmation of such an effect is justified. However, the inconclusive observations cited for carcinoma of the cervix necessitate a major effort to solve this problem definitively under optimally controlled conditions of study. Meanwhile, the precautions cutlined in our previous report (12) as desirable for all women of reproductive age are recommended with equal force for those using the oral contraceptives.

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