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The increase in molluscum contagiosum

Data from both Britain and the United States suggest that genital molluscum contagiosum has become more common in the past decade.¹⁻³ In itself this may not matter, but the condition may be a marker for more serious genital infections.

Molluscum contagiosum is a harmless skin infection caused by a poxvirus that affects mostly children and young adults. The base of each lesion is composed of acanthotic prickle cells, and each infected cell eventually becomes "little more than a sack of virus particles."⁴ The fully developed molluscum lesion is a papule 2-5 mm in diameter with a characteristic dimple at its summit, and the lesions may be profuse in atopic or immunosuppressed people. In children the disease affects the face, trunk, and limbs, and transmission is probably by direct contact—boys seem more susceptible than girls.⁵ In adults the disease affects mainly the genitals, and sexual transmission is suggested by its prevalence in sexually active young people and the concurrence of other sexually transmitted diseases. Lesions have been noted in sex partners of those infected, but the infectivity seems to be low.⁶⁻⁸

Becker *et al* have recently analysed data on molluscum

contagiosum in the United States derived from the National Disease and Therapeutic Index survey of office based practice.¹ They restricted their analysis to patients aged 15 years or more, which means that most cases were of genital molluscum. First consultations for molluscum contagiosum increased tenfold between 1966 and 1983. In most years most cases occurred in patients aged 25-29. Infected women were younger than infected men, but the number of cases in men and women was similar. Most diagnoses were made by dermatologists and obstetricians and gynaecologists. In clinics for sexually transmitted diseases the increase was less dramatic, and two clinics recorded no important change between 1979 and 1983.¹ In England genital molluscum contagiosum has been reported from clinics since 1971, and new cases in both men and women had quadrupled by 1985.^{2,3} Men are seen roughly twice as often as women.^{2,3}

The increase might be caused by greater awareness of genital disorders by both patients and their doctors, but as with other viral sexually transmitted diseases—such as herpes and warts—the increase may be real. Does this matter? Genital molluscum contagiosum is an innocent self limiting disease that is only occasionally complicated by eczematization or ulceration. Treatment with phenol, electrocautery, or cryotherapy is not usually difficult. Nevertheless, these lesions may be markers for other more serious infections, and careful screening with laboratory tests is important.

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French lessons on surveillance of communicable diseases

Britain has several systems for collecting data on communicable diseases, but none is entirely satisfactory. The national weekly return system set up by the Royal College of General Practitioners in 1966 is designed to collect information on common conditions that present to general practitioners. It collects data manually on 14 diseases from doctors in 40 practices, who together care for 0.4% of the population. The Department of Health and Social Security has recently agreed to pay for a doubling of the number of practices over the next three years, and the system will almost certainly need to be computerised. The French began setting up such an electronic system two years ago.¹