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The problems of gelatine and prescribing urologically specific medication to a diverse population in the UK. An initial study

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Summary

Introduction: Gelatine is a setting agent used by the food and drug industries whose consumption is forbidden by religious and other faith groups. Gelatine-containing drugs are found in most of the drug classifications in Section 7.4 of the British National Formulary (BNF). We investigate the issues and seek to provide a solution to the use of gelatine-containing medications in urology.

Methods: Forty representative urological practitioners were surveyed to ascertain if they knew of gelatine-containing urological drugs, had encountered patients enquiring about gelatine-containing medication, and where they would seek this information from.

Results: Twenty-five percent of surveyed urologists had experience of patients refusing medication on the suspicion of gelatine content. 53% were unsure if urological drugs could contain gelatine, while 22%, wrongly, thought they did not. Regarding acquisition of drug constituent information, approximately a third did not know, a third looked to incorrect resources and a third referred to their pharmacy's drug information service.

Conclusion: Most urologists are unaware of the issues surrounding the prescribing of gelatine-containing urological medications, the most important being those given for the management of prostatic hypertrophy. A knowledge of alternative prescribing options can help avoid belief violation for our diverse community in the UK.

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Table 1 Religious and dietetic groups opposed to the consumption of animal gelatine-containing drugs.

Group	Reason not to consume gelatine
Muslim	Pork is unclean
Jew	Pork is unclean
Hindu	Pork is avoided and cows are sacred
Jain	Vegan diet
Buddhist	Most are vegetarian, some eat fish
Rastafarian	Most are vegetarian, some eat fish
Seventh day adventist	Lacto-ovo vegetarian diet
Vegetarian	Is of animal origin
Vegan	Is of animal origin

Introduction

As urologists we have a primary duty of care towards our patients, which includes the duty to 'respect their views' [1]. We therefore have to respect patients' religious and cultural beliefs and protect them from actions which may violate those beliefs. This duty of care was challenged when a small series of Muslim patients questioned the authors with regard to recommended medications for bladder outlet obstruction. They suspected these drugs to contain gelatine, something forbidden by their religion.

We found it difficult to give precise information to these patients due to a lack of information about the presence or absence of gelatine in the suggested treatments; as a consequence of this they either declined treatment, pressurised for early surgical intervention or were simply non-compliant with taking the prescribed medication.

Gelatine is commonly used as a setting agent by food and drug industries and may form constituents such as capsular coatings and jellies in commonly prescribed medications. Gelatine manufacture involves the rendering of animal or fish bones and the most ubiquitous sources are from porcine or bovine carcasses. Followers of many religions (Muslim, Jewish, Hindu) [2] and other groups (vegetarians, vegans) [3] have strict dietary prohibitions and forbid the consumption of gelatine obtained from animal sources (Table 1). It has been estimated that nearly 2.5 million people in the UK, 4% of the population, have religious beliefs [4] which might potentially lead to them refusing the use of medical treatments which could contain gelatine [5]. Ethnic congregation in certain areas of the UK [6] means that up to 50% of certain populations may be opposed to the consumption of gelatine-containing medications [7]; this will have logistic implications for large urban areas of the UK [6].

Non-adherence to medication by patients due to non-pharmacologically active components of drug delivery was first reported in 2004 [7]. That report demonstrated relapse of illness following the cessation of medication when the patients discovered the possibility that they had consumed porcine gelatine. Later those authors surveyed 100 patients and 100 physicians regarding their knowledge and opinion on products containing pork or beef [8]. They demonstrated that both groups were largely unaware of these ingredients in medications. Patients felt strongly that this information should be shared with them and that the most appropriate person to do this was the doctor as opposed to other healthcare professionals such as a nurse or pharmacist [8].

The aim of this initial study was to determine whether UK urologists knew about the ethical dilemma of prescribing gelatine-containing medications, whether they knew which commonly prescribed urological medications did contain gelatine and how they would find out about gelatine-containing drugs used specifically for urological conditions. Finally, by determination of the gelatine content of drugs in Section 7.4 of the BNF, direct from their manufacturers, we intended to provide a ready reference for urologists regarding alternatives to gelatine-containing drugs which patients might consider taking for specific urological problems.

Methods

Initially, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was circulated to 40 consultant urologists, trainee and non-trainee urologists, and specialist urological nurses from the North Western and Mersey regions. The questionnaire was designed to ascertain if in urological practice we were encountering patients who enquired about gelatine-containing medication, whether this population of urologists had any knowledge of the gelatine content of urological drugs and to find out how urologists would seek information on the components of urological drugs.

Data were collected from the proformas onto a database for analysis.

Manufacturers of the urological drugs in Section 7.4, and SSRIs in Section 4.3.3, of the BNF were contacted by phone, or e-mail, to determine the precise constituents of their products and, in particular, to ascertain the gelatine content of the medication. The composition of drugs in Section 7.4.4 was not investigated as these were liquid preparations.

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