Correspondence

Assessing motor neuron disease

Sir,

In their paper (Q J Med 2001; 94:491–5), Hadjikoutis and Wiles draw attention to a number of circumstances in which the serum chloride and bicarbonate can be misleading. They do not mention that they will also be misleading if they are measured when hypercapnia is increasing or decreasing.

An exacerbation of hypercapnia will take 4–6 days to raise the serum bicarbonate and lower the serum chloride to new steady levels.\(^1\) How long it will take them to recover in a remission (or in a period of assisted respiration) is more unpredictable, since it is strongly influenced by the patient’s chloride intake, which in turn depends mainly on the salt intake.\(^2\) If the intake is low, the serum chloride may remain low, and the bicarbonate high, for a long time. A prognosis based on those levels would be unduly pessimistic.

A. Polak
Havant

References
