Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccines

In their editorial for the February 2004 issue of this journal Lipsky and Hirschman take a clear stand on the lack of protection against pneumococcal infections by pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccines in elderly people.1 Their conclusion might have been different if the results of two studies, which demonstrated that in more than 25% of aged people the splenic function is impaired (4 to 14% ‘pitted’ erythrocytes), had been taken into account.2,3 The evidence for an impaired splenic function was evident in spite of the limited number of patients tested and the existence of comorbidity from diseases not known to be associated with hyposplenism. This finding in conjunction with the fact that the presence of more than 3.5% ‘pitted’ erythrocytes correlates strongly with functional hyposplenism suggests that the editorial conclusion does not apply to elderly people with an impaired function of the spleen.4 Therefore, we are convinced that attention should be paid to a possibly increased susceptibility to pneumococcal infections of aged individuals with an impaired function of the spleen before a prospective trial in the elderly Dutch population is designed.5

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