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Valium and cancer

Dr David Horrobin's attack on Valium (diazepam) is becoming tortuous and confused. In your issue of 5 February (Letters, p 364), he states "tumour promoters do not cause a cancer on their own". Why then does he compare diazepam with saccharin, which, as Professor Marian Hicks correctly points out (same page) has been classified as both a carcinogen and a promoter for rat bladder by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)? I accept that saccharin has been shown under defined conditions to promote bladder tumour development in rats exposed to bladder carcinogens, but this does not imply that saccharin is a promoter of carcinogenesis in all tissues of all species, or permit one to classify it as a "tumour promoter" without reference to the circumstances and tissue affected.

Horrobin's account of Green and Ketkar's observations in gerbils is mischievously misleading. The simple fact is that if liver-cell and bile-duct tumours are considered together, diazepam highly significantly reduced the incidence of malignant tumours of the liver in response to DEN, while at the same time delaying the onset of nasal cancer and prolonging life. If I were a DEN-treated gerbil, I would certainly hope to get my teeth into some diazepam as well!

Dr June Marchant's (Monitor, 12 February, p 408) non-specific use of the all-embracing term "tranquilliser" leads to confusion as it includes both neuroleptics (phenothiazines and butyrophenones) and anti-anxiety agents (benzodiazepines). The former group undoubtedly stimulate prolactin release in both animals and man but there is no firm evidence for this effect with benzodiazepines in animals and evidence for the reverse effect in man (Kamel Ajlouni and Moh'd El-Khateeb, *Hormone Research*, vol 13, p 160).

Since this correspondence began, the evidence from the Huntingdon rat study (M. R. Jackson and P. A. Harris, *Lancet*, 1981, p 104) that diazepam does not increase mammary tumour incidence in rats, has been confirmed with the publication of negative results with diazepam in carcinogenicity studies on rats and mice in studies carried out elsewhere (R. A. de la Inglesia and others—see, for example, *Toxicology and Applied Pharmacology*, vol 57, p 39).

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