Taking a back seat (answers on page 34)

Part one

Jayanti, a 60-year-old businessman, has developed low back pain for the first time in his life. He puts it down to the fact that his life has changed recently. His son Manu took over the reins of their business a year ago, letting Jayanti to take a back seat, with fewer worries and more time for leisure. Friends introduced him to a sports club, where he is playing tennis a few days a week. About a month ago he started to have pain across the lower back and radiating down his right leg. Assuming that it was just muscular, he took paracetamol and rested, and stopped his physical activities until, he assumed, the pain resolved. But it didn't lessen, so he arrived at his doctor's office, a little apologetically, as he 'didn't want to waste his time'. He feels otherwise very well, and has not gained or lost weight in the last ten years. He is of normal weight for his height, and is walking normally.

- Q1 Which of the following initial thoughts about this history are correct?
 - (a) Your patient is right the pain is almost certainly due to the new use of his muscles.
 - (b) Stopping the exercise was probably wrong it could have been exercised away: resting won't really help.
 - (c) Although it is almost certainly nothing to worry about, you have to consider that there may be a serious underlying reason for the pain.
 - (d) He needs specialist imaging to make the diagnosis.
 - (e) Paracetamol alone is usually enough to deal with muscular back pain, so that its failure to do so probably means that there are underlying problems.

Part two

- Q2 Considering alternative diagnoses of back pain, which of the following do you think most likely?
 - (a) Spinal metastases specifically from the prostate.
 - (b) Low grade infection in the pelvis or deep tissues.
 - (c) Trauma to a vertebral articular process.
 - (d) A spinal disc lesion.
 - (e) Inflammatory disease such as spondyloarthritis.

Part three

- Q3 Physical examination does not reveal any obvious cause for his pain. Which of the following are essential to the next stage of Jayanti's management?
 - (a) Digital rectal examination.
 - (b) Referral for specialist investigation.
 - (c) Spinal X-ray.
 - (d) Advise a programme of active exercise.
 - (e) A thorough psychological assessment.
 - (f) A short course of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID).
 - (g) A weak opioid if the NSAID is ineffective or not tolerable.

Part four

- Q4 Which of the following have been shown to be helpful to chronic back pain sufferers?
 - (a) Comprehensive explanation of the causes and nature of back pain.
 - (b) Encouragement to continue with normal physical and social activities.
 - (c) Group exercise programmes.
 - (d) Manual therapy such as manipulation and massage.
 - (e) Acupuncture.
 - (f) Complete rest for at least two weeks

Part five

- Q5 Jayanti has since, under his doctor's supervision, recovered from his back pain, but if he had not, and his sciatica had proven intractable, which of the following additional treatments would you consider?
 - (a) Neuropathic pain medication.
 - (b) Epidural injections of local anaesthesia and steroids.
 - (c) Surgical spinal decompression.
 - (d) Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

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