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The Psoriatic Arthropathy Alliance is a registered national charity dedicated to raising awareness and helping people with psoriatic arthritis and its associated skin disorder known as psoriasis.

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Psoriatic Arthropathy

Seldom Suspected, Easily Missed

Dr Anthony White

The Psoriatic Arthritis Clinic

The Royal Free Hospital, London

Why is it that the rheumatic features of the common skin disease do not figure more prominently in the list of diagnostic possibilities when faced with a patient with an arthritis, which does not look quite right for rheumatoid arthritis or for osteoarthritis? The pattern of joints involved does not fit our mental picture of rheumatoid hand deformity, the symptoms come and go in an odd way and although the terminal joints of the fingers are affected the patient is too young for primary generalised osteoarthritis. The problem is that we expect to find psoriatic arthropathy only in patients whose psoriasis is severe. Yet whilst it is true that such cases are more prone to joint symptoms the reverse is not true - mild skin disease certainly does not exclude serious joint involvement. Hence the problem lies with ourselves and our expectations and so we fail to ask the key questions: have you had any skin disease? is there anyone in the family with psoriasis? Do you have any itchy scaly patches in your scalp? Psoriatic arthropathy can be found in patients with one small area of skin involvement in the natal cleft, the scalp or behind one ear for instance - they may not know they have psoriasis until you examine them and find it!

And then there are the nails - dystrophy of the finger and toe nails is correlated with small joint arthritis of the fingers and toes, even to some extent with the individual digits being more likely to show arthritis if their nails are dystrophic - but the nails may happen to be normal on the day you see the patient so another key question to ask is "have you ever had any trouble with your finger nails?" Nails which readily break, nails which develop little pits in their surface and nails which show irregular margins and colour changes often yellow or brownish are all useful clues to likely nail dystrophy and female patients in particular usually recall such aspects easily when asked. Male patients are more likely to have dismissed the changes as likely to have been caused by injury or chemical

exposure at work and neither may recognise any connection with mild changes in the skin even if they have discovered they have them.

Are there any other clues in the pattern of the arthritis itself? Very large but almost painless effusions of the knees are found in few other diseases and should alert one to the possibility. An arthritis which picks out individual small hand or foot joints one or two at a time in an asymmetrical pattern should arouse suspicion and particularly if whole toes swell and become pink - the cocktail sausage toe - not to be confused with gout which is much briefer in duration yet much more painful and tender. If a patient has a painful joint or two but also backache which is worse at night and is followed by severe stiffness in the mornings the patient may be describing features of psoriatic spondylosis - the combination of peripheral joint synovitis with a pattern of inflammatory back pain closely resembling ankylosing spondylitis. Many such patients share the HLA B27 tissue type with sufferers of that condition.

Because much can be done to ease the lot of these patients it is most unfortunate that they tend to fall between two stools and be seen neither by rheumatologist nor dermatologist until late on in their illness. The way to remedy this is through better teaching of medical students and doctors. The Psoriatic Arthropathy Alliance (PAA) was founded very much with this need in mind and to foster research into this sadly neglected area of medicine by bringing together the professionals involved in the specialties most able to take this forward. Already progress is being made. A greater awareness of this condition will be a vital step along the path to better treatment and, in due course, the hope of cure.

