Side-effect of acetazolamide in prevention of acute mountain sickness

To the Editor: The scientific letter by Firth et al., about the side-effect of acetazolamide on a hiker on Mt Kilimanjaro makes a rather hasty conclusion about the recommendation of acetazolamide to prevent acute mountain sickness (AMS), especially in a rapid ascent profile such as Kilimanjaro. It is difficult to disagree about the possible causes of a problem should be considered. Irrespective of the pathophysiology, it is prudent to discontinue a drug if adverse side-effects occur after dosing. Similarly, if symptoms occur following rapid ascent, it is sensible to remove the possible cause by rapid descent. The onset of visual disturbances should occur following rapid ascent, it is sensible to remove the possible cause by rapid descent. The onset of visual disturbances should therefore prompt discontinuation of the possibly offending drug and to consider descending. Although the effectiveness of acetazolamide in preventing AMS during the very rapid ascent profiles typical on Kilimanjaro is debatable, we do not suggest that the prophylactic use of acetazolamide during gradual ascents be abandoned on the basis of this report; rather, the possible causes of a problem should be identified and removed if symptoms occur.

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