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Autor: Baumann, Alice
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First-rate medicine at Berne's Insel Hospital

Improved prospects for pancreas patients

Berne's high-tech reaches for the skies – Berne's top medicine cures pancreas patients. While space shuttle Atlantis had Berne University measuring instruments on board, Berne's university hospital is among the world's leading centres for treating pancreatic disease.

As the count-down at America's space centre, Cape Canaveral, reached the last few seconds, Bernese hearts were also working overtime. For with the latest space shuttle at the end of 1994 a piece of Bernese re-

Alice Baumann

search work was being catapulted into space. This was a measuring instrument for observing the ozone layer, whose development is being closely watched by the Institute of Applied Physics at Berne University. Scientists hope that its results will provide new knowledge about the atmospheric consequences of human activity.

From large-scale to small-scale. Ever more people are suffering from disease of the pancreas, an organ of vital importance. This is an illness increasingly common in developed countries. Too much alcohol, too fatty a diet and not enough exercise can have a devastating effect. But it is not only because of these vices so typical of our time that virtually nothing was known about disease of the pancreas before the beginning of this century. Since it lies right behind the abdomen in the region of the spinal column and the kidneys, the pancreas cannot be felt. Even when there is a tumour it is out of reach of the hands of the doctor. This meant that it was not until the development of photographic processes such as ultra-sound and computer tomography that the pancreas became accessible and techniques could be developed to treat it. This started about 30 years ago.

Today the specialised medical world distinguishes between three specific pancreatic conditions. Acute inflammation is the most sudden and dramatic

form of pancreatic disease. "It hits people like a flash of lightning", is how Professor Markus W. Buechler, director of the Clinic for Visceral and Transplant Surgery at Berne's Insel Hospital, describes it, "and is accompanied by frightful pains in the upper abdomen". In about half of patients it is due to excessive alcohol consumption over many years and in the other half to gall bladder stones. Chronic inflammation is caused by excessive drinking alone. "It is very painful and attacks mainly the so-called heavy drinker", says the doctor. "The normal pancreas is soft but in such cases it becomes as hard as rock. Someone with pancreatic disease literally has a stone in their stomach".

Cancer of the pancreas is being diagnosed with ever greater frequency. "This is a genuine illness of old people. Only one in every 100,000 under-twenties suffers from it, but once you are over eighty the chance of getting cancer of the pancreas rises to 200 out of every 100,000".

High praise for Berne

"Pancreatic tumours are very aggressive. They grow quickly. They can be

successfully treated only at an early stage. This is normally done by means of an operation. But once the liver and the lungs have been attacked there is virtually no hope of recovery", says Professor Buechler. "So our aim must be to diagnose malignant changes in the pancreas as early as possible. This is why endoscopy, viewing the interior of the body, is so important. Thanks to its excellent infrastructure and top scientific know-how in radiology (X-rays) and gastro-enterology (stomach and intestinal disease), this technology is available at the Insel Hospital. Not many clinics in the world can find a tumour as quickly as we can. Berne's university hospital is amongst the leading centres in the whole of Europe and the United States".

Deblocking the pancreas

What is it that makes the work of the Insel Hospital's team of doctors so special? Markus W. Buechler again: "My colleagues use endoscopy, i.e. no surgery, to remove gall stones from the passage between the pancreas and the stomach. In this way they deblock the pancreas and allow the secretions to flow again. My part of the work is to operate on patients suffering from serious acute inflammation. In this kind of surgery I cut out the dead parts; then the stomach is sewed up again and rinsed out with water through tubes. With this method developed by my former superior and myself over the last ten years we are now able to save about 90% of patients". ■

On the operating table Switzerland is tops; thanks to excellent infrastructure and optimum know-how, Berne's Insel Hospital is amongst the world's leading centres for treating pancreatic disorders. (Photo: Keystone)

