

children aged 5 years survived at least to the age of 10 years. This is a better outlook than that given previously.²

David Strauss

California Life Expectancy Project, Department of Statistics, University of California, Riverside, California 92521-0138, USA

Life expectancies in children with cerebral palsy

SIR—Anderson (Nov 30, p 1516)¹ draws attention to important issues about life expectancies in children with cerebral palsy. As he notes, Eyman and colleagues² report life expectancies for some groups of children in California that are only slightly higher than those reported for children in a persistent vegetative state. Anderson notes that British and Canadian studies have shown much higher life expectancies.

Two points should be emphasised. First, because of the larger size of the California data base, Eyman and colleagues were able to study some groups that were at a much lower level of functioning than those in other studies. For example, they have reported that with the (much milder) definition of poor mobility that Hutton and colleagues³ use results similar to Hutton's were obtained.⁴ A second point about the Eyman study has been widely misunderstood and needs clarification. In that work, any child whose condition improved was removed from the analysis. Since such children would have a better outlook, this procedure results in lower life expectancies than if an actual cohort of children had been followed. By contrast, Ashwal and colleagues⁵ did follow a cohort approach and recent unpublished work by our group indicates that many children in this cohort show subsequent improvement. For the estimation of a life expectancy (eg, in litigation) the cohort approach is the correct one. In fact, we have re-examined the issue with a cohort perspective. For even our lowest-functioning cohort (which was more debilitated than the worst group considered by Eyman and colleagues),² some 60% of

- 1 Anderson TW. Life expectancy in cerebral palsy. *Lancet* 1996; 348: 1516.
- 2 Eyman RK, Grossman HJ, Chaney RH, Call TL. Survival of profoundly disabled people with severe mental retardation. *Am J Dis Child* 1993; 147: 329-36.
- 3 Hutton JL, Cooke T, Pharoah POD. Life expectancy in children with cerebral palsy. *BMJ* 1994; 309: 431-35.
- 4 Eyman RK, Grossman HJ, Call TL. Life expectancy in children with cerebral palsy. *BMJ* 1995; 310: 665.
- 5 Ashwal S, Eyman RK, Call TL. Life expectancy of children in a persistent vegetative state. *Pediatr Neurol* 1994; 10: 27-33.