Objective: To evaluate stress fractures in leg (particularly around the knee, tibia, and femur) and knee pathology in active asymptomatic (no symptoms in the preceding month) soccer players.

Method: The study included 42 asymptomatic soccer players (21 women, 21 men; age range 19–31 years). Players from seven teams in the major female professional and amateur male soccer leagues were examined by technetium-99m-methylene diphosphonate (99mTc-MDP) bone scintigraphy during the soccer season. Four hours after intravenous injection of 20 mCi 99mTc-MDP, standard imaging included anterior planar spot images of the legs, lateral images of the knee, and single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT).

Results: Although the players were asymptomatic, increased tracer uptake, indicating stress fracture, was found in 28 (66%). Most of the stress fractures were in the tibia (62%) and femur (5%). In the 42 subjects (84 legs), 35 sites (42%) showed rupture of the posterior horn of the lateral meniscus and bone bruising of the tibial plateau, 16 sites (19%) showed rupture of the anterior horn of the medial meniscus, 11 sites (13%) showed bone bruising of the lateral femoral condyle, eight sites (10%) showed bone bruising of the medial femoral condyle, and there was avulsion injury to the infrapatellar tendon insertion in the anterior tibia in 34 sites (40%). There were 11 anterior cruciate ligament injuries.

Conclusion: Bone SPECT is very accurate, easy to perform, cost effective, may give valuable information before magnetic resonance imaging studies in the detection of meniscal tears, and may be used successfully when magnetic resonance imaging is unavailable.

Materials and Methods

Study population

The study population consisted of 42 subjects (21 women, 21 men; age range 19–31; mean age 22.3 years), with no signs and symptoms of active knee pathology or recent trauma history. These symptomatic soccer players from seven teams (42 players) in major female professional and amateur soccer leagues were evaluated with bone SPECT during the playing season.

Bone scintigraphy and bone SPECT

Bone scintigraphy was performed three or four hours after the intravenous administration of 740 MBq (20 mCi) technetium-99m-methylene diphosphonate (99mTc-MDP) using a large field of view gamma camera equipped with a high resolution collimator. Standard images including anterior planar spot images of the lower extremities, lateral images of the knee, and SPECT were obtained. A rotating gamma camera (GE Starcam 4000 CX/T) was used for image acquisition. Sixty four projections of 30 seconds each, with 64x64 matrix, in 360° circular rotation were acquired. All injuries, uptake may also be seen in the anterolateral tibial plateau.

Our aim in this study was to evaluate stress fractures in leg (particularly around the knee, tibia, and femur) and knee pathology in active soccer players with no symptoms in the preceding month (defined as asymptomatic).
images were interpreted visually by two experienced nuclear medicine physicians.

Classifications of bone scan findings
Stress fracture lesions detected by bone scintigraphy were classified qualitatively into three groups according to the number of lesions and scintigraphic visualisation. Scintigraphic patterns of the stress fractures were classified into three grades of bone response according to dimension, bone extension, and tracer concentration in the lesions (fig 1).

Knee SPECT
Bone SPECT images were interpreted according to the following criteria: crescent shape of increased activity in the medial or lateral tibial plateau, posterior focal medial or lateral femoral condylar activity, and increased activity in the infrapatellar tendon insertion. Increased tracer accumulation in the lateral femoral condyle or posterolateral tibial plateau was considered an important bone SPECT finding related to ACL injury.81 1

Figure 2 gives line drawings of the cross sectional anatomy showing the relevant sites of increased radionuclide uptake.

RESULTS
Table 1 summarises the localisation and grade of focal tracer uptake diagnosed as stress fracture. Increased tracer uptake was identified in the femur and tibia of 54 sites (62%). Most of the stress fractures were located in tibiae (62%). The diffuse tibial uptake was graded as A in 14 subjects, B in four subjects, and C in 10. Different grades of lesions were often found in the same subject.

Table 2 shows the results of bone SPECT of the asymptomatic soccer players. In the 42 subjects (84 legs), 35 sites (42%) showed abnormal uptake (fig 3), indicating rupture of the posterior horn of the lateral meniscus and bone bruising of the tibial plateau, 16 sites (19%) showed rupture of the anterior horn of the medial meniscus, eight sites (10%) showed bone bruising of the medial femoral condyle, 11 sites (13%) showed bone bruising of the lateral femoral condyle, and avulsion injury of the infrapatellar tendon insertion into the anterior tibia was detected in 34 sites (40%). Different localisations of the knee lesions were often found in the same patient. There were 11 ACL injuries.

Table 1  Localisation and grade of focal tracer uptake in the leg

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade A</th>
<th>Grade B</th>
<th>Grade C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Localisation</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right femur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left femur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tibia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left tibia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F, Female; M, male.

Table 2  Results of SPECT bone scans of the knee in asymptomatic soccer players

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right knee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left knee</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lesions: A, rupture of the anterior horn of the medial meniscus; B, rupture of the posterior horn of the lateral meniscus and bone bruising of the tibial plateau; C, bone bruising of the lateral femoral condyle; D, avulsion injury of the infrapatellar tendon insertion into the anterior tibia; E, bone bruising of the medial femoral condyle.

F, Female; M, male.
DISCUSSION

Soccer injuries occur as a result of several factors: player factors (joint instability, muscle tightness, conditioning, and rehabilitation); equipment (type of shoe and shin guards); playing surface (grass versus artificial turf); rules (sportsmanship and adherence to rules); other miscellaneous factors.

In a group of older players (25–41 years old), the most severe types of knee injuries (ligament ruptures and meniscal tears) and muscle strains were recorded with approximately equal frequency (25%, 25%, and 26%). We found approximately 30% of meniscal tears and 13% ACL injuries in our cohort. Previous studies on ACL injuries have shown that men have a higher incidence of ACL tears than women in a variety of sports. The results of our study are very similar (table 2). Intrinsic and extrinsic factors suggested for this discrepancy include hormonal effects, ligament size, body weight, experience, technique, and unequal access to adequate training facilities. A further factor may be that men play more aggressively than women. Also it may be related to the fact that, in some studies, injury incidence is defined as the number of injuries occurring during a study period. In adult male players, the incidence is 12–35 injuries per 1000 hours of outdoor games and 1.5–7.6 injuries per 1000 hours of practice, whereas in female players, the incidence seems to be lower. In our study population, men had a higher incidence of ACL tears than women, which may be explained by this finding. Bjordal et al suggested that it is difficult to perform a prospective study of the relatively rare ACL injury in soccer. Many ACL injuries are misdiagnosed at the first clinical examination. Lack of skilled medical examiners and the high cost of diagnostic tools such as MRI used in the initial evaluation may increase the cost of diagnosis. Therefore the ability of bone SPECT to detect meniscal tears early may have economic significance. Scintigraphy detects stress fractures from the early pathological metabolic bone response that occurs in the periosteal-cortical region. Radiography detects stress fractures late in the bone reaction process (2–12 week after positive scintigraphy), is insensitive for diagnosing mild stress fractures, and remains negative during their resolution. Stress fractures result from excessive, repetitive loads on the bone which cause an imbalance between bone resorption and formation. The origins of stress fractures are probably site specific and depend on bone density and geometry, the direction of the load, the vascular supply to the bone, the surrounding muscular attachments, skeletal alignment, and the type of athletic activity. A high incidence of stress fractures has been reported in women runners. Bjordal et al suggested that it is difficult to perform a prospective study of the relatively rare ACL injury in soccer. Many ACL injuries are misdiagnosed at the first clinical examination. 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obtained with MRI. Our results suggest that bone SPECT may be valuable for detecting meniscal tears of the knee, especially when MRI is unavailable.

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REFERENCES

The land of the free

- Recent news from the US may take some folks by surprise. The Arkansas House of Representatives recently passed a bill that makes the selling of “clean” urine for cheating drug tests an offence punishable by three months in jail and a US$500 fine. Texas, Nebraska, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania have also banned the sale of urine, with south Carolina leading the pack, where the penalty is three years in jail if convicted. For the interested, there is a burgeoning internet market in urine, with test kits for warming urine and chemicals to mask drug metabolites readily available.