Dystonic reactions: two case reports

Gary W Kerr

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Case reports of dystonic reactions to metoclopramide are presented. Dystonic reactions may occur after ingestion of many drugs and should be considered by accident and emergency staff in patients with a suggestive clinical presentation. (J Accid Emerg Med 1996;13:221–222)

Dystonic reactions are a well recognised complication of many drugs,1 2 commonly the antipsychotics and antiemetics. Acute dystonias most commonly affect children and young adults,3 with the muscles of the head and neck mainly affected. Opisthotonus and torticollis are classical, as are oculogyric crises with painful lateral or vertical deviation of the eyes. Bizarre grimaces, blepharospasm, tongue protrusion, and a subjective feeling of swelling

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of the tongue may occur. Rarely spasm of laryngeal and pharyngeal muscles cause choking and respiratory distress. There is no mental impairment, although some patients may initially be considered hysterical due to the unusual appearance of some reactions. Reactions usually occur within a couple of days of starting treatment, but can also present on drug withdrawal. Once recognised they should be treated with an anticholinergic such as benztropine or procyclidine, which normally leads to prompt resolution.

A clear history and classical presentation may make the diagnosis evident but the following two clinical histories show that this is not always the case. In both these cases the initial lack of a history of drug ingestion delayed the correct diagnosis, the first being treated as a cervical spine injury and the other as meningitis, with inappropriate and potentially harmful drugs being given.

Accident and emergency (A&E) staff should consider drug induced dystonic reactions in patients with an appropriate clinical presentation and press for any history of drug ingestion. Many patients are often unaware of the medication they are taking, especially elderly people. Patients who abuse drugs recreationally may deny ingestion because of fear that this information will be passed to police; they should be reassured of the confidential nature of their history. In these cases treatment for possible drug induced dystonic reaction may be diagnostic as well as therapeutic.

Case reports

CASE 1

A schoolboy of 14 years presented by emergency ambulance to the A&E department. He had fallen after slipping on ice in the playground and was complaining of neck pain. The ambulance had fitted a cervical collar and placed him on a spinal board. On arrival he was treated as a potential cervical spine injury and standard x rays taken. These were normal, and immobilisation measures were discontinued. A torticollis was evident and over the next few minutes he developed a marked extensor spasm of his cervical spine and a fixed upward gaze. He denied taking any drugs but in view of his presentation he was given intravenous benztropine and there was a full resolution of his symptoms and signs.

Despite further questioning he maintained that he had not taken any drugs, only a drink of lemonade given to him by a friend at school.

CASE 2

On the same day a general practitioner in the city was called to see another 14 year old boy at his grandmother's house. He had come home from school early, complaining of a sore neck. There was no history of trauma and he had been perfectly well on leaving home earlier. He was apyrexial and apart from "holding his head to the left side" examination was unremarkable. In view of the boy's distress he was sent to the on call paediatric team for their opinion. Initial assessment noted that he complained of sore neck, feeling numb around the mouth, difficulty in swallowing saliva, and episodes where he was unable to see. While being examined in the admissions unit he developed extensor spasm of his upper body and a fixed upward gaze. He was conscious and noted to have a "grinning" appearance. He was thought to be generally hyperreflexic and possibly to have bilateral papilloedema. Blood was taken for full blood count, C-reactive protein, blood cultures, urea and electrolytes, calcium, magnesium, and blood gases. Urine was sent for toxicology and culture. He was given intravenous dexamethasone, mannitol (300 ml of 20%), and cefotaxime. As spasms continued, after one hour he was given intravenous diazepam, then 15 minutes later procyclidine. Shortly after this the spasms settled but he continued to receive intravenous dexamethasone and cefotaxime until the next day, after which he was observed for a further 24 hours before being discharged. He denied any drug ingestion but it transpired that he had put some of his grandmother's metoclopramide in a bottle of lemonade from which he and his friend (case 1) had drunk. Diagnoses initially considered on presentation had included meningitis and tetanus.

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