Injuries initially misdiagnosed as sprained wrist (Beware the sprained wrist)

H R Guly

Objectives: To describe the injuries misdiagnosed as a sprain of the wrist and to determine the approximate incidence of misdiagnosis in patients diagnosed as having a sprain of the wrist.

Methods: All diagnostic errors in an accident and emergency (A&E) department were noted on a computerised database. Injuries initially misdiagnosed as wrist sprain are described and compared with the number of diagnoses of sprained wrist on the A&E department computer.

Results: 57 injuries initially diagnosed as a sprained wrist had a different diagnosis (1.76% of all diagnoses of sprained wrists). This is an underestimate of the true incidence of diagnostic error. Forty two per cent of the misdiagnoses were of greenstick or torus fractures of the distal radius.

Conclusions: Training for junior doctors in A&E departments should be improved—especially training in radiological interpretation. Other methods of preventing diagnostic errors by misreading of radiographs, for example, more hot reporting of radiographs by radiologists or radiographers should be considered.

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DISCUSSION

In this series nearly 2% of all patients diagnosed as having a sprain of the wrist had a more significant injury and this figure is statistically significantly higher than patients with other diagnoses. As discussed elsewhere, no series of diagnostic errors can be complete and so the true incidence of diagnostic error is likely to be much higher.

Forty two per cent of these diagnostic errors were greenstick or torus fractures of the distal radius, either as an isolated injury or (in one case) with a fracture of the capitate. Other common diagnostic errors were other fractures of the distal radius and fractures of the scaphoid.

Others have found that the wrist is a common site for misinterpreting radiographs in an A&E department. One study showed an incidence of misinterpretation (including false positives) of 9.3% with a clinically important false negatives in 3.4% of all wrist radiographs. Altogether 8.8% of positive radiographs were missed. Another study showed that 9.9% of 1276 wrist radiographs were misinterpreted (including false positives) and that this was the second most important area for radiological misinterpretation. Altogether 2.1% had significant important errors, the commonest of which were fractures of the scaphoid (11), undisplaced greenstick fractures (10), Colles fractures (2) and avulsion fractures (2). Fractures of the scaphoid are not uncommonly overlooked on a radiograph. In a series of 222 patients with a scaphoid fracture, Leslie and Dickson found that 3% were missed by the casualty officer and Young et al found that of 85 patients referred with a clinical scaphoid fracture (defined as recent wrist trauma with tenderness over the scaphoid but normal wrist radiograph), five (5.9%) actually had a fracture visible on the initial radiographs.

There was one missed rupture of an intercarpal ligament causing scapholunate dissociation visible on the original plain radiographs. It is possible that there might have been more such injuries but clenched fist radiographs were not performed.

The majority of errors are made by senior house officers (SHOs) who currently see most of the patients. Almost by definition SHOs are inexperienced. Diagnostic errors could be reduced but this would require more resources for staffing and training. Doctors working in A&E departments should receive training in radiological interpretation and should, ideally, be tested on their ability to do so accurately before they are allowed to discharge patients. However, senior and middle grade staffing levels in A&E departments do not allow this and radiology staffing levels do not allow 24 hour reporting of radiographs by radiologists. Radiographers can assist in interpreting radiographs. Among competing demands on the health service, improvements to A&E services will be judged by risk management. I have presented no evidence to suggest that patients have come to any harm as a result of these diagnostic errors. Torus fractures of the distal radius do not require plaster immobilisation and the incidence of non-union in fractures of the scaphoid is not increased by failure to immobilise the wrist initially. However, errors have the potential for causing harm, loss of patient confidence, complaint and legal action. They are also inefficient for the hospital as patients need to be recalled for the correct diagnosis to be explained to the patient and correct treatment to be given; complaints need to be investigated and general practitioners need to be written to. Although there is no evidence in this group of patients that outcomes have been adversely affected, efforts should be made to improve diagnostic accuracy in A&E departments.

REFERENCES

Injuries initially misdiagnosed as sprained wrist (Beware the sprained wrist)

H R Guly

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