Management of sickle cell crisis

BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY MEDICINE
GUIDELINES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF SICKLE CELL CRISIS

REMEMBER AT ALL TIMES—The patient or relative generally knows if he/she has sickle cell disease and is usually knowledgeable about the disease. The pain of sickle cell crisis is genuine, can be excruciating, and can be greater than that of childbirth. Sickle cell disease patients often have a higher pain threshold than others.

DISEASE DEFINITION:
Those at risk include patients with an ethnic background from Africa, West Indies, India, the Mediterranean, or the Middle East. Sickle cell crisis may present with a variety of clinical syndromes including severe pain in limbs, chest, abdomen, and/or systemic conditions. The pain is often severe but limb, hip or back pains may be vague in the early stages of an attack. The pain is caused by blockage of small vessels by sickled red blood cells. The immediate result of sickling is a reduction in oxygen delivery to tissues. The local fall in oxygen saturation may be precipitated by a number of factors, such as minor infections.

MANAGEMENT AIDS:
1. Parenteral analgesia within 15 minutes
2. IV fluids within 30 minutes
3. Admit to ward within two hours
4. Warmth. Reassurance
5. Identify the cause of pain
6. Obtain expert haematological advice early and/or contact the patient’s base hospital if any of the following is present:
   a. shock
   b. pregnancy >12 weeks
   c. dyspnoea
   d. silent abdomen
   e. organ involvement
   f. vomiting/dehydration >10%
   g. abdominal pain/distension
   h. you are inexperienced in the management of this condition

TREATMENT OF THE PAINFUL CRISIS:

TRIAGE NURSE
Place on a trolley
Check oxygen saturation
Give oxygen
Wrap in warm blankets if patient feels cold
Triage to resuscitation room if:
   • SaO2 <85%
   • Neurological deficit
   • Hbg <5
   • Shock
   • Organ involvement
   • Priapism

A&E DOCTOR
Give high flow oxygen. Ensure adequate ventilation. Obtain IV access.
Take bloods for FBC, reticulocytes, group/save, urea/electrolytes, viral titres, blood cultures.
Commence IV infusion. (1 litre 0.9% NaCl over 3 hours in an adult)
Do not use veins if present
Give amoxycillin 500 mg and penicillin G 1200 mg IV
In case of allergy give clarithromycin/erythromycin and seek advice.

SECONDARY SURVEY:
There are certain recognised syndromes and complications which may occur during sickle cell crisis.

CHEST SYNDROME
Suspect from chest pain, tachypnoea, chest wall tenderness and SaO2 <95%. Often misdiagnosed as clinical signs and chest x ray changes may present late. Look for signs of coincidental ischaem. Monitor arterial gases. If pA0 <7 kPa contact anaesthetist, consider CPAP. If pA0 <8 kPa ask haematologist about possible exchange transfusion.

ABDOMINAL SYNDROME
Usually pain with no peritoneal signs and normal bowel sounds. Sometimes like surgical abdomen. Do abdominal x rays and serum amylase. Keep nil by mouth and monitor carefully. If the patient is on desferroxamine and develops diarrhoea, stop the drug. Check yersinia titre, and treat if positive.

INFECTIONS
Prone to pneumococcus and parvovirus B19 especially if hypopoenic. Pyrexia may be only sign. Do blood cultures, sputum cultures, throat swab, MSU/urinalysis. Discuss with consultant microbiologist and haematologist.

APLASTIC CRISIS
Characterised by: high output CCF, decreased haematocrit, and reticulocytes associated with parvovirus B19 infection. Siblings may be source of parvovirus. Senior haematology opinion essential.

SEQUESTRATION
Presents with severe anaemia. Age <5 years generally splenomegaly. Age >5 years generally hepatomegaly. May need urgent transfusion. Seek immediate advice from a consultant haematologist.

MANAGEMENT OF CHILDREN:
Seek expert assistance early. IV access may be difficult; start oral rehydration immediately. Give paracetamol early orally/rectally. Morphine sulphate SC as follows: up to 1 month, 0.15 mg/kg; 1–12 months, 0.20 mg/kg; 1–12 years, 0.1–0.2 mg/kg. Guide to weight in kg for children aged less than 10 years = (age + 4) × 2. Provide good emotional support for the child and parents. Some children may appear angry and rebellious but try and imagine what they have been through.

PITFALLS:
• Do not underestimate the requirement for pain relief.
• Avoid damage to veins if IV access is very difficult and take patient’s advice on the best vein.
• If IV access impossible, try NG or rectal fluids.

DEFINITIVE CARE:
Admit to medical/paediatric ward for ongoing treatment and further haematological opinion.

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Commentary
WHY THESE GUIDELINES
Greater population movement in recent times has meant that a patient can present with a sickle cell crisis anywhere in the UK. These guidelines will be particularly useful for those hospitals which deal with this condition infrequently. These patients are often disadvantaged in accident and emergency departments, where they present less frequently, because the underlying pathological severity of the condition is easy to underestimate.

WHAT IS A SICKLE CELL CRISIS?
In the inherited condition of the gene causing an amino acid substitution in haemoglobin from the normal adult HbA to HbS, the homozygote (SS) has sickle cell anaemia and the heterozygote (AS) has sickle cell trait. In the deoxygenated state HbS molecules can polymerise causing red blood cells to sickle. Sickle cells block small blood vessels to cause infarction but are also fragile and therefore haemolyse. Sickle cell crises may be from thrombosis, narrow aplasia, sequestration, or haemolysis.

PROBLEMS IN MANAGEMENT
(1) Pain without clinical signs means that it is difficult for the uninitiated to take the pain seriously. Assessment is made even more difficult because the patient may be irritable due to pain and hypoxia. Generous, early, and frequent analgesia is required. In severe pain, morphine is the drug of choice. Patients like pethidine but its use should be avoided because of the greater possibility of addiction, the possibility of metabolites causing fits, and the long half life which makes patient-controlled analgesia difficult. Patients may say that they have allergic reactions to morphine in an attempt to persuade the doctor to use pethidine so this history should be properly pursued. Ketorolac trometamol has been shown to be useful in the USA but centres in the UK have found it less useful because patient acceptance has been poor.

(2) Hydration can be difficult by the intravenous route because of vein closure due to frequent cannulation. Profuse oral drinks may tide over the problem temporarily in patients with normal bowel sounds, as may rectal rehydration. The external jugular or any other vein can be used in an emergency.

(3) The need for speed because of the risks of rapid deterioration, infarction, and infection is paramount.

CONCLUSION
We hope these guidelines find national acceptance and implementation. Rapid effective management of sickle cell crises will result in a dramatic reduction of avoidable distress and morbidity.

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Faculty of Accident and Emergency Medicine
Consultant appointments, January to April 1998

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