LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Best evidence topic reports: fracture of the clavicle

EDITOR,—The article concerning the treatment of simple fractures of the clavicle, based on best evidence, is unhelpful and potentially misleading. This search highlights the lack of evidence comparing the use of collar and cuff with broad arm sling in the treatment of fracture of the clavicle. Unfortunately some clinicians may infer from this, incorrectly, that both treatments are equally acceptable.

The issue of treatments for fracture of the clavicle can be approached sensibly from a biomechanical point of view. Simple biomechanics dictate that a sling, which provides support, is the treatment of choice. In fact any device that elevates the shoulder (such as double collar and cuff) is acceptable, whereas a single collar and cuff, which provides traction, will distract the fracture, increase displacement, put more tension on the skin overlying the fracture site, and certainly cause a great deal of discomfort. The only potential disadvantage of a sling is that it may directly impinge upon the fracture site.

While we should strive towards evidence based practice it is important that the right questions are addressed: in this instance this has not been achieved. This particular search has been an unnecessary paper exercise and has not contributed in any way to the rational treatment of fracture of the clavicle.

PETER J RIIOU
Specialist Registrar, Emergency Medicine, Derriford Hospital, Plymouth PL6 8DH


Best evidence topic reports: fracture of the clavicle

EDITOR,—I have always found the best evidence topic reports in the journal to be informative and valuable, so much so that we present them to our students as good examples of a questioning approach to accident and emergency practice. I was, however, concerned to find one example recently which was completely illogical. The comparison of collar and cuff or sling after fracture of the clavicle by Dr Simon Carley and Dr Kevin Mackway-Jones may mislead some readers of the journal into thinking that a collar and cuff is an acceptable treatment for fractures of the clavicle.

The deformity in fractures of the mid-shaft of the clavicle is caused by two factors, firstly the upward pull of the sternocleidomastoid muscle on the medial half of the clavicle, and secondly the effect of gravity pulling down the shoulder and the attached distal half of the clavicle. To overcome this deformity, the elbow must be supported, whereas the use of a standard collar and cuff produces the opposite effect. Collar and cuff slings are very useful in treating fractures of the upper humerus, for which "natural traction" is required, but the use of such a sling in clavicular fracture would predictably cause an increase in deformity and unnecessary pain and suffering. I have been unable to find any reference in textbooks or other literature to suggest that anyone has ever advocated the use of collar and cuff for the treatment of clavicular fractures.

There is, however, an alternative type of collar and cuff sling, known as the double collar and cuff or Maudsley sling, which offers elbow support just like the broad arm sling, but which has significant advantages in terms of patient comfort and mobility. The broad arm sling has the disadvantage of completely covering the upper limb to which it is applied, and additionally it may apply direct pressure over the site of a clavicular fracture. The double collar and cuff does not cross the fracture site, and allows more access to the arm for washing and dressing (fig 1). The authors may be correct that there is no literature comparing the use of collar and cuff or sling in simple clavicular fracture, but perhaps this is due to the right question not being asked. Readers are left with an unsatisfactory conclusion and an impression that "local advice" might legitimately include the use of a collar and cuff for clavicular fracture. It would, perhaps, have been of more benefit to compare the efficacy of the broad arm sling and figure-of-eight bracing, since I am sure that most of the readers of this journal would not have seen the evidence for and against laid out in the skilful way normally adopted by the series authors.

ROBERT A COCKS
Director, Accident and Emergency Medicine, Academic Unit, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Room G06, Cancer Centre, Prince of Wales Hospital, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong


Best evidence topic reports: shaft of humerous fractures

EDITOR,—The best evidence topic report on the above by Drs K Herren and S Carley highlights the lack of evidence and misunderstanding among some readers.1 It is not clear whether they are discussing broad arm sling/collar and cuff (sling supports) in conjunction with a primary plaster support or the sling supports just on their own in an uncomplicated shaft of humerus injury.

If the former were the case, then it is collar and cuff which definitely has a greater mechanical advantage.2 The two common methods of plaster support in these fractures are either hanging arm cast3 or the coaptation splint4 (commonly called U slab/sugar tong splint).

The distinct advantages of using a collar and cuff are that by adjusting the length (or the "drops") of the sling, one can correct the anteroposterior angulation—shortening corrects the anterior angulation while lengthening corrects the posterior angulation. Placing the loop of the cuff on the dorsal aspect of the wrist corrects the lateral angulation and placement of the same on the volar aspect of the wrist corrects the medial angulation. While a broad arm sling can definitely provide a support, I do not consider the finer advantages provided by the collar and cuff.

There is no scientific basis for discussion of management/prognosis of these fractures treated just with cuff and collar or broad arm sling. It is not a surprise that particular evidence is lacking on a literature search based on the entry criteria in the report.

KALYAN S MURALI
Specialist Registrar, Accident and Emergency Department, City Hospital, Dudley Road, Birmingham B18 7QH

3 Caldwell JA. Treatment of the fractures of the shaft of humerus by means of the plaster cast. American Journal of Surgery 1940;70:421.

Kevin Mackway-Jones replies

I am grateful for the opportunity to reply to the letters that comment on the best evidence topic reports (BETs) about the support of upper limb fractures. These letters argue that the outcomes of the literature reviews are not reliable and hence should be handled with caution. The BETs are based on a wide search of available literature, and the letters argue for particular treatments on biomechanical grounds, and the authors clearly have well formed views about how these fractures are best managed.

The two BETs were not undertaken for purely academic reasons. As previously reported BET topics are selected because they seek to answer questions that arise in clinical practice. In both instances junior staff had been told to instigate the alternative treatments being considered (broad arm sling or collar and cuff) by different specialists at different times. Each specialist had “good reasons” for the advice they gave and each felt that their advice offered the best approach to care. The BETs were undertaken to establish what evidence there was for this conflicting advice.

The fact that rigorously applied searches revealed no evidence does not imply that one or other of the alternatives is not the best, but rather that there is no direct comparative evidence to support one or the other. In such cases our recommendation can only be that practitioners must make up their own minds using other sources—in other words, for junior and non-specialist staff, local advice must be followed.

It is of great interest to me that the first comments on the BETs are about negative reports. There are of course two reasons why a
Management of minor head injuries by non-specialists

EDITOR,—The management of patients with a minor head injury (MHI)—that is, a Glasgow coma scale score of 13-15 1—once the decision has been made to admit them, is relatively simple and straightforward. The value of having a neurological specialist input could be looked upon as a luxury. In Nottingham there is a co-located accident and emergency (A&E) department with a regional neurosurgical unit. It is often the case that the A&E beds for observation become full and the local arrange-ments for the regional neurosurgical unit are not as simple to invoke as in other hospitals, and it is not always so easy to admit the patient under their care. The value of this resource for this condition has been ques-tioned and a retrospective review of patients with a MHI admitted to this hospital was undertaken to determine the actual involve-ment of neurosurgery in the management of these cases in a typical teaching hospital.

For the calendar year of 1996, 618 adults (>16 years of age) were admitted with a diagnosis of MHI for observation, of whom 89 (14.4%) were referred to the regional neurosurgical unit (M: F = 63:26; 70.8%:29.2%). Thirty seven (42%) had other injuries, some of which required admission in any case, for example maxillofacial or spinal fracture in eight (9%), their MHI being truly minor.

The NHSS referred was made because of no A&Es beds in 47 (53%), was not stated at all on the admission card in 22 (25%), was for "social reasons" in four (4%), and in two (2%) because it was had been under a neurosur-geon's care for another reason not related to their MHI. Of the 24 (8%) patients who had a computed tomography during their admission had anything abnormal detected, neither of whom needed any intervention beyond simple observation.

Visual assessment of blood loss by accident and emergency staff

EDITOR,—Birkinshaw et al have recently demon-strated that in reconstructed scenarios using manikins, 80% of estimates of blood loss by paramedics and technicians were under-estimates, and for a blood loss of 3 litres the mean underestimate was 60%. It is also important that staff in the accident and emer-gency (A&E) department can assess blood loss that is continuing within the department and also assess loss in clothing as it is removed, as stressed in Advanced Trauma Life Support courses.1

We undertook a study whereby a measured volume (450 ml) of expired human whole blood was spilt over some clothing on a non-absorbent surface. After five minutes this scene was photographed. The photograph was shown to staff of the A&E department and they were asked to estimate the volume of blood shown in the photograph.

Forty A&E nurses and 18 senior house officers (SHOs) were surveyed. Their estimates of blood loss are shown in table 1. This demonstrates that staff in A&E show a wide variation in the accuracy of their estima-tions of blood loss. It is not relied on for decision making. In contrast to the pre-hospital study, A&E staff appear to overestimate blood loss. None of the staff had ever been shown pictures of measured blood loss as part of their training. There is a need to train A&E staff in the assessment of external blood loss.

The same survey carried out in the same hospital in 1992 revealed, using a randomly acquired sample of 90 patients with MHI, that eight (9%) were referred to the regional neurosurgical unit, none of whom needed any active intervention.

One of the authors (NB) carried out a similar review of patients admitted under general surgeons with MHI for the year 1991 in a different large general hospital with a co-located A&E department and a trial trauma centre and subregional neuro-surgical unit. Of 53 patients admitted with MHI only four (7.5%) required a neurosurgi-cal opinion and none required active inter-vention.

These three temporally separate studies in two similar, but different, hospitals found a total of 761 patients admitted with MHI, none of whom required neurosurgery. It is our con-tention that no patients with MHI need be admitted under the care of neurosurgeons in this country and that patients who need specialist neurosurgical input can be identified by neurological observations in a non-specialist setting and referred for advice or action accordingly.

HENRY PAU
NEIL BUXTON
Department of Neurosurgery,
University Hospital, Nottingham NG7 2AH


Transthachal jet ventilation and the completely obstructed airway: incorporating an active expiratory phase

EDITOR,—Transthachal jet ventilation is an important technique in emergency airway management. During an audit of equipment available for emergency airway management we had occasion to test various devices for transthecal jet ventilation in a model trachea and lung (BOC Lung Ventilator Performance Analyser, compliance 50 ml/cm H2O) with an interposed Wright respirometer to measure minute ventilation. Using a 14 gauge cannula and Sander’s injector connected to a 400 kPa oxygen outlet in a model where the “laryngeal” end of the “trachea” was completely ob-strected, further ventilation following the first insufflation was clearly not possible without hyperinflation of the model lung.

In this situation where expiration via the natural airway is not possible, it is a commonly believed myth that insertion of another 14 gauge cannula will allow the lungs to deflate between insufflations. In our model, when this was performed, a minute ventilation of 2.5 l/min was achieved. This is clearly insufficient for adequate ventilation for any considerable length of time. However, when the expiratory cannula was connected to standard wall suction set at “high” (80 kPa), a minute venti-lation of 10 l/min was consistently achieved. A similar result was obtained using only one can-nula connected to the Sander’s injector and suction via a three way tap leaving between the two for inspiration and expiration.

This technique has not been tried in clinical practice and it is possible that the expiratory phase could become obstructed by tracheal mucosa, blood, or mucus. However, in the situation of a completely obstructed airway where a satisfactory needle cricoidotomy for transthecal jet ventilation has been performed incorporation of an active expiratory phase may allow a clinically useful minute ventilation and would remove some degree the time pressure before a more satisfactory definitive airway (for example surgical cricothyroidotomy) is achieved.

G KESELL
Consultant Anaesthetist,
Cleveland School of Anaesthesia,
Chorlton House, South Cleveland Hospital,
Marmont Road, Middlesbrough TS4 1BW

Table 1 A&E staff's estimate of volume of a measured 450 ml blood loss

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<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
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