Fasciotomy in crush syndrome patients: debates continue

We read, with interest, the well written articles on fasciotomy and crush injury by Duman et al and Demirkiran et al. Demirkiran et al presented 18 cases of crush syndrome, seven of them underwent fasciotomy, and six of them had amputation in the end. It is difficult for Demirkiran et al to recommend fasciotomy as the first choice treatment in crush syndrome patients. By contrast, Duman et al presented 16 cases of fasciotomy, 10 of them had no peripheral pulses, four underwent amputation, four needed further physiotherapy, and eight functionally recovered after 15 months. Huang et al also reported high infection and amputation rate from their fasciotomies series. During an earthquake disaster because of increased patient overload and the chaotic situation, fasciotomies carry a higher risk of infection and can result in improper wound care and sepsis and mortality. Sever et al reported findings that support the attitude not to undertake fasciotomy unless clear objective indications are present such as increased intracompartmental pressure. Sever et al also suggested that the practice they followed during this disaster regarding fasciotomy was not correct. However, this dispute regarding fasciotomy is still not settled, and there is a need for prospective studies on intracompartmental pressure in crush syndrome patients.

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References

Ondansetron and chest pain

I was interested to read the letter by Dodd and Doyle criticising routine paramedic use of cyclazine as an antiemetic for patients with chest pain. They sensibly highlight the BNF statement criticizing cyclazine’s side effects of palpitations and arrhythmias as cause for concern but then go on to recommend ondansetron as the antiemetic of choice for patients with chest pain based on its lack of ‘serious’ side effects.

Several reports have implicated ondansetron in causing not just arrhythmias but chest pain too. In fact, the BNF lists chest pain, arrhythmias, hypotension, and bradycardia under ondansetron’s side effects, while the packaging insert for ondansetron (Zofran) lists “chest pain with or without ST depression” among associations with its use. Angina is not specifically mentioned on the UK insert (because of lack of proof of a cause-effect relation) but has been on the insert for the US product since 1992. Furthermore, clinical trials have shown ECG changes after intravenous administration of ondansetron and other 5-HT3 receptor antagonists in healthy subjects.

The method by which 5-HT3 receptor antagonists might precipitate myocardial ischaemia and arrhythmias is not clear. It has been postulated that it results from inhibition of the Bezoold-Jarisch reflex by 5-HT3 receptor block on vagal afferent fibres and a complex pattern of coronary vasoconstriction and vaso-dilatation mediated via various cardiac 5-HT3 receptors. Other authors have explained ECG changes on the basis of 5-HT3 receptor ability to block cardiac sodium channels and their affinity for the potassium channel, which may delay repolarisation.

Overall, ondansetron has a better side effect profile than many antiemetics but it is the side effect of chest pain, specifically, that may cloud the clinical picture the most. It would seem prudent to exercise caution when using ondansetron in the treatment of suspected acute coronary syndromes.

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References

Haemorrhage after pneumothorax aspiration

I read with interest the case reports on haemorrhage after aspiration for spontaneous pneumothorax.

It has always been my understanding that the reason for continuing to use the second intercostal space, mid-clavicular line (2ICS MCL) approach for these patients is more to do with convenience and ease of approach than for any scientific reason. Aspirating two patients may take considerably more time using the 2ICS MCL: it is generally easy to find the intercostal space and the patient can be in pretty much any position that is comfortable for them and convenient for the “aspirator”.

I would contrast this with the 5th intercostal space anterior axillary line approach, when it can be more difficult to identify the space and awkward for both patient and doctor to keep the arm in a convenient position. I tried this approach for a while and admit to going back to the 2ICS MCL approach, which I find much easier. While tempting to blame the anatomy and dangerous “big vessels” on each of the cases presented, in none of them was there a source of bleeding identified. It is therefore not possible to conclude, as the authors seem to, that similar complications would not occur if a different approach occurred.

I would also be interested to know what technique was used for aspiration—probably the needle is inserted percutaneously into the pleural cavity. It would be a rare occurrence to cause a massive haemothorax even when deliberately puncturing subclavian vessels for central venous access, so it does seem incredibly unlucky to have three cases in such a short period of time.

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Reference

Needle handling should be avoided while suturing

I read the instructive and informative article by Gandham and Menon. However, I was concerned to note that in figure 1 the suture needle appears to be held by the thumb and index finger of the operator. Needle handling has been linked to glove perforation that can be significantly reduced if the suture needle is held only with instruments. This forms a key part of a non-touch suture technique taught on the Basic Surgical Skills course. Do the authors feel that needle handling is a low risk practice?

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References