Training in anaesthesia is also an issue for nurses

We read with interest the excellent review by Graham.1 An important related issue is the training of the assistant to the emergency physician. We wished to ascertain if use of an emergency nurse as an anaesthetic assistant is common practice. We conducted a short telephone survey of the 12 Scottish emergency departments with attendances of more than 50000 patients per year. We interviewed the duty middle grade doctor about usual practice in that department. In three departments, emergency physicians will routinely perform rapid sequence intubation (RSI), the assistant being an emergency nurse in each case. In nine departments an anaesthetist will usually be involved or emergency physicians will only occasionally perform RSI. An emergency nurse will assist in seven of these departments.

The Royal College of Anaesthetists1 have stated that anaesthesia should not proceed without a skilled, dedicated assistant. This also applies in the emergency department, where standards should be comparable to those in theatre.2

The training of nurses as anaesthetic assistants is variable and is the subject of a recent Scottish Executive report3 that consists of at least a supernumerary in-house program of 1 to 4 months. Continued professional development and at least 50% of working time devoted to anaesthetic assistance follow this.4 The Faculty of Emergency Nursing has recognised that anaesthetic assistance is a specific competency. We think that this represents an important progression. The curriculum is, however, still in its infancy and is not currently a requirement for emergency nurses (personal communication with L McBride, Royal College of Nursing). Their assessment of competence in anaesthetic assistance is portfolio based and not set against specific national standards (as has been suggested).5 We are aware of one-day courses to familiarise nurses with anaesthesia (personal communication with J McGowan, Southern General Hospital). These are an important introduction, but are clearly incomparable to formal training schemes.

While Graham has previously demonstrated the safety of emergency physician anaesthesia,6 we suggest that when anaesthesia does prove difficult, a skilled assistant is of paramount importance. Our small survey suggests that the use of emergency nurses as anaesthetic assistants is common practice. If, perhaps appropriately, RSI is to be increasingly performed by emergency physicians,7 then the training of the assistant must be concomitant with that of the doctor. Continued care of the anaesthetised patient is also a training issue8 and applies to nurses as well. Standards of anaesthetic care need to be independent of its location and provider.

M R Vishwanath
Department of Ophthalmology, Queen Elizabeth Queen Mother Hospital, Margate, Kent;
m.vishwanath@virgin.net
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3 A Inglis
Department of Anaesthesia, Southern General Hospital, Glasgow, UK
Correspondence to: R Price, Department of Anaesthesia, 30 Shelley Court, Gartnavel Hospital, Glasgow, G12 0YN, rjp@doctors.org.uk
doi: 10.1136/emj.2004.016154
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Ultrasonic Guidance for Central Venous Catheter Insertion

We read Dunning’s BET report with great interest. As Dunning himself acknowledges, most of the available literature concerns the insertion of central venous catheters (CVCs) by anaesthetists (and also electively). However, we have found that this data does not necessarily apply to the critically-ill emergency setting. We conducted a study looking at emergency medicine physicians’ where the ultrasound did not reduce the complication rate.

The literature does not distinguish between potentially life-threatening complications and those with unwanted side-effects. An extra attempt or prolonged time for insertion, whilst unpleasant, has a minimal impact on the patient’s eventual outcome. However, a pneumothorax could prove fatal to a patient with impending cardio-respiratory failure. Some techniques – for example, high internal jugular vein – have much lower rates of pneumothorax. Furthermore, some techniques use an arterial pulsation as a landmark. Such techniques can minimise the adverse effect of an arterial puncture as pressure can be applied directly to the artery.

We also share Dunning’s doubt in the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance’s claim that the cost-per-use of an ultrasound could be as low as £10.1 NICE’s economic analysis model assumed that the device is used 15 times a week. This would mean sharing the device with another department, clearly unsatisfactory for most emergency situations. The cost per complication prevented would be even greater. (£500 in Miller’s study, assuming 2 fewer complications per 100 insertions).

Finally, the NICE guidance is that “appropriate training to achieve competence” is
undertaken. We are sure that the authors would concur that the clinical scenario given would not be the appropriate occasion to "have a go" with a new device for the first time.

In conclusion, we believe that far more important than ultrasound-guided CVC insertion, is the correct choice of insertion site to avoid significant risks, which the critically-ill patient would not tolerate.

M Chikungwa, M Lim
Correspondence to: M Chikungwa; mchikungwa@msn.com
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Patients’ attitudes toward medical photography in the emergency department

Advances in digital technology have made use of digital images increasingly common for the purposes of medical education. The high turnover of patients in the emergency department, many of whom have striking visual signs makes this an ideal location for digital photography. These images may eventually be used for the purposes of medical education in presentations, and in book or journal format. As a consequence patients’ images may be seen by the general public on the internet, as many journals now have open access internet.

In determining the attitudes of patients presenting in an inner city London emergency department regarding the usage of photography, we found that the majority of patients were amenable to having their images used for the purposes of medical education. This is in contrast to the picturing of genitalia and the usage of any images on internet medical sites/journals. The findings of this pilot study are limited to data collection in a single emergency department in central London. A particular flaw of this survey is the lack of correlation between age, sex, ethnicity, and consent for photography. Further study is ongoing to investigate this.

There have been no studies published about patients’ opinions regarding medical photography to date. The importance of obtaining consent for publication of patient images and concealment of identifying features has been stressed previously. This questionnaire study emphasizes the need to investigate patients' beliefs and concerns prior to consent.

A Cheung, M Al-Ausi, J Hathorn, J Hyam, P Jaye
Emergency Department, St Thomas’ Hospital, UK

Correspondence to: Peter Jaye, Consultant in Emergency Medicine, St Thomas’ Hospital, Lambeth Palace Road, London SE1 7QR, UK; peter.jaye@gs.snt.nhs.uk
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Unnecessary Tetanus boosters in the ED

It is recommended that five doses of tetanus toxoid provide lifelong immunity and 10 yearly doses are not required beyond this. National immunisation against tetanus began in 1961, providing five doses (three in infancy, one preschool and one on leaving school). Therefore, the majority of the population under the age of 40 are fully immunised against tetanus. Td (tetanus toxoid/low dose diphtheria) vaccine is often administered in the Emergency Department (ED) following a wound or burn based upon the patient’s recollection of their immunisation history. Many patients and staff may believe that doses should still be given every 10 years.

During summer 2004, an audit of tetanus immunisation was carried out at our department. The records of 103 consecutive patients who had received Td in the ED were scrutinised and a questionnaire was sent to the patient’s GP requesting information about the patient’s tetanus immunisation history before the dose given in the ED. Information was received in 99 patients (96% response). In 34/99 primary care records showed the patient was fully immunised before the dose given in the ED. One patient had received eight doses before the current dose and they were tetanus immunised less than 1 year before the ED dose. In 95/99 records suggested that the patient was not fully immunised. However, in this group few records were held before the early 1990’s and it is possible some may have had five previous doses. In 30/99 there were no tetanus immunisation records. In 80/99 no features suggesting the wound was tetanus prone were recorded.

These findings have caused us to feel that some doses of Td are unnecessary. Patient’s recollections of their immunisation history may be unreliable. We have recommended that during working hours, the patient’s general practice should be contacted to check immunisation records. Out of hours, if the patient is under the age of 40 and the wound is not tetanus prone (as defined in DoH Guidance), the general practice should be contacted as soon as possible and the immunisation history checked before administering Td.

However, we would like to emphasize that wound management is paramount, and that where tetanus is a risk in a patient who is not fully immunised, a tetanus booster will not provide effective protection against tetanus. In these instances, tetanus immunoglobulin (TIG) also needs to be considered (and is essential for tetanus prone wounds). In the elderly and other high-risk groups—for example, intravenous drug abusers—the
need for a primary course of immunisation against tetanus should be considered not just a single dose and follow up with the general practice. But can 252 pages of General Aspects of Disaster Medicine be comprehensive with regards to disaster planning? Can it provide me with what I need to know? I was confused by the end of my involvement with this book or perhaps overwhelmed by the enormity of the importance of non-medical requirements such as engineering and technical expertise in planning for and managing environmental catastrophes.

Who is this book for? I am still not sure. The everyday emergency physician? I think not. It serves a purpose to be educational about what is required, in a generic sort of way, when planning disasters. Would I have turned to it last year during the SARS outbreak? No. When I feared a bio-terrorism threat? No. When I watched helplessly the victims of the latest Iranian earthquake? No. To have done so would have been to participate in some form of voyeurism on other people’s misery. Better to embrace the needs of those victims of environmental disasters in some tangible way than rush to the book shelf to brush up on some aspect of care which is so remote for the majority of us in emergency medicine.

J Ryan
St Vincent’s Hospital, Ireland; j.ryan@st-vincents.ie

Neurological Emergencies: A Symptom Orientated Approach


The authors set out with very laudable intentions. They wanted to get the “maximum value out of both professional time and expensive testing modalities”. I therefore picked up this book with great expectations—the prospect of learning a better and more memorable way of dealing with neurological cases in the emergency department.

The chapter headings (14 in number) seemed to identify the key points I needed to know and the size of the book (346 pages) indicated that it was possible to read. Unfortunately things did not start well. The initial chapter on basic neuroanatomy mainly used diagrams from other books. The end result was areas of confusion where the text did not entirely marry up with the diagrams. The second chapter dealing with evaluating the neurological complaint was better and had some useful tips. However the format provided a clue as to how the rest of the book was to take shape—mainly text and lists.

The content of this book was reasonably up to date and if you like learning neurology by reading text and memorising lists then this is the book for you. Personally I would not buy it. I felt it was a rehash of a standard neurology textbook and missed a golden opportunity of being a comprehensive text on emergency neurology, written by emergency practitioners for emergency practitioners.

P Driscoll
Hope Hospital, Salford, UK; peter.driscoll@srft.nhs.uk

Emergency medicine procedures


This book has 173 chapters, allowing each chapter to be devoted to a single procedure, which, coupled with a clear table of contents, makes finding a particular procedure easy. This will be appreciated mostly by the emergency doctor on duty needing a rapid “refresher” for infrequently performed skills. “A picture is worth a thousand words” was never so true as when attempting to describe invasive procedures. The strength of this book lies in the clarity of its illustrations, which number over 1700 in total. The text is concise but comprehensive. Anatomy, pathophysiology, indications and contraindications, equipment needed, technicalities, and complications are discussed in a standardised fashion for each chapter. The authors, predominantly US emergency physicians, mostly succeed in refraining from quoting the “best method” and provide balanced views of alternative techniques. This is well illustrated by the shoulder reduction chapter, which pictorially demonstrates 12 different ways of reducing an anterior dislocation. In fact, the only notable absence is the locally preferred Spaso technique.

The book covers every procedure that one would consider in the emergency department and many that one would not. Fish hook removal, zipper injury, contact lens removal, and emergency thoracotomy are all explained with equal clarity. The sections on soft tissue procedures, arthrocentesis, and regional anaesthesia are superb. In fact, by the end of the book, I was confident that I could reduce any paraphimosis, deliver a baby, and repair a cardiac wound. However, I still had nagging doubts about my ability to aspirate a subdural haematoma in an infant, repair a great vessel, or remove a rectal foreign body. Reading the preface again, I was relieved. The main authors acknowledge that some procedures are for “surgeons” only and are included solely to improve the understanding by “emergentologists” of procedures that may present with late complications. These chapters are unnecessary, while others would be better placed in a pre-hospital text. Thankfully, they are relatively few in number, with the vast majority of the book being directly relevant to emergency practice in the UK.

Weighing approximately 4 kg, this is undoubtedly a reference text. The price (£120) will deter some individuals but it should be considered an essential reference book for SHOs, middle grades, and consultants alike. Any emergency department would benefit from owning a copy.

J Lee