

Scotch-cart injuries in Zimbabwe: A Serious Hazard.

Abstract of the Paper presented at the 53rd Annual Scientific Conference of Association of Surgeons of East Africa held in Addis Ababa – Ethiopia, December 2002.

K R Ghani, M H Cotton

Department of Surgery, United Bulawayo Hospitals, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Background & Aims

The 'scotch-cart' is the term for the donkey drawn cart, which is commonly used by the rural people of Zimbabwe and South Africa as a means of transportation. Accidents involving scotch-carts are not uncommon in Zimbabwe. The aim of this study is to review the injuries received from scotch-cart accidents in the Bulawayo region and to assess the morbidity and mortality of the scotch-cart trauma victim.

Patients and method

A retrospective audit of patients sustaining scotch-cart related trauma admitted to a tertiary referral government hospital in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, over a 5-year period (1997-2002). Only patients that were admitted by general surgical teams were audited (this included those jointly managed with the orthopaedic team). Data was obtained from ward admission diaries, surgical team records and ICU admissions data.

Results

Over a 5-year period there were 19 patients admitted with scotch-cart related trauma (17 male, 2 female). The mean age was 11.42 and median age 12 (range: 8-20). All patients except one were referrals from the district hospital. The transfer time from time of injury to arrival in tertiary hospital ranged from 3 hours to 23 days (median time: 9 hours). Injuries according to body site were found to be as follows: 4 patients with blunt chest trauma, 6 patients with blunt abdominal trauma, 1 patient with penetrating abdominal trauma and 10 patients with head injuries. Four patients received multiple injuries. Nine patients required ICU admission.

The mean length of stay in hospital was 8 days (range: 1 to 22 days). Ten out of nineteen patients died due to their injuries (mortality rate: 52%). Six patients died due to head injuries (intracerebral haemorrhage), two died after developing respiratory failure, one died from hypovolaemic shock and one patient died because of late sepsis.

Conclusion

Injuries from scotch-cart accidents occur mainly to young boys in the rural areas. Patients with injuries from scotch-cart accidents admitted under the general surgeons in a large government hospital in Zimbabwe have a high mortality rate. The major cause of death is head injury. Factors that contribute to the high mortality rate include the open design of the vehicle, the long transfer time and inadequate resuscitation at the local hospital. Scotch-carts can be dangerous vehicles and children should be educated about the dangers of riding on such a vehicle without proper supervision. This study does not take account of orthopaedic injuries or minor injuries treated at the local district hospital.

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