Evaluation of Central Spinal Cord Injury Pain with Diagnostic Spinal Anesthesia

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THE prevalence of chronic pain associated with spinal cord injury (SCI) varies considerably (5–94%). Donovan et al describe five categories of chronic SCI pain: musculoskeletal, segmental, central, visceral, and psychogenic. In approximately 30% of SCI patients, pain is disabling, producing additional social handicaps. Recently, attention has turned to identifying mechanisms of nociception and effective treatment modalities for neuropathic SCI pain.

Spinal anesthesia has been used effectively to demonstrate the mechanism and origin of nociception in various pain conditions. Furthermore, in SCI patients, it may elucidate the site of the "neural pain generator" with respect to the actual neurologic level of injury. However, in patients with cervical SCI, the use of diagnostic spinal anesthesia has not been well defined. The following report describes the response to diagnostic spinal anesthesia in a patient with chronic central pain associated with cervical SCI.

Case Report

A 53-yr-old man with a 2-yr history of C6 SCI secondary to a motor vehicle accident presented with chronic dysesthetic pain. In the lower extremities, pain was distributed from the knees to the soles of the feet bilaterally with radiation to the right anterolateral thigh region. Pain occurred mainly with movements (active/passive) or spasticity, and in the right thigh region was described as cramping in nature. In the upper extremities, dysesthesias were distributed from the elbows to the tips of the fingers and were associated with movements. Simple physical modalities such as physical therapy, local heat, and transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation were ineffective in controlling pain. Similarly, various oral pharmacologic agents such as nonopoid analgesics (75 mg indomethacin twice daily, 50 mg diclofenac three times daily), anticonvulsants, (100 mg phenytoin three times daily, 300 mg carbamazepine three times daily), antidepressants (75 mg amitriptyline twice daily, 150 mg trazodone twice daily) provided only partial relief of pain. Though oral baclofen (20 mg four times daily) was effective in reducing pain by controlling spasticity, it produced functional impairments by decreasing lower extremity strength during attempted ambulation.

The patient's SCI produced an incomplete motor and sensory deficit below the neurologic level of injury. On examination, increased patellar reflexes, hip flexor spasticity, and ankle clonus were present bilaterally. Voluntary movements of the lower extremities such as hip and knee flexion were present bilaterally, though reduced in strength and limited functionally by hypertonicity. Sensory examination revealed the preservation of light touch sensation in the lower extremities, but loss of sensation to pinprick. No allodynia or hyperalgesia was present in the lower extremities during cutaneous stimulation.

Clinical neurophysiologic measurements of sensory function were performed. This included a quantitative evaluation of temperature that compared the response to heat pain and cold pain in the lower extremities. In addition, quantitative evaluation of touch, graphesthesia, and joint position were recorded with a quantitative evaluation of vibratory perception thresholds. These evaluations detected absent temperature and thermal pain perception but preservation of some touch and vibratory perception below the C5 dermatome bilaterally. These findings demonstrated a more severe spinthalamic dysfunction in comparison to preservation of dorsal column function, consistent with a presentation of central dysesthesia syndrome. A temporary trial of deep brain stimulation was recommended to the patient before surgical implantation of a thalamic electrode/stimulator ensemble. However, before this trial, confirmation of the central etiology of pain was sought with diagnostic spinal anesthesia.

A 23-G intrathecal catheter (Bizzari-Guillifrida, Becton-Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ) was placed via a 20-G Tuohy needle in the L3-L4 lumbar interspace and threaded cephalad for 3 cm. Double-blind pain assessments (patient and nurse evaluating pain were both blinded to the injected agent) included a 10-cm visual analog scale and somatic diagram demonstrating spatial distribution of pain. Following aspiration of clear cerebrospinal fluid from the catheter hub, 2 ml of placebo (normal saline) was injected. The patient was monitored...
for 30 min after injection of placebo, which failed to produce any change in the patient's pain status. Thereafter, 50 mg lidocaine in 7.5% dextrose was injected via the catheter. This was followed by the disappearance of spasticity, loss of voluntary movements, and disappearance of dysesthetic pain in the lower extremities. A sensory level (to touch) of T8 was detected on the anterior abdomen. Clinical assessments were repeated every 20 min, and approximately 60 min after injection of intrathecal lidocaine, the patient's spasticity and pain status returned. In comparison, no changes in pain status or sensory or motor function were recorded in the upper extremities. The catheter was removed on completion of the study.

The response to diagnostic spinal anesthesia required reassessment of the central etiology of the patient's pain. In turn, the patient declined the temporary trial of deep brain stimulation, and instead, an aggressive course of conservative therapy was reattempted. This included high-dose amitriptyline (150 mg twice daily), group psychotherapy, and biofeedback relaxation. These measures produced some relief of pain, which the patient deemed compatible with normal activities of daily living. Other invasive modalities such as dorsal column stimulation or a temporary trial of intrathecal opioid also were declined by the patient.

Discussion

Several theories based on experimental data have been forwarded to explain the pathophysiology of central pain. The original suggestion by Melzack and Loeber,\(^7\) that phantom pain in paraplegics developed secondary to "pattern generating mechanisms" occurring centrally in response to deafferentation, is widely regarded as the most plausible explanation. The term "central!" is used in this context to denote a location within the dorsal horn and somatosensory projection systems, rostral to the actual spinal cord transection. Central dysesthesia syndrome was described by Bercic et al.\(^6\) in patients with SCI who manifest loss of spinothalamic but preservation of dorsal column function. Misinterpretation of residual dorsal column system input in the absence of suppression via integrated spinothalamic system activity within the thalamus or lower brainstem is thought to produce widespread dysesthesias.

Visceral/abdominal pain may occur in high-thoracic and cervical SCI patients regardless of varying degrees of sensory anesthesia and/or paralysis. Despite interruption of spinal sensory pathways, autonomic connections to the viscera and mesentery may remain intact, e.g., via the vagus nerve or sympathetic chain. In most cases, a comprehensive diagnostic workup will indicate the source of pain, e.g., gall bladder, bowel, bladder, or kidney, and appropriate treatment will alleviate pain. However, a study by Julier and Eltoral\(^9\) of 36 SCI patients with visceral disease suggest that the diagnosis may be delayed in spinal injuries above the splanchnic outflow. Sometimes, no apparent etiology or source of pain can be identified. This form of chronic visceral pain is idiopathic and poorly understood. Little is known about its exact prevalence or its significance to patients with SCI; however, it may represent a form of central pain.

Local anesthetics injected in the lumbar intrathecal space accumulate along the dorsal and lateral portions of the spinal cord and nerve roots, areas that are heavily myelinated.\(^9\) In 1951, Pollock et al.\(^10\) described the use of diagnostic spinal anesthesia to elucidate the source of nociception in patients with SCI. In four patients, spinal anesthesia administered above the level of the lesion was associated with disappearance of pain. More recently, Louber and Donovan\(^4\) described the use of diagnostic spinal anesthesia via an intrathecal catheter in 21 patients with chronic SCI pain. The level of spinal anesthesia was titrated to anesthetize segments of the spinal cord below, at or above the SCI. Spinal anesthesia administered below the level of injury to three patients with cervical SCI having clinical symptomatology suggestive of central dysesthesia syndrome did not abolish pain.\(^4\)

Recently, a positive response to diagnostic spinal anesthesia was demonstrated by Crisologo et al.\(^2\) in two patients with central post-stroke pain.\(^11\) The present case report confirms Crisologo et al.'s findings and suggests that peripheral nociceptive mechanisms contributed significantly to the patient's symptomatology. According to Devor, neuropathic pain develops secondary to activation of low threshold mechanoreceptors, which then become functionally effective in driving the central pain circuit via dorsal horn cells.\(^12\) In turn, spinal anesthesia may interrupt these low threshold afferents, thereby producing reduction of pain.

The response to diagnostic spinal anesthesia in this patient provoked a significant alteration in the planned management. Other possible nondestructive treatment alternatives aimed at modulating peripheral sensory input to the dorsal horn cells, such as epidural dorsal column electrical stimulation and intrathecal pharmacotherapy (opioids, adrenergic agonists/antagonists), may have a place in the treatment of this condition. These modalities are usually not indicated for central pain syndromes; however, a positive response to diagnostic spinal anesthesia might support further evaluation, e.g., temporary percutaneous trials. Also, systemic effect of lidocaine could not have accounted for the observed response,\(^13\) because pain in the upper extremities was unchanged. The presence

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of other peripheral nociceptive mechanisms such as sympathetically maintained pain seem unlikely in this patient, in view of the extensive clinical neurophysiologic testing, which clearly supported a central pain etiology.

In conclusion, this report provides further evidence that diagnostic spinal anesthesia may be associated with a positive response in central pain syndromes. This suggests that neural blockade with local anesthetics be incorporated into the diagnostic workup of patients with possible central pain syndromes. The response to neural blockade may either confirm a predominant central nociceptive mechanism or identify patients in whom peripheral sensory input contributes to the pain symptomatology, which may influence selection of long-term therapeutic options. Further clinical research is needed to characterize central pain syndromes in SCI patients and objectively evaluate long-term treatment modalities using neuraxial electrical stimulation or pharmacotherapy.

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References


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Indigo Carmine-induced Severe Hypotension in Patients Undergoing Radical Prostatectomy

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Indigo carmine (indigotindisulfonate sodium, American Regent, Shirley, NY; IC) is a blue dye routinely used during urologic procedures to localize the ureteral orifices and to identify severed ureters and fistulous communications.1,2 Sporadic cases of untoward reactions to IC following its intravenous administration—mainly hypertension and bradycardia3–6,‡§ but also