**Bending over backwards with opisthotonus: a case of generalised tetanus**

Authors

Joseph John Malayapillay Gerald

Lim Wen Tzien

Ian Tey Zhe Yuan

Affiliation of all authors: Emergency department, Selayang Hospital, Malaysia

Introduction

Tetanus is a dramatic yet rare disease in Malaysia, with an incidence of 0.09 per 100,000 population. Approximately 80% of tetanus cases present with generalized tetanus, characterized by intense muscular contractions and distinctive features such as opisthotonus and risus sardonicus. Complications can include cardiovascular or respiratory collapse, rhabdomyolysis, and aspiration pneumonia.

Case Description

A 20-year-old male presented to the emergency department with a two-week history of a foot injury from hitting a metal object, followed by generalized muscular spasms and a five-day history of difficulty opening his mouth. On examination, he was alert but had trismus and a wound on the third toe of his right foot. He received intramuscular human tetanus immunoglobulin (TIG), intravenous benzodiazepines, and antibiotics. Blood tests revealed multiple organ damage and rhabdomyolysis. The patient was intubated in the operating theatre for airway protection and admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) with a guarded prognosis.

Discussion

Tetanus management is primarily supportive, aiming to control symptoms and eradicate residual spores. Initial treatment should include a dose of TIG between 3000U to 6000U, along with antibiotics and wound debridement to limit toxin production, and intravenous benzodiazepines to control spasms. Severe cases necessitate ICU admission with sedation and mechanical ventilation. Although tracheostomies are preferred over endotracheal tubes to reduce the risk of laryngospasm, they pose increased morbidity and potential long-term sequelae. Crucially, tetanus prevention through vaccination with the tetanus toxoid is the cornerstone of managing this disease.

Conclusion

Generalized tetanus carries high morbidity and mortality. This case underscores the critical importance of primary prevention through vaccination and outlines the essential management strategies for such patients. Highlighting this case aims to reinforce best practices in emergency and intensive care settings.

Keywords

Tetanus, opisthotonus, emergency

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