Case Report on Traumatic Brain Injury – Management in the African Context

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Received: May 25, 2022
Published: June 10, 2022

Abstract

Traumatic brain injury is a major medical and socio-economic issue worldwide, more importantly in resource-poor countries where adequate and invasive monitoring is a major challenge as well as infection control. It is said to be the leading cause of mortality among children and young adults worldwide [1,2,3,4].

The severity of traumatic brain injury is graded into mild, moderate and severe based on Glasgow coma scale score and it is a good predictor of outcome [5,6].

Traumatic brain injury carries significant morbidity and mortality. However, recovery over the last 2 decades has improved owing to aggressive efforts to mitigate secondary brain injury, maintaining neurological homeostasis and averting raised intracranial pressure [3,4].

A case of a middle-aged man who sustained multiple trauma and head injury following an assault by armed robbers is reported from National Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria. Presenting GCS score and post-resuscitation was 15/15 (E – 4, V – 5, M – 6) however, that progressively deteriorated to 6/15 (E – 2, V – 2, M – 2) warranting intensive care unit admission, endotracheal intubation, mechanical ventilation and inotropic support. The patient’s clinical status remained poor until his demise (brain death) 3 days post trauma in the ICU.

The management of traumatic brain injury is multidisciplinary for optimum outcome. Increasing evidence pioneered by the Brain Trauma Foundation has shown that Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPG) with clear key management goals may improve recovery and rapid return to significant or full functional premorbid state. Randomized controlled clinical trials (double-blind) to test and validate current management practices for traumatic brain injury, and collaborative scientific research are necessary to advance and improve trends in managing traumatic brain injury.

LMIC (resource-poor) face peculiar challenges in the management of TBI. The development of Clinical Practice Guidelines (factoring in technical difficulties and resource limitations) based on highest level of scientific evidence available may improve outcome/survival of head injured patients. This paper is a call-to-action to the need to standardize management and develop CPG specific for developing/resource-poor setting.

Introduction

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is not an uncommon presentation in the emergency room. It is a major medical and socio-economic issue worldwide especially in developing countries. TBI is the leading cause of mortality and morbidity among children and young adults [1,2,3,4]. Common aetiologies leading to this condition include: Road traffic accidents, falls, assault and sports related injuries [1].

The incidence of TBI in developing countries, like Nigeria is largely unknown. However, UK based studies have shown that about 1 million patients present to the hospital having suffered head injury with almost one-half, 16 years and less, and a vast majority having mild to moderate head injuries [1,4]. Males have been found to be 2 to 3 times more likely to suffer TBI when compared to females [1,4].

Traumatic brain injury can be classified into mild >13, moderate 9 – 13, and severe 3 – 8, based on the Glasgow coma scale (GCS) score – most common method of assessing severity of TBI – post-resuscitation. The GCS score is predictive of outcome [1,2,4,7,8].

Glasgow Coma Scale (Hutchinson Clinical Methods 23rd edition)

Traumatic brain injury occurs in 2 distinct phases: Primary brain injury (sustained at the time of injury, more or less irreversible) and secondary brain injury resulting in further neuronal damage [4,8].
The management of TBI is multidisciplinary for best outcome and involves a team of neuro-intensivist (anaesthetist in Nigeria), neurosurgeon, neurologist, specialized nurses, respiratory and physical therapist, nutritionist and other support/technical staff. Critical care management is paramount in order to maintain in homeostasis as much as possible, the physiologic processes of the body.

Mortality from TBI has consistently improved over time. This improvement is due to aggressive efforts to mitigate secondary brain injury, maintenance of neurological homeostasis and averting raised intracranial pressure and cerebral oedema. There are currently no approved neuro-specific or neurone protective medications for the management of TBI.

Improvement in morbidity and mortality from TBI has unfortunately, not been reflected in resource-poor settings like Nigeria, this is in part due to lack of facilities for resuscitation, lack of ambulance services and paramedics at site of injury, delay in transportation and prompt investigations, cost of care (out-of-pocket payment system); unavailability or insufficient space in ICU/HDU, among others.

Management of traumatic brain injury following Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPG) based on highest available evidence has been a major advance in this area, the most commonly used CPGs are adapted from publications by the Brain Trauma Foundation (BTF) [7,8,9].

**CASE**

In 2017, a 32-year-old single male trader was brought into the ER by the Nigerian police following an assault on him by armed robbers. He was stabbed and thrown out of a fast-moving sedan following which he sustained a penetrating injury to the right 3rd intercostal space mid-clavicular line, lower lip laceration, and avulsion of the left upper central and lateral incisor. He reportedly bled profusely at the site of the incident.

An immediate clinical assessment was carried out which revealed a clear airway, moderate dehydration, spontaneous breathing, hypothermia 35.40°C, oxygen saturation SPO2 97%, respiratory distress and tachypnoea 40cpm, hypotension (Blood pressure 71/36mmHg) and tachycardia (pulse rate 135beats per minute). He had a GCS score of 15 (E – 4, V – 5, M – 6), he was conscious but lethargic, pupils were 3mm bilaterally and equally reactive to light. History of allergies, current medications, past medical history, last meal couldn’t be ascertained.

Resuscitation was commenced immediately at presentation with 2 litres of normal saline and 500ml of gelofusine, oxygen was administered via a facemask at 10L/m, a CTTD was passed in the 5th right intercostal space mid-axillary line, drained about 2.5 litres of sanguineous effluent, patient was catheterized and blood sample taken for urgent haemoglobin estimation, grouping, crossmatching and urgent whole blood transfusion, baseline blood chemistry, and rigid cervical collar applied. Chest radiograph and cranial CT scan were requested. Post-resuscitation, blood pressure improved to 101/65mmHg, pulse rate 121bpm.

Central Nervous system (CNS) revealed a conscious but lethargic middle-aged man, GCS score 15/15 (E – 4, V – 5, M – 6). No signs of focal neurological deficits, pupils were equally reactive to light about 3mm. Chest examination revealed breathlessness, tracheal deviation to the left, reduced chest movement and air entry over the right hemithorax, penetrating injury and skin laceration (about 3cm by 3cm) over the right 3rd intercostal space, dull percussion notes widespread over the right hemithorax. Conceded abdominal haemorrhage, and long bone, pelvic and thoracic fractures were ruled out via ultrasound scan and x-rays respectively.

Assessment of polytraumatised patient – penetrating chest injury and mild traumatic head injury was made. He was reviewed by the neurosurgical, maxillofacial surgery, anaesthetist, and physiotherapy teams.

Full blood count showed anaemia (haemoglobin 8g/dl), which was optimised with multiple whole blood transfusion, blood electrolytes and renal function were within normal limits. Lacerations were sutured and other external physical injuries were attended. Chest radiograph revealed re-expansion of the right lungs, other findings were unremarkable. CT scan was delayed for about 21 hours due to financial constraint, it revealed generalized cerebral oedema with midline shift to the left cerebral hemisphere and multiple contusions worse on the right cerebral hemisphere.

Patient’s GCS score started deteriorating about 10 hours into admission, initially to 13/15, then to 11/15 about 5 hours later. No overt signs of raised intracranial pressure were seen on examination. Measures to prevent and lower raised intracranial pressure such as nursing 30o head up, administration of 100% oxygen via non-rebreathable facemask at 10L/min were instituted.

6 hours later, patient developed tonic-clonic seizures, each episode lasting about 1 minute and aborting spontaneously. GCS score deteriorated further to 9/15, pupils became sluggishly reactive to light about 3mm and aborting spontaneously. GCS score deteriorated further to 9/15, pupils became sluggishly reactive to light about 3mm and aborting spontaneously. GCS score deteriorated further to 9/15, pupils became sluggishly reactive to light about 3mm and aborting spontaneously.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARAMETERS</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best Eye Response (E)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous eye opening</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye opening to verbal command, shout</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye opening to pain</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Best Verbal Response (V)            |       |
| Confused but appropriate speech     | 4     |
| Inappropriate but discernible speech| 3     |
| Incomprehensible sounds             | 2     |
| No response                         | 1     |

| Best Motor Response (M)             |       |
| Movement of all limbs – obeys command| 6     |
| Localises painful stimuli           | 5     |
| Flexion withdrawal to painful stimulus| 4     |
| Decorticate posturing (Abnormal flexion) | 3     |
| Decerebrate posturing (Abnormal extension)| 2     |
| No response                         | 1     |
transfer to intensive care unit. 12 hours into ICU admission, the GCS score deteriorated to 5T/15 while in the ICU and on mechanical ventilation. He developed persistent hypotension and was commenced on intracranial pressure monitoring for all patients with moderate to severe TBI. The management of severe TBI requires aggressive and proactive treatment protocols with invasive monitoring (minimum an ICP bolt and neuroprotection) for the best chances at a significant mortality [4,8,9]. Data from SAFE study showed that colloids are contraindicated in traumatic brain injury [4,7,8,9]. Crystalloids on the other hand, are widely accepted in resuscitation. However, blood products are preferred in cases of haemorrhagic shock. The risk of infection among other complications associated with invasive ICP monitor placement is of concern to neurosurgeons and physicians. Nutritional support, glycaemic control and deep venous thrombosis prophylaxis are all vital supportive management that improves patient’s overall wellbeing. In general, traumatic brain injury carries a significant mortality rate, and morbidity following this condition can be devastating as individuals have been seen to have residual neurological deficits up to 1 year following mild TBI. The number increases with the degree of brain injury. High quality care and aggressive efforts at maintaining homeostasis and physiologic neurological milieu – prevention of secondary brain injury, is paramount to recovery and as much return as possible to pre-morbid state. Ubiquitous use of Glasgow coma scale, although have been seen to be a good predictor of outcome, may not always be accurate – intracranial pathologies may be responsible for GCS scores of less than 8. The dynamic nature of head injury and lack of collaborative studies are other contributing factors to this challenge. The management of severe TBI requires aggressive and proactive treatment protocols with invasive monitoring (minimum an ICP bolt and neuroprotection) for the best chances at a good outcome. Unfortunately, these measures are unavailable in LMIC and is reflected in the mortality burden from TBI as ubiquitously seen in LMIC and is reflected in the mortality burden from TBI as evident – intracranial pathologies may be responsible for GCS scores of less than 8. The dynamic nature of head injury and lack of collaborative studies are other contributing factors to this challenge. The management of severe TBI requires aggressive and proactive treatment protocols with invasive monitoring (minimum an ICP bolt and neuroprotection) for the best chances at a good outcome.
est evidence from randomised controlled trials) in the management of traumatic brain injury in hospitals and institutions, especially in LMIC countries – where there is poor funding for healthcare systems development and infrastructure, inefficient and ineffective health insurance services, and predominant out-of-pocket payment, based on the studies conducted within the resource constraints and proactive to mitigate secondary brain injury before its onset. Increasing evidence have shown that some practices may, as a matter of fact, be associated with poor clinical and functional outcomes following TBI. This need is even more emphasized in resource-poor countries, like Nigeria where invasive monitoring is largely unavailable and the management decisions rely majorly on physicians’ clinical acumen and experience.

References