Intravenous drug abuse

Few studies have been published specifically examining intravenous drug abuse (IVDA)-associated spinal epidural abscesses (SEAs), an unfortunate sequela of the opioid crisis in the United States.

DiGiorgio et al., examined a series of patients with IVDA-associated SEAs in order to shed light on this challenging disease entity.

This study is a retrospective chart review of patients presenting with IVDA-associated SEAs at the authors' institution from 2013 to 2018, spanning the statewide implementation of opioid-prescribing restrictions.

A total of 45 patients presented with IVDA-associated SEAs; 46.5% presented with a neurological deficit. Thirty-one patients underwent surgery for neurological deficit, failure of medical therapy, or both. Nineteen surgical patients underwent a fusion procedure along with decompression. The complication rate was 41.9%, and the mortality rate was 6.7%. The average length of stay was 27.6 days. Patients who underwent surgery within 24 hours of onset of neurological symptoms trended toward more improvement in their American Spinal Cord Association Impairment Scale grade than those who did not (0.5 vs -0.2, p = 0.068). Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus was isolated as the causative pathogen in 57.8% of patients. Twenty-three patients (51.5%) kept their scheduled clinic follow-up appointments. Of the fusion patients with adequate follow-up, 5 showed bony arthrodesis and 3 had pseudarthrosis. The rate of IVDA-associated SEAs increased after opioid-prescribing restrictions were put in place, from 0.54 cases per month to 1.15 cases per month (p = 0.017).

Patients with IVDA-associated SEAs are challenging to treat, with high complication rates and poor follow-up. This disease is increasing in frequency, and opioid-prescribing restrictions did not slow that rise. Community outreach to promote prevention, early medical attention, and medication compliance would benefit this largely publicly funded patient population [1)].

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DiGiorgio AM, Stein R, Morrow KD, Robichaux JM, Crutcher CL, Tender GC. The increasing frequency of intravenous drug abuse-associated spinal epidural abscesses: a case series. Neurosurg Focus. 2019 Jan 1;46(1):E4. doi: 10.3171/2018.10.FOCUS18449. PubMed PMID: 30611170.