

Recovery after acute brain injury: function in hospital; dysfunction at home

From studies within the USA, Israel, Norway and France, it has been estimated that the incidence of brain injury in children up to 14 years of age is 180 out of 100 000 per annum¹. Between 40 and 50% of children dying from acute traumatic injuries in the USA during 1991 had brain injury as part of their diagnosis² and this proportion has been born out by other reports³. However, death rates of children admitted for brain injury from whatever cause, which range from 2–3%⁴ to 14%^{5–6}, are not very helpful as the aetiology and admission criteria can vary widely.

In England and Wales, around 13 000 children every year are admitted to hospital with a diagnosis of head injury (ICD-10 codes 500 to 509). But many of these children would have been discharged without any adverse effects. There is evidence to suggest that the number of deaths from head injury is falling; that there has been a marked improvement in the past 15 years in acute care; and that relatively more children are surviving severe injury⁷ (which may, of course, increase the need for rehabilitation). A minority are profoundly disabled but a significant number, although disabled, have a much better recovery. The possibility of a fulfilled life begins to open up for them, but not quite fully; areas of cerebral function, taken for granted by the rest of us, do not work correctly or at all. Skills may return gradually, but quite often do not. This can begin to dominate the rehabilitation and style of life available.

Worldwide, health service provision of dedicated units for children's rehabilitation following recent brain injury were established possibly not more than 20 years ago. Perhaps for this reason, after the acute life-threatening phase, the typical aim can still be to discharge home rather than to specialist rehabilitation. In my experience, efforts are more usually concentrated on supporting the family, so that they can cope with an irremediable, long-term tragedy. Evans⁸ has observed how, for adults, these specialized units have developed rather different aims and methods from those of a normal hospital rehabilitation team. And it is for this reason that at a recent conference on 'The Management of Behavioural Problems in Disabled Children' at the Royal Society of Medicine, Stephane Duckett of the Children's Trust highlighted the need for more dedicated units for children, and, unwittingly, became the stimulus for this editorial. Much can be done for these children, but they do need a specialized service.

A number of studies investigate outcome for children's head injury and the effectiveness of individual treatments but no published studies examine global outcome for children who have had specialist post-acute rehabilitation following head injury. This is in marked contrast to the many excellent adult reports which have been thoroughly reviewed by Evans⁸.

One group of children who cause particular concern are

those who, having made an excellent motor recovery, still present with cognitive problems that can lead to changes in personality. While in hospital, these children may appear to have made a good recovery and the depth of their difficulties can easily be underestimated. As Brown et al.⁹ have noted, they risk developing profound psychiatric problems following difficulties in adjustment resulting from their failure upon return to school and the community.

Experience in specialist centres has shown that much can be done to enable these children to regain control of their environment and to further their successful return to school. This takes time and commitment and although thankfully they will remain a minority, provision must be made for them.

Those who work in the community know that many of the children fail; but how many? However small the current demand for this extra stepping stone may be, there are children whose need is great; and I hope that this short editorial will stimulate those who work with them to write for us and those who are responsible for such a child to look beyond clinical recovery of function and towards day-to-day function.

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