

ABSTRACT

TETANUS REQUIRING INTENSIVE CARE IN JAMAICA

An Eleven Year Review of Cases Admitted to the
Intensive Care Unit, University Hospital of the West
Indies

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The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the University Hospital of the West Indies continues to receive several cases of tetanus each year. An eleven year retrospective study, conducted by examining the medical records of all cases of tetanus admitted to the ICU during the period 1978-1988 inclusive, is presented. Criteria of severity, clinical patterns and management are outlined, discussed and compared to other studies.

Of the 97 patients studied, more than two-thirds were males, with peak incidence occurring amongst the very young and the elderly. Trismus was the commonest presenting symptom, the majority of patients manifesting the generalized form of tetanus. Minor wounds were often the source of infection, although disease occurred as a complication of maturity onset diabetes or haemoglobinopathies in 9% of patients. Few

patients could provide information on their immunization status.

Once the disease manifested, it was associated with considerable morbidity and mortality. In a half of the patients, disease was severe enough to require neuromuscular blockade and controlled ventilation. Complications involving the respiratory system were the commonest, primarily due to infection. However, the cardiovascular instability seen in very severe cases, presented the most difficulty in management. Seventeen patients died while in the ICU, representing a mortality rate of 17.5%. Sudden cardiac arrest was the commonest cause of death and was attributed to the disease.

The average duration of stay in the ICU was 3 weeks. Treatment was thus expensive in terms of limited staff and resources. However, the introduction of intensive care in the management of tetanus, has resulted in a 50% decrease in mortality. As Jamaica is a third world country with limited resources, the continued occurrence of this preventable disease reduces optimum utilization of existing resources. Based on the findings, recommendations are made towards improving preventative measures and areas for further research in terms of curative measures are identified. Overall,

this study should provide useful information relevant to an understanding of the health problem presented by tetanus in Jamaica.