

Post traumatic cervical syndrome - some considerations

Cristina Cordeiro, *MSc*

The post traumatic cervical syndrome arises after injuries of the cervical spine. Such “injuries” are restricted to damage of soft tissues, due to a physically distorting traumatic event. Also called “soft tissue neck injury”, this term should only be used for noncontact injuries, i.e., those in which there has not been a blow to the head. Post traumatic cervical syndrome differs from other degenerative disk-related conditions of the cervical spine only in its mode of onset and its course.

The most common type of post traumatic cervical syndrome is acceleration-deceleration injury of cervical spine, so-called “whiplash”. This term, first used in 1928 but that continues to be employed despite its replacement by some synonyms, is commonly used to describe neck pain following to injuries caused by an abnormal motion or force applied to neck that causes movement beyond the neck's normal range of motion.

The most frequent cause of whiplash is a car accident. Other causes include contact sport injuries, accidental falls and assault. The speed of the cars involved in the accident or the amount of physical damage to the car may not relate to the intensity of neck injury. If there is no headrest, or if the headrest is poorly adjusted, a rear collision can cause maximum displacement of the head backward followed by an immediately forward movement. Such movements can cause injuries of the soft tissues, sometimes difficult to objectify.

In medico-legal assessments the objective findings frequently are few combined with a multiplicity of subjective complaints. As a rule, the severity of injury tends to be inversely proportional to the difficulty of the medico-legal assessment, particularly to establish the sequels due to a specific traumatic event. And such problem is bigger when a pre-existing spinal damage or trauma is unknown by the expert. So, a careful and complete expertise, eventually with diagnostic exams including tests to detect simulation, is mandatory.

The variability of whiplash injuries, with its potential consequences, can result in very different rates of incapacity. The appropriate compensation awarded to these victims, with significant differences between the countries, represent major annual costs for insurers, especially as whiplash claims increases every year.