

Recommendations for good practice in the use of epidural injection for the management of pain of spinal origin in adults



FACULTY OF PAIN MEDICINE

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1 Introduction

- 1.1** This document describes the Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) consensus regarding standards of good practice for clinicians carrying out epidural injection in adults for the management of persistent pain of spinal origin and includes the use of epidural injection for the management of acute episodes of discogenic and/or radicular pain. The recommendations relate to 'single-shot' epidural injection at any level of the neuraxis (cervical, thoracic, lumbar or caudal routes). The document also describes the desirable facilities in which to safely carry out epidural injection.
- 1.2** Discussions regarding the evidence base for the following are beyond the scope of this document and include: indications for the therapy, choice of interlaminar or transforaminal route, choice of specific drugs to be administered epidurally, and comment on the published evidence to inform the decision to carry out epidural injection.
- 1.3** The FPM recognises that epidural injections are performed by clinicians from a number of medical disciplines. The FPM has responsibility for the professional standards of Pain Medicine Specialists and this guidance outlines the standards of good clinical practice expected for this professional group and the setting in which the

procedure should be carried out. These recommendations apply both to doctors in training who perform epidural injections under varying levels of supervision and to established practitioners in non-training grades. The competencies expected of doctors who perform epidural injections are defined in the Curriculum for a CCT for Anaesthetics 2010.

2 Consent

- 2.1** Clinicians must work in partnership with patients and should discuss each patient's condition and treatment options with them in a way that they can understand. Patients should share in decision making about their care. Consent to treatment is an important part of the process of discussion and decision-making and clinicians must be satisfied that patients have given properly informed consent before providing treatment.
- 2.2** The guidance in the General Medical Council (GMC) publication 'Consent: patients and doctors making decisions together' must be followed.
- 2.3** Practitioners may need to support discussions by using written or visual material or other aids. If this is done, the material must be accurate, up to date and understandable by the patient.

- 2.4** The doctor who provides treatment has the responsibility to discuss that treatment with the patient. If this is not practical, then this responsibility can be delegated to another suitably trained clinician who has sufficient knowledge of the proposed treatment, understands the risks involved and understands and acts fully in accordance with GMC guidance.
- 2.5** The person obtaining consent must identify adverse outcomes that may result from the proposed treatment, including the potential outcome of taking no action. Discussion should include: side-effects, complications and technical/therapeutic failure. Patients should be advised if the treatment might result in a serious adverse outcome, even if the likelihood is very small. Patients should also be given information about less serious side-effects or complications if they occur frequently. Patients should be given unit/practitioner specific rates of complications where appropriate.
- 2.6** Written consent should be obtained for all epidural injections for pain of spinal origin. This should be recorded in the patient's medical records or on a consent form. It should document key elements of the discussion, any specific requests by the patient, any written visual or audio information given and details of decisions that were made.
- 2.7** The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) grants licences to regulate the activity of pharmaceutical companies when marketing drugs. None of the currently available corticosteroid preparations has a marketing authorisation for epidural use. This does not restrict the prescription and use of these drugs by medical practitioners. Steroids can be injected into the epidural space as 'beyond licence' therapy. The clinician has a duty to obtain informed consent that a

corticosteroid is to be used in an 'off-label' manner; this should be recorded in the medical records.

3 Preparation and identification of patients

- 3.1** Procedures for checking patient identity, site and nature of planned procedure, patient preparation, and readiness of equipment should meet the standards expected in the World Health Organisation (WHO) surgical safety checklist.
- 3.2** The patient should wear an identification bracelet and national guidance regarding patient identification must be followed.
- 3.3** Females of child bearing age must have their pregnancy status confirmed prior to epidural injection according to local and national guidelines.
- 3.4** It is recommended that an intravenous cannula should be sited before starting an epidural injection to allow prompt resuscitation as any epidural injection may be complicated by intrathecal, subdural or intravascular injection, cardiac arrhythmias and vasovagal responses.

- 3.5** It is recommended that patients should be fasted prior to epidural injections even if only steroid is being injected. This is because cardiovascular and/or ventilatory compromise and loss of airway control can occur after epidural injection at any spinal level. This may be due to accidental intrathecal injection of local anaesthetic during infiltration, inadvertent intrathecal injection of steroid or it may occur from distension within the epidural space itself. Patients should be fasted according to local policy and practice. This usually allows clear non-particulate fluids up to 2 hours and solid food up to 6 hours before a procedure.

4 Environment and facilities

- 4.1** Epidural injection is usually performed as a day case procedure. It should be performed in an environment that is appropriate in terms of infection control, monitoring, imaging, availability of assistance, resuscitation and post-procedure care facilities.
- 4.2** Epidural injection should be performed in an environment that provides a level of asepsis that conforms to local guidelines for invasive procedures such as spinal injections.

- 4.3** The area should be large enough to accommodate the staff and equipment necessary for safe regional anaesthesia practice. It should be near to a fully equipped and staffed post anaesthesia care facility; if this is not practical then patients may recover in the treatment area with appropriate support and monitoring.

5 Infection control

- 5.1** Epidural injection may be complicated by infection leading to epidural abscess or bacterial meningitis. The risk of infection may be enhanced in diabetic and immunocompromised patients and as a result of systemic steroid therapy.
- 5.2** Meticulous aseptic technique is mandatory and this should include surgical scrub according to local policy, sterile gown, sterile gloves, cap, mask, skin preparation and sterile drapes around the injection site. The assistant should wear a cap and mask. The epidural pack must be opened onto a sterile field and the injectate must be drawn up with full aseptic precautions.
- 5.3** Suitable skin preparation solutions include 0.5% chlorhexidine in alcohol or 10% povidone-iodine. If local guidelines exist for surgical skin preparation then they must be followed. A wide area must be prepared and solutions must be allowed to dry thoroughly before needle insertion. Particular care is required in skin preparation for caudal injection because of the increased risk of skin contamination in this area.

6 Anticoagulants

6.1 Bleeding into the epidural space is a serious complication after an epidural injection. Particular care is needed in patients with disordered clotting either from medical problems, or medication. The benefits and risks of an epidural should be considered on an individual patient basis and after discussion with the cardiologist or GP supervising therapy. It is recommended that practitioners should follow the current guidelines for the use of neuraxial blockade in patients taking anticoagulants or with pre-existing clotting abnormalities.

7 Fluoroscopy

7.1 It is accepted practice to perform epidural injection without fluoroscopy to provide intra-operative and postoperative analgesia, and obstetric analgesia and anaesthesia. In these settings it is clinically apparent when the epidural has been effective. However, in patients having epidural injection for spinal pain, assessment of efficacy is not as straightforward. Further decisions about management are often determined by the outcome of an epidural injection so it is important to confirm the accurate placement of the epidural needle and the spread of the injectate.

7.2 It is recommended that normally, epidural injection for patients with pain of spinal origin should be performed under fluoroscopic guidance. Studies indicate that in a significant number of patients the needle may not be correctly sited if epidural injection is performed without fluoroscopy.

7.3 A non-ionic water soluble contrast medium should be injected to confirm correct needle placement before injecting any medication into the epidural space. The contrast medium must be licensed for spinal (including intrathecal) injection.

7.4 Needle and syringe connections should conform to local and national guidelines.

8 Monitoring

8.1 Patients having epidural injection should have appropriate monitoring in line with local arrangements.

9 Assistance

9.1 Trained assistance should be available when performing epidural injection.

9.2 The assistant should be skilled in Immediate Life Support (ILS) (Resuscitation Council UK).

10 Record keeping

10.1 Standards of record keeping should be audited in accordance with local clinical governance arrangements.

10.2 Records should include details of:

- Clinical indication for epidural
- Location where epidural was performed
- Date/time of procedure
- Type of procedure performed
- Name of clinician performing procedure (printed and signed)
- Position of patient
- Sedation (if used), oxygen, monitoring
- Imaging
- Skin preparation
- Spinal level of epidural insertion
- Size of needle (gauge)
- Depth of epidural space
- Loss of resistance technique
- Radio-opaque contrast and dose
- Spread of injectate by spinal level
- Any difficulties encountered
- Injected drugs and doses
- Post-procedure observations
- Aftercare instructions
- Follow up arrangements
- Contact details for patient and primary care team

10.3 The record may be sent to the patient's GP as a letter, copied to the patient, and filed in the hospital notes. It is good practice for X-ray images to be stored and available for review.

11 Follow up and discharge planning

- 11.1** On the day of procedure, patients should be seen by a member of the treating team prior to discharge. Limbs should be checked for numbness and/or weakness, and the patient asked about urine retention or headache. Usual medication can be resumed on the day of the procedure. If there is significant limb weakness, sensory loss or headache, an unplanned overnight admission may be necessary, with review the next day before discharge.
- 11.2** If the procedure is complicated by inadvertent dural puncture then the patient may need a more prolonged admission and management in accordance with local guidance.
- 11.3** After discharge, a telephone contact should be provided for patients to report any acute complication such as headache, fever, prolonged numbness/weakness or urinary retention. This should be provided by day surgery units as part of the normal discharge procedure.
- 11.4** Other health care providers who may be involved in the patient's care after the epidural (e.g. the primary care team, emergency department or day care staff) should know how to contact a member of the treating team by telephone to make management decisions if necessary.
- 11.5** A standard letter, with a copy to the patient, should be sent to the patient's GP detailing the procedure and follow up arrangements. Fever, severe back pain or worsening neurological and/or urinary symptoms are potentially serious and an urgent medical review is required.
- 11.6** Emergency full spine MRI scanning must be available. Arrangements must be in place for urgent referral for neurosurgical or spinal surgical opinion.
- 11.7** Follow up arrangements should be made for all patients after a therapeutic epidural. The time of review will depend on the patient and the indication for the epidural.

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Working Group members: Dr Karen Simpson (Chair), Dr Beverly Collett, Dr Sanjeeva Gupta (BPS Representative), Dr Joan Hester, Dr Roger Okell, Dr Cathy Stannard and Mrs Kate Rivett (Patient Representative).

FACULTY OF PAIN MEDICINE

Churchill House 35 Red Lion Square London WC1R 4SG
020 7092 1746/1727 fpm@rcoa.ac.uk

www.rcoa.ac.uk/fpm

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