Nontraumatic Myelopathy Described in Novice Surfers

By Jane Salodof MacNeil
Southwest Bureau

Scottsdale, Ariz. — Physicians in Hawaii have described a mysterious nontraumatic myelopathy in seven young people who became weak and could not stand shortly after taking an otherwise uneventful surfing lesson.

Typically, the novices felt some discomfort or pain during the lesson but continued to surf for 15-20 minutes. They did not notice weakness or paresthesias until 10-60 minutes after the onset of symptoms.

By that time, they were sitting on the beach and could not get up. The patients all had symptoms of neurogenic bladder as well.

“We’ve done all this imaging to try to see what was going on with them. None of them had back fractures, but they had paraplegia—some for a couple of weeks,” Cherylee W. Chang, M.D., said at the annual meeting of the Neurocritical Care Society, where she described the cases in a poster.

All seven patients were treated acutely with methylprednisolone (Solu-Medrol). Over time, six patients improved by 1-3 grades on the Acute Spinal Injury Association impairment scale.

Paraplegia appears to be permanent in the oldest patient, a 31-year-old man from Illinois, according to Dr. Chang of the Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu, where she is medical director of the Neuroscience Institute and neurocritical care director of the stroke center.

Dr. Chang said she first heard of a similar case in 1997. After learning of a third surfer with nontraumatic myelopathy, she began collecting case reports. “The four males and three females, aged 15-31 years, described in the poster were hospitalized at the Queen’s Medical Center in New York in the 3-month period following Tiger Woods’ first Masters championship,” she noted.


Golf-related injuries most often involve golf clubs and balls and occur at parks and homes, rather than at golf courses.

Still, the author noted, the more widespread use of golf carts also contributes to the increase in accidents.

As a way to prevent or reduce injuries, Dr. Rahimi and his colleagues recommended precautionary guidelines and safety training programs, proper storage of golf clubs, adult supervision of golf club and golf-cart use, and the requirement of a minimum legal age to drive a golf cart. In Georgia and many other states, it is illegal to drive a golf cart with out a valid driver’s license.