The Heat of the Moment:
Burns, Child Abuse and the MDT
Jonathan Thackeray, MD | June 24th, 2009
Center for Child and Family Advocacy | Nationwide Children's Hospital
The Ohio State University College of Medicine

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Objectives
• State the epidemiology of abusive burns in children
• Distinguish between the mechanisms and clinical presentation of thermal, radiant, chemical and electrical burns
• Recognize patterns of specific burn injuries based on appearance and location
• Recognize the key components of the history, including scene investigation, that are important when evaluating a child with burn injuries

Child Maltreatment Data - 2007
• 3.2 million referrals to child protective services agencies
  - U.S.: 10.6 / 1000 children
  - MS: 9.1 / 1000 children
  - 62% of these screened in for investigation
  - 900,000 substantiated
• 13% of children experienced more than one type of maltreatment
• 1760 deaths

Epidemiology of Burns
• Pediatric burns cause:
  - Over 250,000 injuries per year necessitating medical attention
  - Over 15,000 hospitalizations per year
  - Over 10,000 cases of severe disability per year
  - 1100 deaths per year
  - Third leading cause of mortality in children < 5 years of age

Epidemiology of Burns
• National Burn Repository Data 1999-2008

Children's Burn Foundation 2008
**Burns Caused by Abuse/Neglect**

- Multiple studies reporting the proportion of burns in children due to abuse/neglect
  - Range from 1% - 30%
  - More common in:
    - Lower socioeconomic status
    - Children from single-parent families
- In the U.S., scald burns from tap water are the most common abusive burn
- Abuse-related burns carry higher morbidity than accidental burns

**Boys 2-3 times as likely to sustain abusive burns**
- Mean age between 2 and 4 years
  - Corresponds with times of high ‘demand’
    - Toilet training
    - Enuresis
    - Excessive crying
- Children with inflicted burns 2.4-4.8 times more likely to have burns to hands, arms or legs bilaterally than children with accidental burns

**Andronicus Burns 1998**
- Child abuse was found in nearly half of children < 2 years with scald burns to perineum and/or genitalia

**Angel J Pediatr Surg 2002**

**Pathophysiology**

- Severity of a burn is based on:
  - Time of exposure
  - Temperature of agent
  - Type of agent
  - Heat-dissipating capacity of burned tissue (blood flow)

- Superficial burn
  - Damage to the epidermal layer
  - Normally heal within 5 to 7 days
  - Heals usually without scarring
  - Example: Sunburn

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Pathophysiology
- Partial thickness burns
  - Superficial
  - Dermis is 15-40 times as thick as the epidermis
  - Pain and blistering
  - Scarring dependent upon depth of wound

Pathophysiology
- Full thickness burns
  - Total necrosis of the skin components
  - Often painless as pain innervation is destroyed
  - Skin grafting necessary for large wounds
  - Significant scarring occurs

Burns: Medical Evaluation

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse
- History, history, history!
  - Who, what, when, where, and how
    - Who was caring for the child?
    - What events preceded the injury?
    - What was the child’s reaction?
    - What did the caregiver do?
    - When did the injury occur?
    - Where did it occur?
  - Developmental assessment of the child
  - What does the child say happened?
  - What does the caregiver say happened?
  - Keep in mind - 80% of burns for which a physician cannot match the history with the pattern of injury are later found to be accidental or negligent

Hammond South Med J 1991

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse
- Red Flags in the History:
  - Injury incompatible with child’s developmental abilities
  - Absent, changing, or evolving history
  - Delay in seeking medical care
  - Triggering event that precipitates loss of control in caregiver
  - Family crisis or stress
  - Prior history of abuse in caregiver

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Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse

- Labs/Diagnostics
  - Skeletal survey
    - 5 (14%) of 36 burn patients had positive skeletal surveys
    - Mean age 1.8 +/- 1.5 years
  - AST/ALT for occult abdominal injury

Hicks Ped Emerg Care 2007

Potential Burn Mimics

- Moxibustion
- Phytophotodermatitis
- Infections
  - Impetigo
  - Herpetic whitlow
  - Staph scalded skin syndrome

Potential Burn Mimics

- Insect and arachnid bites
- Fat necrosis
  - Popsicle panniculitis
  - Trauma

Potential Burn Mimics

- Laxative-induced dermatitis (Senna)

Leventhal Pediatrics 2001

Types of Burn Injury

Thermal | Radiant | Chemical | Electrical
Thermal Burns
- Cause tissue damage from coagulation of tissue proteins
- Cell membrane is the most vulnerable to heat damage, but all components of the cell may be damaged
- Most commonly the result of:
  - Application of a liquid
  - Application of a hot object
  - Application of a flame (rare in young children)

Thermal
- Liquid burns
  - Scalding is the most frequent form of burn abuse
  - More than 80% of abusive scald burns are from tap water
  - Observed patterns:
    - Immerison pattern
      - “Stocking” and “glove” distribution
      - Skin-sparing patterns of immersion
    - Viscous vs. non-viscous substances

Child’s Response to Immersion Burn?
- Two prevailing theories:
  - Reflex is to withdraw from the burn
    - Child would struggle, kick, flail
    - Splash marks would be evident if burn is accidental
  - Child panics and ‘freezes’
    - Child holds perfectly still
    - Splash marks would be absent and child would have a symmetrical distribution of burn
- The reality is there likely exists a wide range of behavioral and pain response to burn injuries
- Because of this, patterns may influence the concern for inflicted injury – but should not be the sole basis for making a diagnosis

“Stocking” or “Glove” Pattern
- Sharp demarcation between injured and healthy skin
- Implies that the affected area has been immersed in a hot liquid

Sparing Pattern
- May see spared skin in areas of joint mobility
  - Elbows
  - Wrists
  - Popliteal fossa
  - Inguinal creases
- Implies either reflexive or forced flexion/extension of the area

Sparing Pattern
- May see sparing where skin is pressed against the surface of the container, which is relatively cooler than the liquid in which the child is immersed
  - Sole of foot
  - Palm of hand
  - Buttocks
Contact Burns
- Characterized by the configuration of the burning object
- Abusive injuries often more sharply defined than accidental ones
- May be relatively superficial
  - e.g. cigarette burns
- May be deep
  - e.g. metal iron

Cigarette Burns
- Intentional:
  - Firm contact typically produces a sharply-defined, circular, third-degree burn
  - Approximately 5-10mm diameter
  - Often on ‘exposed’ areas, such as hands, feet, head, and neck
- Accidental:
  - Typically causes only superficial “brush” burns
  - Short duration of exposure
  - Glowing coals insulated by layer of ash

Additional Patterns
- Stun gun injury
  - Circular lesions approximately 0.5cm in diameter
  - Evenly spaced 4-5 cm apart
- Hair dryers
- Car seats
- Enuresis blankets

Thermal Burns – Additional Readings
- Electric stoves
- Electric water heaters
- Glass-enclosed fireplaces
- Iron burns
- Oil burns
- Radiator burns
Radiant - Sunburn

- Sunburn
  - 70 to 85 percent of children and adolescents have reported at least one sunburn in the previous year
  - Burns range from painless erythema to painful erythema with edema/blistering
  - Recent history of sun exposure
  - Characteristic pattern of burn in exposed areas

Radiant - Microwave Burns

- Standard microwave oven has a 2-5 cm depth of penetration
- Tissues with higher water content (e.g., muscle) heat to a greater extent than those with lower water content (e.g., fat)
- Cause sharply demarcated burns and “sparing” of tissue levels

Chemical Burns

- Cause tissue damage through chemical reactions which alter
  - Extracellular matrix
  - Cellular membranes
  - Intracellular structures and molecules
  - Production/resorption of heat
- Tend to be deep
- Alkalis > acids

Chemical Burns

- Household cleaners/solvents
  - Hydrofluoric acid
- Cement
- Alcohol-based skin cleaners
- Alternative medicine home remedies
- Meth production
  - Anhydrous ammonia
  - Hydroiodic acid

Electrical Burns

- Cause tissue damage both from
  - Electroporative forces on cell membranes
  - Generation of heat
    - Heat = 0.24 x (Voltage)^2 x Resistance
    - Low voltage (domestic current)
      - Small, deep contact burns at entry/exit sites
      - Alternating nature can interfere with cardiac cycle
    - High voltage (1000V or greater)
      - Extensive tissue damage to soft and bony tissues
      - Rhabdomyolysis \(\Rightarrow\) renal failure
    - “Flash” injuries

Electrical Burn
Medical Management

Hospital Admission Criteria
- The following criteria indicate need for hospital admission and further management:
  - Age <10 years with 5 to 10 percent TBSA burn
  - Age ≥10 years with 10 to 20 percent TBSA burn
  - Full thickness burn 2 to 5 percent TBSA
  - High voltage injury
  - Suspected inhalational injury
  - Circumferential burn
  - Medical problem predisposing to infection (such as diabetes or sickle cell disease)
  - Concern for inflicted injury

Burn Center Referral Criteria
- The following criteria indicate need to receive care in a burn center:
  - Age <10 years with >10 percent TBSA burn
  - Age ≥10 years with >20 percent TBSA burn
  - Full thickness burn >5 percent TBSA
  - Inhalational injury
  - Any significant burn to face, eyes, ears, genitalia, or joints
  - Significant associated injuries (fractures or major trauma)

Minor Burns
- Pain management
- Cooling affected area to limit injury
- Keeping affected area clean, including topical antibiotic to prevent infection
- Tetanus prophylaxis if warranted
- Follow-up for signs of infection or healing complications

Major Burns
- Resuscitation (airway, breathing, circulation) as necessary
- Cooling affected area to limit injury
- Admission/transfer to pediatric burn center whenever possible
- Careful fluid resuscitation (modified Parkland formula)
- Debridement
- Dressing changes

Complications
- Death
- Infection, burn wound sepsis
- Vascular compromise
- Contractures
- Hypertrophic scarring
Psychological Outcomes
• Limitations of current research:
  − Abuse cases frequently excluded from studies
  − Existing literature focuses primarily on adults
  − Most studies monitor short-term follow-up
    • First few months/years are the most intense period of adjustment
  − Most abused children are too young to have formulated substantial self-concept or sense of significance of injury

Psychological Outcomes
• Recurring themes in the literature:
  − Burn patients, long-term, have higher incidence of anxiety than the general population
  − Most burn survivors develop a positive self-concept with high self-esteem
  • Overall sense of self-worth similar to non-burned peers
• Implications for providers:
  − We need a heightened awareness of possibility of future anxiety or affective disorders
  − We must encourage burn patients to capitalize on their strengths in areas of personal development

Case Discussions
Perspectives from the Multidisciplinary Team

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse
• Role of social workers
  − Often the first to perform an in-depth interview of the child victim and the alleged perpetrator
    • Emotions run high
    • Little time to construct an alternate story
    • Story may evolve over time
    • Event reconstruction
      • How, where, when, what, and who
      • Consider use of props (dolls, sinks, bathrooms)

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse
• Role of social workers
  − Psychosocial Assessment
    • Risk factors associated with child abuse?
      − Single-parent family
      − Relationship discord
      − Financial stress
      − Social isolation
      − Employment difficulties
      − Substance abuse
      − Domestic violence
      − CPS history

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse
• Role of social workers
  − Psychosocial Assessment
    • Risk factors associated with child abuse?
      − Role reversal in childcare responsibilities
      − Disabled child
      − Inappropriate expectations of the child
      − Poor bonding
      − Chaotic, erratic lifestyle
      − Delay in seeking medical care
Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse

• Role of law enforcement
  - Interviews of the alleged perpetrator
  - Corroboration of the history
  - Cell phone records
  - Witness accounts
  - Security camera footage
  - Receipts/Credit card usage
  - Scene investigation

• Scene Investigation
  - Evaluation of site where burn reportedly occurred
    - Contact burns:
      - Object to match the pattern
    - Chemical burns:
      - Empty bottle or container
      - Evidence of a spill
    - Electrical burns:
      - Downed wires
      - Singe marks on carpet/furniture

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse

• Bathtub burns:
  - Layout of bathroom
  - Proximity to caregivers if not present at time of injury
  - Surface of the tub
  - Evidence of injury?
    - Sloughed skin
    - Wet towels/rugs/clothes

• What type of knob?
  - Can child reach?
  - Can child turn?
  - Separate hot/cold?

• Water temperature?
  - Water heater settings
  - Temperature when water turned on
  - Temperature x seconds later

Importance of Water Temperature

*Derived from original data from Mortic and Henriques. Am J Pathol 1947*

Diagnostic Evaluation for Abuse

• What is the height of the tub?
  - Can child enter tub alone?
    - 35% of children 18-18 months old can
  - How deep is internal tub?
  - Rate of filling/drainage?
Conclusions

• Up to 30% of pediatric burns may be due to abuse/neglect and tap water is the most frequent etiology of these burns
• Know the mechanism and recognize the clinical presentations of the many etiologies of pediatric burns (thermal, radiant, chemical, electrical)
• Specific patterns of burn injury may influence the concern for inflicted injury, but should rarely, if ever, be used as the sole basis for diagnosing abuse
• A detailed history, including a scene investigation, is critical when evaluating a burned child for possible abuse/neglect

References

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