

ABSTRACT

Increased emergency department presentations for head trauma following media coverage of a fatal epidural hematoma

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Objective

This study describes an increase in head trauma-related visits to emergency departments (ED) in New York City, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Duval County, Florida; and Seattle, Washington following the widespread media coverage of actress Natasha Richardson’s head injury and subsequent fatal epidural hematoma.

Introduction

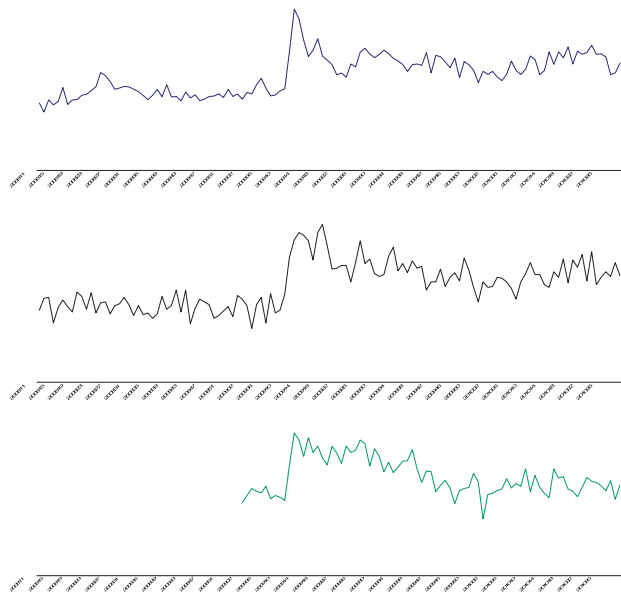
Previous reports have demonstrated the media’s influence on ED visits in situations such as dramatized acetaminophen overdose, media report of celebrity suicides, television public announcements for early stroke care and cardiac visits following President Clinton’s heart surgery. No previous study has demonstrated the influence of media-publicized trauma on ED visits. On 16 March 2009, the actress Natasha Richardson suffered a traumatic brain injury leading to her death on 18 March; these events were widely publicized by national news sources. The health departments of New York City, Boston, Duval County and Seattle monitor ED visits daily, and capture 95, 100, 100 and 95% of all ED visits, respectively. The data collected include basic demographic information, chief complaint and in some cases ICD-9 diagnosis codes.

Methods

Each health department independently reviewed their ED visit data from January 2008 (when possible) through August 2010 for head injury-related visits. The head injury syndrome consisted of any visit with a chief complaint of ‘head trauma,’ ‘head injury,’ ‘struck head,’ or ‘hit head,’ or an ICD-9 code of 959.01 (injury to head). Visits meeting the syndrome criteria were compared by week and age. The data were analyzed across all sites by week of visit and age group.

Results

The figure below shows the weekly plot of total ED visits for head trauma 2008–2010; NYC, Duval County, Seattle.



Conclusions

Following this event, a significant increase in ED visits for head trauma was noted in the four sites participating in this study. This surge of presentations for head trauma was most pronounced in pediatric patients, despite the event being the death of an adult, possibly reflecting heightened concern over head-related injuries by parents. EDs should prepare for a surge in visits following news media reports of head trauma, particularly among pediatric populations. While increased awareness of trauma is important to public health,

this may need to be balanced with community education about need for emergent hospital-based evaluation. Further studies are needed to see if any increased pathology is found following similar events.

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