

Chest pain and panic disorder in the ED: one of the authors responds to Epstein's letter

To the Editor: In our recent article¹ we did not intend to target or blame ANY particular group of physicians for failure to recognize panic disorder (PD).² Our hope was to increase awareness of this problem and to promote better integration of health care services to our community. We agree that, given repeated exposures to their patients, family physicians (FPs) have a greater opportunity than emergency physicians to diagnose PD. It is our belief that FPs are doing an increasingly better job at diagnosing and treating anxiety and mood disorders; however, in these times of outrageous FP shortages, it is a mistake to assume that most or all patients have a family doctor.

There are several reasons why patients with PD end up in the emergency department (ED), and one of them is the difficulty in seeing a family doctor. In addition, panic attacks are dramatic and composed mainly of physical symptoms — especially cardiovascular symptoms. The role of the ED physician is not only to rule out deadly illness, but to arrive at a comprehensive differential diagnosis and adequate referral. The diagnosis of PD should be included in the diagnostic algorithm of chest pain.

We sympathize with ED physicians: they are overburdened because the rest of the system is. Yet ED doctors are often confronted by patients with PD — perhaps more often than any other group of physicians. By arriving at a probable diagnosis and arranging appropriate follow-up, they have the opportunity to prevent the evolution of PD from an acute to a chronic condition. While we agree with Dr. Epstein

that greater efforts are needed to improve PD detection in family practice, we specifically targeted ED physicians because this study was conducted in the ED. We are flattered that he thinks this paper should be distributed to FPs. Thank you.

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References

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2. Epstein NL. Chest pain and panic disorder in the ED? [letter]. *Can J Emerg Med* 2003;5(5):308.

Epinephrine in digital blocks: refuting the refutation of dogma

To the editor: While it is always reasonable to question dogma, I am not satisfied that local anesthetics with epinephrine are safe for use in fingers, toes, ears, the penis and the tip of the nose. I was not surprised when Dr. Katis stated¹ that he could not find any citations where digital blocks with epinephrine have caused a problem. In every modern textbook it is still considered a contraindicated application; therefore, it'd be a very brave physician who would report such a case.

Dr. Katis disregarded articles that reported complications from direct epinephrine injection into a digit. I suggest these articles would have been relevant because direct injection into other areas

— such as the arm or thigh — generally does not cause complications. One such article,² published in *CJEM*, is of particular note: “Accidental injection of epinephrine by a child: a unique approach to treatment.” Appended to this article was an Editor's Note (p. 36). It stated: “Although these authors specifically address the issue of epinephrine-injector injury, the therapy they describe is probably widely applicable to patients who undergo inadvertent digital injection of local anesthetic with epinephrine, which is a much more frequent ED occurrence.”

We must decide in which situations the use of epinephrine would justify a potential increase in risk to the patient. In most cases involving digital repair in the ED it is completely unnecessary.

In the rare situation where epinephrine might be useful — perhaps to prevent a trip to the operating room — the patient must be informed of the risks because this treatment is outside the realm of standard care. The physician should be prepared to use rescue drugs such as phentolamine or terbutaline if the need arises.

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References

1. Katis PG. Epinephrine in digital blocks: refuting dogma. *Can J Emerg Med* 2003; 5(4): 245-6.
2. Sellens C, Morrison L. Accidental injection of epinephrine by a child: a unique approach to treatment. *Can J Emerg Med* 1999;1(1):34-6.

[The author responds:]

Dr. Moser raises some important concerns. The studies to date suggest an absence of harm, and I agree that this does not equate with proof of safety.