INFORMATION SHEET TO PATIENTS AND CARERS ON INTRATHECAL PHENOL

Intrathecal Phenol treatment is a therapy which has been established for 50 years. It has been found to have a very potent and effective role in controlling refractory spasticity affecting the lower limbs. This is a form of treatment recommended for patients with severe muscle stiffness affecting their lower limbs, which has failed to respond to all oral medications and other forms of therapy.

The Treatment

The treatment involves administration of Phenol in Glycerol, which is an alcohol-like chemical [in an oily formulation] into the spinal column at the lower end of the spine through a lumbar puncture. This is done under the cover of a local anaesthetic. This chemical causes the lower motor neurons to cease to send the excitatory signals to the muscles of the lower limbs. This then helps to relax the muscles that often cause involuntary or uncontrolled scissoring of hips flexion and bending of hips and knees and the accompanying muscular spasms.

Risks Involved

This form of treatment causes irreversible damage to the nerves that supply the lower limbs and control bladder, sexual function, and bowel function. Therefore patients recommended for this treatment are often those who have no control and will not regain control of their bladder, sexual or bowel functions and who are not expected to use their legs in a functional way.

This treatment affects the sensory components of the nerves as well as the motor components and therefore one would expect that this treatment will help with pain control in the lower limbs but on rare occasions it might give rise to temporary “dysaesthesia” which is nerve pain in the lower limbs that may need to be treated with specific oral medications.

As it may cause numbness to the buttocks and impairment of sensations in the legs it is important to assess the liability to develop pressure sores in the lower half of the body, and to institute care in the prevention of development of these sores after the procedure. Like all other invasive treatments involving reduction of muscle tone and movement in the legs this form of treatment can raise the risk of venous thrombosis in the lower limbs and therefore there is a need to monitor and manage that risk effectively particularly after the procedure.
Effects of the Treatment

Applying this treatment will help to improve seating, posture, pain control and application of personal care. The effects of the treatment are manifested within a few minutes of administering the treatment and may last from twelve months to several years; the treatment can be repeated in case of recurrence of the symptoms. As this is an invasive treatment it is carried out as a procedure in hospital, which requires a short admission for a few days various observations taken during the procedure to ensure safety of the patient.

After the injection of the Phenol the patient is often positioned in such a way to direct the medicine towards the target nerves and that position is maintained for the best part of an hour, thereafter the patient can be mobilised and position could be altered. It is important that after the procedure and once the clinical effect is realised further assessment takes place to insure optimum seating, and optimum care, in light of the changes that happens in the lower limbs. The procedure is usually carried out by a doctor with expertise in this treatment and with a clearly set clinical protocol, which has been approved by the Clinical Governance Committee of the Directorate and the Trust.