Did you know?
Cauda equina syndrome
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From January 2008 to December 2018, NHS Resolution received 827 claims for incidents of cauda equina syndrome. Out of these 827 claims, 340 were settled with damages, 212 were without merit and 275 remain open. This has cost the NHS:

£186,134,049

This includes payments for claimant legal costs, NHS legal costs and damages.

Cauda equina syndrome can result from a ruptured disc in the lower back, a narrowing of the spinal canal, a spinal tumour, fracture, haemorrhage or infection. It can also result from a trauma such as a car accident, gunshot wound, a stabbing or a fall.

The patient’s vertebral discs prolapse and compress the nerves descending from the end of the spinal cord (the cauda equina).
Age range of claimants

- 51-85 years: 23%
- 31-50 years: 65%
- 0-30 years: 8%
- Unknown: 4%

Key causes of claims for cauda equina syndrome are due to delays in

- specialist centre referrals
- diagnosing/recognising symptoms
- MRI scanning (time, access, referral)
- responding to ‘red flag’ symptoms
- surgical intervention
- transport to hospital or specialist centre

It may also be caused as a result of surgery.

If the condition is not addressed at an early stage, it can result in life-changing injuries which are often associated with significant psychological effects. In some cases, cauda equina syndrome increases the risk of death.

Red flag symptoms that require rapid investigation and treatment can include:

- Sciatica in both legs
- anal and/or buttock numbness
- loss of feeling between the legs (saddle anaesthesia)
- motor weakness, sensory loss or pain in both legs
- bladder retention and/or incontinence
- bowel disturbance/incontinence

Last revised March 2018 by the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE): Back pain - low (without radiculopathy)
Red flag symptoms and signs: https://cks.nice.org.uk/back-pain-low-without-radiculopathy#!diagnosisSub:1
What can you do?


• Ensure your local guidance compliments NICE guidelines

• Ongoing education to ensure clinicians are educated and updated regularly

• Review your organisation’s claims history regarding cauda equina syndrome and ensure that learning is shared with all clinicians

• Review patient information resources to include evidence-based practices and patient support organisation’s.

For further information please contact: safety@resolution.nhs.uk

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