



Tackling flesh eating bacteria in the Outback

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Central Australia has a higher incidence of necrotising fasciitis, or flesh eating bacteria, than elsewhere in Australia, delegates to the 81st Annual Scientific Congress (ASC) of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons have been told.

Dr Jocelyn Lippey, a Trainee General Surgeon, told delegates of a retrospective audit over a five year period which revealed significantly decreased morbidity and mortality rates, despite the increased incidence of necrotising fasciitis in the Outback and the difficulty of achieving early diagnosis.

“We assessed the incidence of necrotising fasciitis in Central Australia in order to show the relationship between specific risk factors and severity, diagnosis and presentation,” Dr Lippey said.

“We performed an audit of patients admitted to Alice Springs Hospital between 1 July 2006 and 31 June 2011 with necrotising fasciitis and forniers gangrene. We identified 33 patients with necrotising fasciitis during this period, of whom 17 required admission to the Intensive Care Unit. Average length of stay was 36 days (range 3-146) and overall mortality was 12.1 per cent (4 patients). This is considerably lower than the mortality rate of 25-73 per cent reported in the literature.”

Dr Lippey said that time from presentation to initial debridement, one of the key indicators for prognosis, averaged 26.7 hours (range 3-137). Ninety-four per cent of patients were Indigenous Australians, and 70 per cent were diabetic.

“Several factors influenced our positive outcomes with flesh eating bacteria in Central Australia. Our treatment strategy of early aggressive debridement following initial resuscitation, broad-spectrum early antibiotics and support of vital function appears to influence our outcomes in this aggressive and life threatening infection. As we have a high incidence of necrotising fasciitis, we have a high index of suspicion with patients displaying subtle early signs and symptoms,” Dr Lippey said.

Dr Lippey acknowledged and thanked Dr Jacob Ollapallil, the Director of Surgery at Alice Springs Hospital, for his guidance and assistance in the development of her study.

This year's ASC, with the theme 'The Making of a Surgeon', runs from 6 to 10 May and is being held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. Approximately 2,500 delegates from Australia, New Zealand and around the world are attending.

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