Rehabilitation Strategies for Traumatic Brain Injury: Insights and Innovations

ALEXIOS G. CARAYANNOPOULOS, DO, MPH, DABPMR, FFSMB, FAAOE; STEPHAN P. PIRNIE, MD, PhD;
ALEXANDRA I. GUNDERSEN, MD; CLAUDIA HENTSCHEL, MD

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) represents a significant public health challenge, manifesting in a spectrum of cognitive, physical, and emotional impairments that profoundly affect individuals' long-term functioning. In Rhode Island, where the prevalence of TBI is on the rise, addressing the complexities of rehabilitation is of paramount importance. This article is a review of current rehabilitation strategies for the evaluation and treatment of individuals with TBI, with a focus on aphasia, dysphagia, paresis, respiratory dysfunction, cognition, behavior, and long-term outcomes.

ACUTE REHABILITATION GOALS AND TREATMENT STRATEGIES

Participation in interdisciplinary rehabilitation should begin in the intensive care unit to mitigate the complications of critical illness.[1] Acute inpatient rehabilitation after TBI is associated with improved long-term functional outcomes, lower mortality, and greater odds of regaining independence in the community.[2] Treatment teams consist of therapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists, a case manager, social worker, and a physiatrist as well as consultants such as psychiatry, neurology, psychology and nutrition.

COMMON SEQUELAE AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Traumatic brain injury can lead to a variety of neurological impairments dependent on damage to specific brain areas or pathways, causing disruptions in the brain's ability to control and coordinate various bodily functions. The extent of these impairments can widely vary depending on factors such as the severity of injury, location, and the individual's health. Common sequalae of traumatic brain injury include pain, autonomic dysfunction, spasticity, aphasia, dysphagia, paresis, seizures, respiratory dysfunction, as well as cognitive and behavioral impairments.[3] Any of these complications alone or in aggregate can significantly limit a patient's function and quality of life.

APHASIA AND DYSPHAGIA

Traumatic brain injury can damage language centers in the left hemisphere, where Broca's and Wernicke's areas are located. Broca's aphasia affects speech production and fluency, while Wernicke's aphasia impacts language comprehension. Dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing, can occur with damage to areas that control muscles in the swallowing process, including the brainstem and cortical regions such as the precentral gyrus. Aphasia and dysphagia significantly impact communication and feeding, affecting quality of life post-injury. Speech therapy targets improvement of language skills and swallowing capabilities through exercises to strengthen oral muscles and improve speech clarity. Technology aids such as speech-generating devices also assist communication. Percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) is used when oral feeding is unsafe; a feeding tube is inserted directly into the stomach, with careful monitoring to ensure proper nutrition and tube function.

PARESIS

Paresis, or muscle weakness, results from injury to the corticospinal tract or motor cortex, which are responsible for voluntary muscle movement. Depending on the location, this can lead to unilateral or bilateral weakness. In severe cases, it can progress to paralysis of the affected muscles. Rehabilitation for paresis focuses on restoring movement using functional electrical stimulation (FES), task-specific training, and motor learning to promote strength and coordination. Severe TBI and resultant immobility can predispose to heterotopic ossification, which can be diagnosed through symptoms (pain, swelling, decreased range of motion) and imaging and managed with physical or occupational therapy, medications to halt ossification, or surgical intervention in severe cases.

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT AND DISORDERS OF CONSCIOUSNESS (DOC)

While both cognitive impairment and DOC are consequences of brain injury, they differ in the severity and location of injury, which affects their pathophysiology and rehabilitation approaches. Cognitive impairment results from damage to brain regions like the prefrontal cortex, temporal lobes, or hippocampus. Pathophysiological changes may include disrupted neural networks, neurotransmitter imbalances, and neuronal damage, which affect memory, attention, language, and executive function. DOC result from widespread or severe brain injury to the reticular activating system, thalamus, or cortex, leading to impaired arousal and awareness; these disorders include coma, vegetative state, and minimally conscious state.

Cognitive rehabilitation therapy (CRT) focuses on retraining cognitive processes through exercises, tasks, and compensatory strategies. CRT may incorporate pharmacotherapy to manage symptoms like attention deficit or depression as well as structured tasks like memory aids and puzzles. Environmental modifications are important to reduce distractions.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can address cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges to mitigate agitation, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation. Personalized strategies include cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, managing triggers, symptom management, goal-setting, and problem-solving to promote recovery and improve quality of life. CBT should include the patient, family, and caregivers to be most effective. For DOC, sensory stimulation therapy engages the patient with auditory, visual, tactile, and olfactory stimuli to enhance arousal and responsiveness. Medications like amantadine have been studied for their potential to improve outcomes.[4] Family and caregiver support training is important for those involved in day-to-day care of these complex patients. Emerging technologies include neuroimaging and brain-computer interfaces (BCI) for diagnosis and treatment options.

RESPIRATORY ISSUES

Traumatic brain injury can cause irregular breathing or respiratory failure from damage to the brainstem; dysregulation of respiratory depth and rhythm from damage to neural pathways; aspiration from disruption of the autonomic nervous system; and sleep apnea from muscle weakness of the diaphragm. Respiratory therapy aims to improve ventilation, maintain airway clearance, and prevent complications such as pneumonia. Mechanical ventilation is often necessary in severe cases, which includes ventilators that either assist or take over the breathing process. Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) provides a steady flow of air to maintain airway patency. Tracheostomy is performed when long-term ventilatory support is required. Suctioning can remove secretions to prevent airway blockage and infections. Supplemental oxygen delivered via nasal cannula or mask can ensure adequate oxygenation; nebulization directly delivers bronchodilators and corticosteroids to the lungs to open the airways and reduce inflammation. Airway clearance techniques include chest therapy, coughing exercises, and postural drainage to clear mucus and prevent pneumonia. Finally, inspiratory muscle training (IMT) employs tools and exercises to strengthen the diaphragm and intercostal muscles to improve respiratory function.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES FOLLOWING TBI

Traumatic brain injuries can range in severity from mild to severe. Multiple factors including the patient's history and risk factors, mechanism/type of injury, extent of injury, and recovery timeline all impact the severity of the brain injury. While prognostication for both long-term recovery and overall functioning after traumatic brain injury is not an exact science, there are multiple tools that can provide guidance for patients, their families, and medical providers. Utilizing these predictors for prognosis allows for improved patient care and expectation setting for long-term management.

The Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) is one of the first scores utilized during a trauma evaluation (especially when a possible brain injury is suspected). The GCS is made up of three parts to assess the severity of the brain injury, with a highest score of 15 and a lowest score of 3. The best motor response ranges from 1 (no response) to 6 (obeys verbal commands). The best verbal response ranges from 1 (no response) to 5 (able to converse, is alert, and oriented). Eye opening ranges from 1 (no eye opening) to 4 (opens eyes spontaneously). The more severe the injury, the lower the score, with a mild TBI being categorized by GCS of 13–15, moderate TBI from 9 to 12, and severe TBI from 3 to 8. While all three parts are important for assessment, the best motor response is the best predictor of outcome. Overall worse outcome is based on the lowest GCS in the first 24 hours of injury. The Glasgow Outcome Scale (GOS) illustrates the relationship between GCS and possible recovery/level of disability. It is divided into five categories, ranging all the way from death to good recovery. The Glasgow Outcome Scale Extended (GOSE) is a newer instrument, with an expanded 8-point scale for levels of disability after TBI. For example, while the GOS simply has severe disability, GOSE includes lower severe disability and upper severe disability, based on "frequent" vs. "infrequent" assistance for activities of daily living.

Other predictors of long-term outcome and recovery after TBI include duration of the coma and post-traumatic amnesia (PTA). PTA is described as the time when the patient can recall daily events after their injury. It is often assessed through the Galveston Orientation and Amnesia Test (GOAT) or the Orientation Log (O-log). A score of 75 or higher on the GOAT or 25 or higher on the O-log for two consecutive days indicate that the patient is no longer in PTA. Longer durations of coma and PTA are both associated with worse outcomes. The Disability Rating Scale and the Coma Recovery Scale are also used to assess early recovery and predict final functional outcome.

Younger age (specifically age >5 and <65) often predicts improved outcomes. The presence of significant neuroimaging findings (e.g., bi-hemispheric lesions) and neurological findings such as non-reactive pupils, decerebrate posturing, and oculocephalic signs are all associated with poor outcomes. Deficient or absent somatosensory evoked potentials (SSEPs) have also been associated with poor outcomes. Lastly, levels of proteins in the blood such as Glial Fibrillary Acidic Protein (GFAP), Ubiquitin C-terminal Hydrolase L1 (UCH-L1), neurofilament light chain (NfL), and S100B can be measured to further assess the severity of a traumatic brain injury.

Utilizing these prognostic scores to predict the extent of disability after TBI allow the patient and family to better prepare for the future. This creates time to arrange support within the home, whether from family caregivers (requiring teaching) or external help (home health aides). Home modifications can also be made to improve functional independence and decrease caregiver burden. For example, stair/chair lifts and ramps can be installed to make homes accessible. Durable medical equipment (DME) like commodes, shower chairs, and ambulation devices assist with improving a patient's independence with activities of daily living and mobility. Communication aids also allow patients to express their needs and interact without relying entirely on family members. During the acute rehabilitation stay, case managers, therapists, and social workers ensure the safest discharge plan, provide information on community resources, and order DME.

Early access to interdisciplinary rehabilitation care is essential for maximizing the possibility of independent living. This usually includes physical, occupational, and speech therapy along with cognitive rehabilitation and behavioral therapy in the acute care, post-acute care (inpatient rehabilitation), home, and outpatient settings. Early rehabilitation can also assess the need for adaptive equipment and family education. Brain injury organizations at both the local and national level are sources of education and support. For patients who wish to return to work, a gradual transition or engaging in vocational rehabilitation are recommended.

Impaired physical functioning, cognitive and behavioral changes, and increased psychosocial stressors after TBI can all be limiting factors to returning to work. Pre-injury factors such as employment status, education level, occupation, and demographics (age, marital status) are predictors for returning to work. Factors related to the brain injury – GCS, overall disability level/injury severity (similar to GOSE), and length-of-hospital stay – are also predictors for working after TBI. Workplace accommodations including modifications such as increased break time/frequency and access to vocational rehabilitation are associated with an increased likelihood to return to work.

AREAS OF NEED IN RHODE ISLAND

The care of patients with traumatic brain injury is complex and requires multiple medical specialties, therapists, social workers, and community resources to properly care for patients and support their families. There are clearly areas of success as well as opportunities for improving access to these resources in Rhode Island. Trauma centers within the state have excellent neurologic and neurosurgical care, and several inpatient rehabilitation units provide post-acute care for patients with TBI. However, these patients often face difficulty with ongoing support following their inpatient rehabilitation.

Physical medicine and rehabilitation providers receive education and training on the care of patients with TBI during residency. Advanced fellowship training and board certification are available, but there are no brain injury specialists in Rhode Island. To access this specialized care, patients must travel to neighboring states (Connecticut and Massachusetts). Additionally, patients need home health agencies that can manage the behavioral challenges associated with TBI. There is limited long-term care for patients who are physically functional but cognitively impaired and unable to return home. Further challenges include limited availability of cognitive and neuropsychology programs for supporting patients in the outpatient setting. There are areas of improvement for the care of patients with TBI in Rhode Island. For instance, information packets with local and national resources for clinical care and community support of patients with TBI would be helpful at acute care hospitals and primary care clinics. Patients with TBI have complex care needs, and interdisciplinary care centers that include neurosurgery, physical medicine and rehabilitation physicians, therapists, psychologists, and social workers would lead to more efficient and comprehensive treatment. Finally, the state should invest in recruiting physicians, therapists, neuropsychologists, and social workers who specialize in caring for patients with TBI.

CONCLUSION

The multifaceted nature of TBI rehabilitation calls for a collaborative approach that incorporates innovative practices and addresses the unique needs of these individuals. Effective assessment tools, personalized interventions, and ongoing support will help optimize long-term functional outcomes for TBI survivors in Rhode Island. Continued efforts to identify gaps in care and enhance rehabilitation practices will play a critical role in improving the trajectory of recovery for this vulnerable population.

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Authors

Alexios G. Carayannopoulos, DO, MPH, DABPMR, FFSMB, FAAOE, Medical Director of Outpatient Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Rhode Island, The Miriam Hospital, and Newport Hospitals; Chief of the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation of Brown Health Medical Group; attending physician at the Norman Prince Spine Institute; Professor of Neurosurgery and Neurology, Clinician Educator, Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Providence, RI.

Stephan P. Pirnie, MD, PhD, Brown University Health, Vanderbilt Rehabilitation Center, Newport, RI; Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Department of Neurology, Providence, RI.

Alexandra I. Gundersen, MD, Director, Cancer Rehabilitation Program, Brown University Health Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation; Asst. Professor and Clinician Educator, Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Providence, RI.

Claudia Hentschel, MD, Clinical Fellow in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA.

Disclosures

None

Correspondence

Alexios G. Carayannopoulos, DO
690 Eddy Street
Providence, RI 02903
401-793-9837
acarayannopoulos@brownhealth.org