A Profile of Elderly Fallers Referred for Physiotherapy in the Emergency Department of a Dublin Teaching Hospital

Abstract:

Ireland has an ageing population and the elderly are over-represented in Emergency Departments (ED) – a quarter of their attendance is due to falls. A prospective study was employed using a convenience sample to profile elderly fallers referred for physiotherapy in ED. Forty-subjects were assessed over 14 weeks. Mean age was 84.88 years (s.d. 7.3) and 31 (77.5%) were female. All demonstrated slow walking speed and 26 (65%) demonstrated poor grip strength. A quarter of subjects reported fear of falling and 30 (75%) were classified as frail. Elderly fallers in ED are a frail group of socially vulnerable patients who demonstrate a risk of further falls. Osteoporosis had been diagnosed in 9 (22.5%) subjects and 62.5% had ever had a DEXA scan. The prevalence of frailty in the sample of elderly fallers in this study was very high (75%).

Introduction

Ireland like many other countries has seen a steady increase in life expectancy and has an ageing population. The consequences of falls in the elderly population can be severe and include hospitalisation, nursing home placement, and changes in health status. The prevalence of falls in the over-65 year old age group and so the management of fallers in ED is an important issue. The ED offers healthcare professionals an excellent opportunity to identify elderly fallers and those at risk of falls. The aim of this study was to describe the profile of community dwelling adults over 65, who were referred for physiotherapy in the Emergency Department (ED) of a Dublin Teaching Hospital after a fall.

Methods

St Vincent's University Hospital is one of the Dublin Academic Teaching Hospitals with 479 in-patient beds. There is a 24-hour ED catering for patients over the age of 14. A prospective, observational study design was used in the ED of St Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed by liaising with the senior physiotherapist, physiotherapy management research supervisor, Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) and consultants in the relevant area. Patients over 65 who had been referred for physiotherapy in the ED after a fall as defined by WHO4 were included and the Senior Physiotherapist in ED, who acted as a gatekeeper, identified potential subjects. Patients with an Abbreviated Mental Test Score (AMTS) of below 6 were excluded. St Vincent's Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval.

Subjects were interviewed about fall details, falls history, fracture history, osteoporosis, visual impairment, footwear, assistive devices, previous physiotherapy involvement, fear of falling, steadiness, environment, markers of frailty and urinary incontinence. Demographic data and history were established from the medical charts. The Timed Up and Down (TUG) test was assessed as a measure of gait and falls risk and grip strength was assessed using a Jamar dynamometer. The validity and reliability of these outcome measures have been described previously. Frailty was assessed based on Fried's classification in Table 1.

Results

Demographic Profile

There were 40 subjects recruited over a 14-week period with an age range from 67 to 99 and a mean age of 84.88 (s.d. 7.3) years. During this period a further 8 elderly fallers had left the department before assessment. 4 patients were excluded due to an intentional fall and 3 patients were excluded due to poor cognition and 3 refused to participate. The majority of subjects were female and only 9 (22.5%) subjects were male. Many of the participants (43%) used a frame to mobilise. There were 9 (22.5%) subjects who had been diagnosed with osteoporosis but only 15 (37.5%) had ever had a DEXA scan. Of the elderly fallers who were referred to physiotherapy service in ED, over three quarters (77.5%) were admitted to hospital. Only four subjects (10%) were discharged from hospital. A high percentage of subjects had never had a DEXA scan. Of the subjects who had a fracture they were admitted to hospital. Thirty-three percent of subjects had a fracture (s.d. 22.5%), 10% (s.d. 25%) had a pelvic fracture (s.d. 22.5%), 7.5% had a humeral fracture (s.d. 22.5%) and 10% had a cervical fracture (s.d. 7.5%). There were 7 (17.5%) of this population who fell more than once. Over 40% of the subjects had a diagnosis of osteoporosis (s.d. 37.5%) of this population. A high percentage of subjects had never had a DEXA scan. Thirty-seven percent of subjects fell more than once. Over 40% of the subjects had a diagnosis of osteoporosis (s.d. 37.5%) of this population. A high percentage of subjects had never had a DEXA scan. Thirty-seven percent of subjects fell more than once.

Falls Risk Profile

There were thirteen risk factors for falls included in this study. Study subjects displayed 8-12 of these risk factors. Ten (25%) of all subjects who participated reported they fell at least once during the TUG. Of these, seven acknowledged that they restricted their activity. A summary of prevalence of falls risk is summarised in Table 1.

Details of Falls

The most frequent location of the falls was indoors as 33 of the subjects (82.5%) fell indoors. The majority of subjects (65%) sustained an injury after the fall. The most common injury was bruising (12.5%) followed by Colles fracture and pelvic fracture (10%). Head lacerations (7.5%) and humeral fractures (7.5%) were also prevalent. Over 40% of the falls happened between 10am and 12 noon and only 20% of falls happened between the hours of 10pm and 6am. Sixty-three percent of the subjects fell from a height of 1-2 feet (s.d. 15%). Over 40% of the subjects who fell during the day and 10% of subjects who fell at night. There were 5% of subjects who fell on the stairs, 5% in a lift, 5% on the floor and 5% in the bathroom. Ninety-five percent of the subjects fell from a height of 1-2 feet (s.d. 15%). There were 5% of subjects who fell on the stairs, 5% in a lift, 5% on the floor and 5% in the bathroom.

Frailty

Frailty was assessed based on Fried's classification. Grip strength data was analysed for subjects dominant upper limb and compared to normative data. For four subjects, dominant upper limb grip strength could not be assessed due to radial fracture, humeral fracture or severe gout. In these cases the non-dominant reading was analysed. There was 8% of the population that had grip strength below normal values for their age and gender.

A high percentage of subjects (37.5%) were unable to complete the TUG test as they required assistance to stand from chair or assistance to mobilise. Of the subjects who fell during the TUG, 34% fell in the first 15 seconds, 3% fell in the second 15 seconds and 13% fell in the third 15 seconds. The majority displayed weak grip strength (65%) but just over a third (35%) reported un-intentional weight loss.

Thirty (75%) of the subjects in this study were classified as frail based on Fried's classification. It was calculated that the mean number of markers displayed was 3 (s.d. 1.2). Two of the subjects did not display any markers of frailty (4%) and 10 (25%) subjects who reported fear of falling. Of these subjects, seven acknowledged that they restricted their activity. A summary of prevalence of falls risk is summarised in Table 1.
Discussion

Comparison with previous studies shows that elderly fallers referred for physiotherapy in ED were older, and more socially vulnerable than the general ED elderly population in the same setting. Previous studies have reported mean age of elderly ED fallers to be 75.8 years (range 70-92 years). It has been found that fallers in ED were significantly older (mean age of 79 years) than non-fallers. Further study would be required to establish if elderly fallers referred for physiotherapy in ED are older than the fallers who are not referred for physiotherapy. However 72.5% of suggesting that osteoporosis

The frequency of living alone for elderly patients who present to ED was previously shown to be 42%: subjects in this study lived alone indicating that fallers referred for physiotherapy in ED are a group of socially vulnerable elderly. There were 22.5% of the subjects in this study who had been diagnosed with osteoporosis. However research has shown that 40-50% of women and 25% of men are likely to develop osteoporosis may be underestimated in this population. Only 7.5% of the subjects in this study were independently mobile and half used a frame. Of those who had a mobility aid, only 22.5% reported getting it from a physiotherapist and the same percentage reported that a family member had provided the mobility aid. This suggests that there may be an unmet need for this group of subjects who may never had any intervention by a physiotherapist despite a decline in mobility. Further study in this area seems warranted.

The profile of the subjects in this study is of a frail group. Three-quarters were classified as frail according to Fried's classification system and in total 90% were classified as frail or pre-frail. Previous studies have documented a frailty prevalence of 6.3% in the community dwelling elderly population 10. There were 85% of this study cohort who displayed decreased grip strength than age and gender matched controls, and therefore were more at risk of disability and mortality. A high percentage of subjects were unable to complete TUG. Previous research has advised that inability to complete the TUG is more predictive of falls than slow walking speed. All of the subjects who were able to complete the TUG, required more time to do so than age and gender matched controls. This portrays the study population as having gait and balance limitations. Interpretation of this must be limited as the TUG was carried out after the subjects presented to ED to address a fall and had various injuries. In conclusion, elderly fallers presenting to the ED were older, frail and socially vulnerable adults who are likely to require admission to a hospital. The reasoning implications are significant at the moment and are likely to increase given the ageing population. Previous studies have documented a frailty prevalence of 6.3% in the community dwelling elderly population. The prevalence of frailty in the sample of elderly fallers in this study was very high (75%). These patients displayed risks of further falls with slow TUG speed or an inability to complete the TUG. Polypharmacy and decreased grip strength were common. Slippers were the most frequent form of footwear worn at the time of falling. The prevalence of Osteoporosis in this group was low compared with international research, but the majority of subjects had never had a DEXA scan. A future study could include all fallers attending the ED to describe their demographic and frailty profile, and to determine their needs with regard to management and follow-up services.

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Acknowledgements
The staff and patients of St Vincent’s University Hospital

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