

Is there a doctor in the house?

"Mountain bikers are cautioned to ride with care - major injuries do happen". So says the newsflash in my inbox.

I'm no stranger to extreme sports, and I have to say that all my mountain-biking, skiing, rock-climbing friends are aware of the fact that they're risking life and limb when they fling themselves up and down sheer slopes.

But if the headline provoked a smile, the paper itself was distinctly sobering¹. It contains three case studies of men (yes, all men) who careened over their handlebars and landed on their heads, typically doing "considerable damage" to their helmets (yes, they were all wearing helmets). They all ended up with cervical spine injuries that left their limbs paralysed.

The paper lists the factors that are likely to lead to nasty accidents: "excessive speed, unfamiliar terrain, equipment failure, gender [that'd be being male, I presume], inattentiveness, and riding beyond one's ability". In terms of obvious, that lot pretty much hits the gold standard.

"That is all known information," concedes Sunil Apsingi, the lead author.

But although that sounds clear enough, the risks of paraplegia from such accidents may not be obvious to attending doctors. While all serious head injuries are treated as possible spinal, biking isn't exactly a high-profile cause of paralysis. And in one case documented by Apsingi, at the regional spinal injuries centre at the general hospital in Southport, UK, physicians didn't spot the spine injury until the patient became conscious and complained that he couldn't move his limbs.

A nasty bump

One of Apsingi's reviewers pointed out that at ski resorts a spinal injury is almost always suspected after a bad, headfirst tumble. If British attendees for bike accidents don't assume the same perhaps it is only because of a lack of familiarity with the sport, says Apsingi. But with mountain biking becoming ever more popular, they really, really ought to be made aware of the possibility.

How much does publishing a paper increase such awareness? Apsingi was driven to look for connections between bike accidents and paraplegia when one such patient asked if his situation was common; searches on Google and PubMed left him none the wiser. Now at least he has put some data out there. It isn't exactly quantitative: his research has left him with the as-yet unproven feeling that such accidents are "more common than anyone realizes". But it is something.

So... obvious? Absolutely. Worthwhile? I'd say so. If cyclists are hit over the head with the message that they really shouldn't move their friends when they crack open their helmets, and instead call an ambulance, that's good. Ditto if doctors immediately think about spinal injuries when presented with a victim of extreme biking.

The main difficulty now is getting the word out. It's not as if you can post signs on every tree. Nor is it reasonable to expect bike shops to hand out gory leaflets. Maybe some cyclists and doctors will read Apsingi's paper. Or this column. Any doctors in the house?

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References

1. Apsingi S., Dussa C.U.& Soni B.M. . *American Journal of Sports Medicine*, **34** . 1 - 3 doi: 10.1177/03663546505279917 (2006).