PATIENTS CAUGHT BETWEEN FEAR AND FASCINATION
PATIENTS CAUGHT BETWEEN FEAR AND FASCINATION: THE PATIENT’S PERSPECTIVE ON EMERGENCY RADIOLOGY

BY IAN BANKS AND THE ESR PATIENT ADVISORY GROUP

It may sound trite to say that emergency radiology is of utmost importance to patients.

However, it is indeed true that, depending on the nature of the problem and especially after accidents, most people need and desperately want an x-ray. The reason for this is obvious: people want to understand the root of their pain. Simply put, they want to know what is wrong with them. To patients, radiology is thus a means of shedding light on their problem – and this can even be taken literally.

FROM FASCINATION TO FEAR

Being able to see your organs and bones meticulously displayed on a computer screen from one second to another is somehow fascinating to most patients and, to some extent, still makes radiology some sort of ‘space age technology’. This fascination may, however, fade when it comes to accidents and emergencies. In fact, people usually feel scared in such cases.

There are innumerable different reasons for such fears: Patients might be anxious about the severity of their injury. Others might be anxious about the examination itself. For many people, the sight of a CT scanner, MRI or even a simple x-ray machine might be a new experience. Suddenly finding yourself strapped down, warned not to move a single muscle might cause panic and render the examination a nightmare.

Emergency radiologists and radiographers are thus often confronted with extraordinary situations, where they not only need to prove their expertise in stressful situations but also take the time to show an interest in individual patients and their fears.

Given the ever-increasing workload and pressure under which emergency radiologists and radiographers find themselves, this certainly poses a huge challenge. It might be tempting to have the examination completed as quickly as possible and then have another staff member communicate the result in order to be able to help the next patient already waiting in the crowded waiting area.

TALK TO THEM

What emergency radiology staff always have to bear in mind is how much it means to the patient to talk to a radiologist directly and perhaps even receive some motivating words in a situation which is most likely unfamiliar and frightening. As a matter of fact, reassurance from the ‘true expert’ can work wonders for the patient. The important role of communication between patients and healthcare professionals in the field of radiology is also a key issue addressed by the ESR Patient Advisory Group (ESR-PAG). ESR-PAG strongly advocates a patient-centred, human approach in the field of clinical radiology, which takes into account the patients’ emotional and social needs.

In its so-called Driver Diagram for Patient-Centred Care in Clinical Radiology, ESR-PAG not only defines the opportunity for patients to talk to radiological staff as a key concept for change and improvement, but goes even further by saying that radiologists need to find the right words in accordance with the level of understanding of each patient. This also requires respecting and acknowledging different cultural backgrounds, values and beliefs, which might not only affect communication but planning and delivery of service itself.

Generally speaking, emergency radiologists need to be experts in a variety of areas and...
the value patients place on the radiologist’s knowledge, training and expertise should never be underestimated. In addition, it is important to understand the exceptional-ity in the eyes of the patient of a situation, which probably seems only too ordinary to radiologists and radiographers in their daily routine. Reflecting on the situation from the patient’s perspective, or ‘living the journey’ of the patient as the ESR-PAG phrases it in its Driver Diagram, might help in recognising and ultimately understanding the patient’s fears and worries, which very often translate into confusion, frustration or at times even aggression.

It is thus often the patients themselves who add to the difficulty of the radiology staff’s job and the examination itself. Nonetheless, and at least once the examination is over and people are undergoing recovery – patients are truly thankful that there are emergency radiologists and radiographers who dedicate their professional lives to their well-being. In some cases, this might mean relieving your pain, in others, it might even mean saving your life. In any case, emergency radiology practitioners are doing a tremendous job and make a vital, profound difference!

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ABOUT THE ESR PATIENT ADVISORY GROUP
It is not always easy to find useful and clear information about radiology, and patients often have questions about radiological examinations. The ESR has recognised this need, and in 2013 began taking its communication with patient groups to another level with the launch of the ESR Patient Advisory Group (ESR-PAG). The goal of the ESR-PAG is to bring together patients, the public and imaging professionals in order to positively influence advances in the field of medical imaging to the benefit of patients in Europe.