

Discussing prognosis in spinal cord injury

Information for clinicians

Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) is often a life-changing event that requires a protracted rehabilitation journey spanning inpatient and community settings. Clinicians should exercise caution when queried about prognosis from people with SCI and their families and, if uncertain, should refer these questions to their local rehabilitation physician or the [Queensland Spinal Cord Injuries Service \(QSCIS\)](#).

Many variables impact on the likelihood of functional recovery after acute SCI, including:

- Type of injury (traumatic causes vs non-traumatic causes)
- Level of injury
- Degree of neurological impairment at the time of injury, including which neural tracts have been affected
- Patient age and comorbidities
- Secondary conditions and complications following SCI

Whilst prognostic indicators exist, it is difficult to predict the long-term functional impact of SCI on a person and this uncertainty should be acknowledged in the acute setting.

A holistic approach to the person's care from the time of injury is imperative to support their psychological and emotional health, and that of their families. Maintaining hope assists with people's ability to engage in acute and rehabilitation management (Dorsett, 2017). Most people with SCI hope for neurological recovery so they can return to independent function.

The discussions clinicians have with people can either maintain or diminish hope. The following information has been provided to support clinicians managing people with a new SCI to promote maintenance of hope whilst acknowledging prognostic uncertainty and the significant impact SCI has on a person's life and future plans.

In the acute phase after spinal cord injury

- Acknowledge that any SCI is a significant event
- Discuss the benefits of QSCIS involvement and request consent for a QSCIS referral:
 - QSCIS is the specialist spinal rehabilitation service for people in Qld and northern NSW
 - QSCIS can support local health care teams to provide people with the best care following SCI
 - QSCIS provides education to people and their families after SCI
 - QSCIS has an 'all of life' model that can continue to provide support after hospital discharge
- Do not attempt to predict functional prognosis e.g., telling the person they will "never walk again". These statements have the effect of diminishing hope and negatively impacting the therapeutic relationships between patients and their health care team. Such statements are also factually incorrect early after injury due to influences such as spinal shock, inaccurate early assessment, and unexpected recovery.

Suggested responses to patient questions about prognosis include:

- “Whilst a spinal cord injury is a significant event that affects many functions of the body, it is difficult to predict the long-term effects in the early stages.”
- “Because all spinal cord injuries are different, it takes a few months before we have a better idea about the amount of recovery someone might have.”
- “I know that prognosis after spinal cord injury can be difficult to predict so I will request that a specialist doctor from the QSCIS team make a time to discuss this further with you and your family.”

The terms ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ are derived from the International Standards for Neurological Classification of Spinal Cord Injury (or ASIA assessment) that is performed to classify SCI level and severity. They specifically refer to the absence or preservation of motor or sensory function in the lowest sacral spinal segments. For patients, however, the terms are emotive and confusing. It is not recommended that these are used when communicating with patients without an adequate explanation of their meaning. Questions from patients and families regarding the ‘completeness’ of a SCI should be referred to QSCIS senior medical staff.

Contacting QSCIS

If you have any questions about SCI, please do not hesitate to contact a QSCIS medical officer by calling the Princess Alexandra Hospital on 3176 2111 and asking to speak to the admitting SIU registrar.

For additional contact details or information on how to refer patients to QSCIS, please visit our website at: <https://qscis.health.qld.gov.au/>

References

Dorsett P, Geraghty T, Sinnott A, Acland R. Hope, coping and psychosocial adjustment after spinal cord injury. *Spinal Cord Ser Cases*. 2017 Sep 21;3:17046. doi: 10.1038/scsandc.2017.46. PMID: 28944084; PMCID: PMC5607448.