

TITLE: Improving your care of patients with spinal cord injury/disease

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ABSTRACT

More than 5 million Americans are living with paralysis, and for nearly one in 4 of them the cause is spinal cord injury or disease (SCI/D). More common than multiple sclerosis (17%) as a cause for the loss of movement, SCI/D is second only to stroke (29%). The percentage of people living with paralysis due to SCI/D is increasing, partly because the population is aging and partly because management of infections has improved. Prior to the 1970s, life expectancy for people with SCI/D was significantly shortened, largely because of urologic and respiratory infections. But improved bladder management, in particular, has increased life expectancy—especially for the least severely injured. Respiratory diseases and septicemia remain the leading causes of death, but with increased longevity, other causes, such as endocrine, metabolic and nutritional diseases, accidents, nervous system diseases, and musculoskeletal disorders, are becoming increasingly common.

Primary care's pivotal role.

Given the size of the population affected by SCI/D and the increase in life expectancy, family physicians (FPs) are more likely than ever before to care for these patients, most of whom have highly specific needs. However, little information about the primary care of patients with SCI/D exists. This patient population tends to consume a relatively large share of practices' resources because of high case complexity. A recent Canadian report confirms our clinical experience that FPs report knowledge gaps in the area of SCI/D care, yet the same report found that 90% of people with SCI/D identify FPs as their "regular doctors."⁵ Although a large number of patients with SCI/D identify their physiatrist as their primary care physician (PCP), one study reported that fewer than half of physiatrists are willing to assume that role. And while more than half of all patients with SCI/D have both specialists and PCPs involved in their care, communication breakdowns are a concern for patients receiving medical and rehabilitative direction from multiple health care professionals.