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Clinical Practice and Cases in Emergency Medicine

Title
A Plumb Fit

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zv916xw

Journal
Clinical Practice and Cases in Emergency Medicine, 1(4)

ISSN
2474-252X

Authors
Harrison, Michael F.
Rooney, Kevin
Jaskulka, Bradley

Publication Date
2017

DOI
10.5811/cpcem.2017.9.35222

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Peer reviewed
A Plumb Fit

Michael F. Harrison MD, PhD**†‡
Kevin Rooney, MD, MS*
Bradley Jaskulka, MD*

*Henry Ford Hospital, Department of Emergency Medicine, Detroit, Michigan
†Henry Ford Hospital, Department of Internal Medicine, Detroit, Michigan
‡Henry Ford Hospital, Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Critical Care Medicine, Detroit, Michigan

Section Editor: Rick A. McPheeters, DO
Submission history: Submitted June 18, 2017; Revision received August 19, 2017; Accepted September 6, 2017
Electronically published October 18, 2017
Full text available through open access at http://escholarship.org/uc/uciem_cpcem
DOI: 10.5811/cpcem.2017.9.35222


CASE PRESENTATION

In the middle of the night, a young male with no significant past medical history presented from a local detention facility with an unusual chief complaint – entrapment of his right hand in the cell’s stainless steel toilet basin. The circumstances leading to this complaint were unclear, and the hand had been in the toilet for approximately three hours at the time of arrival. When detention facility staff, including a plumber, were unsuccessful in freeing the hand, the patient and the entire toilet and sink assembly were transported to our emergency department (Image). To assist efforts to safely remove the hand, a plain radiograph identified its location with respect to the toilet’s inner structure (Image).

While preparations were being made to cut the toilet with a power saw, approximately 500mL of ultrasound gel was applied to the basin and allowed to seep into the outflow tract. Using firm manual traction, the patient’s hand was then safely freed. Physical exam of the liberated hand revealed water aging but no other anatomical, functional, or sensory abnormalities. A subsequent (more traditional) series of plain

Image. The patient’s right hand and intact sink / toilet assembly (Panel A) on the stretcher in the trauma bay; the lateral view radiograph of the entrapped hand (blue arrow – shaft of radius; black arrow – metacarpals; red arrow – distal tips of fingers) inside the toilet (Panel B).
radiographs revealed no acute osseous injury; and laboratory analysis, including creatinine phosphokinase levels, were within normal limits. The patient and intact toilet were subsequently discharged to the detention center.

**DISCUSSION**

While using a toilet may seem like a benign common process, injuries do occur.\(^1,3\) Alternatively, hand injuries are one of the most common complaints of prisoners requiring medical attention.\(^4,6\) Regardless of patient population, this case demonstrates an unusual marriage of hand and toilet injuries requiring medical intervention. The use of ultrasound gel to liberate the patient’s hand is an excellent example of the “thinking on your feet” skillset that makes our profession both challenging and enjoyable.

**Address for Correspondence:** Michael F Harrison, MD, PhD, Henry Ford Hospital, 2799 W Grand Boulevard, Detroit, MI 48202. Email: mharri19@hfhs.org.

**Conflicts of Interest:** By the CPC-EM article submission agreement, all authors are required to disclose all affiliations, funding sources and financial or management relationships that could be perceived as potential sources of bias. The authors disclosed none.

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