UK Time to Brain Stem Death Testing

Paul Murphy, Joanne Allen, Alex Manara and Dale Gardiner
NHS Blood and Transplant, Bristol, UK, BS34 8RR

Background

The publication of three cases of ‘reversal’ of brain death in North America has prompted renewed discussion about the criteria for brain death. In two of these cases brain death testing occurred at 7 and 6 hours respectively, from the onset of coma. One clinical criticism is that this is a relatively short duration of observation, given the clinical circumstances.

Method

To benchmark UK practice, the time to brain stem death testing from the onset of coma, defined as onset of fixed and dilated pupils, was investigated by NHS Blood and Transplant utilising the UK Transplant Registry. Deceased donors after brain death (DBD) who donated at least one solid organ in the UK have been included, if both times were reported. This represents approximately 40% of brain stem death tests carried out in the UK. Timing data were only available for brain stem dead individuals who progressed to organ donation.

Results

Results for 1880 brain stem death tests, between 1st September 2007 and 31st August 2011, were available for analysis. The median time between fixed and dilated pupils and first brain stem death tests was 18 hours 15 minutes and the distribution is displayed in Figure 1.

Discussion

The UK criteria for diagnosing death using neurological criteria have no mandated minimum time period for observation before testing, following the onset of coma. None-the-less, an unofficial 6 hours is usually suggested. Results from this investigation demonstrate that in a significant number of cases, UK clinicians are using a short period of observation. This should inform education.

References