
IMAGE OF OUR TIME

The Combination Tool: A Significant Cause Of Morbidity In Deployed Personnel

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Background

The combination tool is a common addition to the personal kit of today's armed forces and is particularly prevalent in deployed troops.

A retrospective analysis of cases of injury caused by these tools in UK Armed Forces personnel deployed in Iraq was conducted. The case notes for all such injuries over a one month period were obtained from the attendance log of the Accident & Emergency facility, MND SE Hospital. Data detailing site of injury, extent of damage, necessity surgical intervention and ultimate disposal was collected. The activity at time of injury was also recorded.

Results

Over the study period 12 soldiers attended with combination tool injuries. There were 4 thumb, 2 index finger, 3 forearm and 3 lower limb injuries. All but one injury occurred at work. Six wounds injured muscles, including complete division of the extensor pollicis longus tendon in one case. Three wounds were confined to the skin and were stripped. Two soldiers suffered 50% division of digital nerves and underwent repair after exploration. The remainder all underwent surgical exploration. Five soldiers returned directly to full duties, 3 received two weeks light duties and four were aeromedically evacuated.

Discussion

In a short time period, significant injuries resulted from the use of combination tools by deployed personnel. Seventy five percent required surgery and one third were evacuation from theatre as a result. Ninety two percent of injuries occurred using the tool to perform a work related task and were predominantly of the upper limb, predominantly the thumb or index finger, mirroring a well described distribution of accidental occupational injury (1,2). The suitability of using these tools for work tasks, raises important occupational health issues as this short report demonstrates a potential for serious injury with implications for manpower capability on deployment. It is suggested that the tool's suitability for performing routine maintenance tasks is assessed.



References

1. Mackenzie K, Peters M. Handedness, Hand Roles, and Hand Injuries at Work. *Journal of Safety Research* 2000; 31, (4) : 221-7.
2. Sorock GS, Lombardi DA, Courtney TK, *et al.* Epidemiology of occupational acute traumatic hand injuries : a literature review. *Safety Science* 2001; 38: 241-56.

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