

Brethertons BIG FAQs Series

Statistics

It is often the case that clients we engage with take some interest in placing and seeing their situation in the wider perspective and context that key spinal cord injury statistics provide. This note explores some of that statistical perspective and context.

What do the statistics show about the prevalence of spinal cord injury in the UK?

Of the approximately 67 million people living in the UK there are thought to be approximately 50,000 people living with spinal cord injury. That equates to a 'community' of just 0.08% of the population at large. There are thought to be approximately 13,300 A&E appointments involving spinal injury annually, of which it is thought 2,500 may involve spinal cord injury. That suggests there are 48 spinal cord injuries per week, around 7 per day or one person suffering a spinal cord injury every 3.5 hours or so. Around 51% of spinal cord injuries year on year are thought to involve tetraplegia; and just under 50% have a traumatic (rather than an organic cause). There are 8 specialist spinal cord injuries rehabilitation centres in England and Wales. It is thought that around 3 in 10 people with the injury might have grounds to make a compensation claim. The number of people making a compensation claim for all types of injury is decreasing year on year. Just under 565,000 compensation claims were made in the year to 31st March 2021 (compared with just over 987,000 claims made ten years ago.)

Why are these statistics important?

The statistics are important to health providers where designing health services provision is concerned. They are important to groups representing the interests of spinal cord injured people – for example charities – where prioritising and explaining or campaigning on behalf of spinal cord injured people might be concerned. They are also important to individuals affected by spinal cord injury be they patients, family or friends of patients, or those working in the field of spinal cord injury. They provide context and perspective to the lived experience of the individuals who suffer spinal cord injury.

When was the last time these statistics were reviewed?

It varies! Until recently it was thought there were only around 1,000 spinal cord injuries each year. It is now thought it might be as many as 2,500. There is a surprising disparateness to the different data sources – A&E data being collated separately of rehabilitation data; different Trusts with different reporting practices and habits; different regional spinal cord injuries groupings; and a National Spinal Injuries Database (available only to clinicians) makes it difficult to do more than establish a general picture at any point in time. That said the annual data on new patients entering spinal cord injuries rehabilitation units is a useful point for extrapolation exercises.

How are trends changing?

It used to be that life expectancy beyond spinal cord injury was limited whereas now in broad terms it is not appreciably different to the life expectancy in the 'un-injured' population thanks to advances in medicine and the understanding of the injury. What was an injury affecting predominantly younger men (in road accidents, accidents at work or in sport) is now an injury seemingly affecting older people more than it used to. People living longer are perhaps more prone to other health issues by which for example balance may be affected and falls causing the injury become more common, or disease leading to spinal cord damage becomes more prevalent. At the same time, as more complex surgery becomes possible, complications of surgery leading to spinal cord injury feature more often.

Where can I find out more?

Whilst perhaps of more interest only to the particularly keen statisticians the following sources are useful starting points for finding out more about spinal cord injury related statistics:

TARN
GRIFT
DWP

Who suffers spinal cord injury in the UK today?

The male to female ratio of spinal cord injured patients is around a two thirds to one third (male to female) split. Around 5% of newly injured patients are aged over 80 and 2% are aged under 14. Beyond that all that can be sensibly said is that spinal cord injury can and does happen to anyone at any time. Trying to identify a typical or an average patient type in all of this is a fool's errand of course. The average human, after all, has fewer than four limbs and inevitably, as with most statistical analyses, that fact takes us only so far in furthering our understanding and widening our perspective.

If you would like any more information or have any questions, please contact:

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