

Head injury or under the influence of drugs?

The way in which the ambulance service dealt with the “Sofienberg Park Case” has been a prominent topic in the media during the last year. The main focus was on whether the ambulance personnel had acted in a way that was discriminatory or racist. This case, and other supervision cases involving ambulance personnel, has highlighted another important aspect: the challenge of distinguishing whether a patient has a serious head injury or whether he or she is under the influence of drugs.

blow to the head that could have caused serious injury. It is important to assess what type of injury the patient has received. The ambulance personnel must also identify whether the patient is under the influence of drugs, and if so, what type of drugs and how much the patient has consumed.

In our view, ambulance personnel do not have the skills to distinguish between head injury and intoxication. Therefore, patients with this problem should be routinely assessed by a doctor.

The Norwegian Board of Health Supervision has dealt with some cases involving head injury and intoxication. In two cases, the ambulance personnel justified their decision not to take the patient to a doctor or a hospital on the grounds that the patient refused this. Based on other evidence in these cases, and on the fact that the ambulance personnel spent only a few minutes at the site of the accident, we think it is unlikely that the ambulance personnel took the necessary initiative to take the patient to a doctor or a hospital. According to the Health Care Personnel Act, Section 7, health care personnel have a duty to provide health care to patients in situations where there is a danger to life or a danger that the patient’s condition may seriously deteriorate.

(1) Nore A., O. Ommundsen, S. Steine: Hvordan skille mellom sykdom, skade og rus på Legevakten? (How can we distinguish between illness, injury and intoxication in the emergency department?) Tidsskr Nor Lægeforen 2001; 121: 1055–8

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A serious consequence of head injury is cerebral haemorrhage. This can be a life-threatening condition, and people who survive can be left with permanent injury. In some cases, cerebral haemorrhage after a head injury gives immediate symptoms. In other cases, symptoms develop over time. The early symptoms can easily be confused with the symptoms of intoxication. This can be further complicated by the fact that head injury and intoxication often occur at the same time. The prognosis is largely dependent on making the correct diagnosis as soon as possible and giving the appropriate treatment. A survey at the Oslo Emergency Department (1) showed that systematic observation of patients over several hours combined with repeated clinical examinations is necessary, in order to distinguish between patients who had serious illness and injury from those who were intoxicated.

When ambulance personnel are called out to patients with acute injuries, they are expected to assess whether the patient has received a

