

HEADACHE - PRIMARY STABBING (ICE - PICK)



Leon Trotsky working in his study in exile in Turkey (1929- 33)

"I hit him just once and he gave out a piteous, shattering cry when it happened, at the same time as he threw himself on me and bit my left hand, as you can see for yourself from these three teeth marks. Then he took some slow steps back from that spot. As soon as they heard the cry, people arrived; because of what had happened I almost lost consciousness and didn't try to escape. Harold got there first and started to beat me with his pistol, and then came Hansen and Charles..."

*Ramon Mercador, on interrogation by Mexican Police for his assassination of
Leon Trotsky, 20th August, 1940.*

In 1938 Ramon Mercador was a student studying at the Sorbonne in Paris. He was a Spanish born Soviet agent who was assigned by the NKVD to assassinate Joseph Stalin's personal enemy, Leon Trotsky who was now living in exile in Mexico City with the famous Mexican Artists, and Trotsky sympathisers, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. At this time Frida Kahlo was holding an exhibition of her work at the Renou & Colle Gallery. Under the assumed name of Jacques Mornard, Mercador tried to ingratiate himself with Frida, by offering large bunches of flowers. Frida, however was not much impressed with her follower, who seemed far too insistent on wanting to meet Trotsky. She later recalled; "In Paris I met Mornard, the one who killed him, and he went around insinuating to me that I should take him to Trotsky's house. "Not me because I am quarreling with the old Trotsky", I told him. He said, "I only ask you please, to find me a house near there". I said, "Well, look for it yourself, because I am too sick to look for houses for anyone, and I cannot give you lodging in my house, nor can I introduce you to Trotsky, I never will introduce you". But his girlfriend (Sylvia Ageloff) came and introduced him".

Having failed in his courting of Frida Kahlo, Mercador turned his attentions to one of Trotsky's personal secretaries, an American Social Worker, by the name of Sylvia Ageloff. Here he was far more successful. When Sylvia returned to Mexico City, Mercador followed her and gradually ingratiated himself into the Blue House, then awaited Stalin's orders. In May 1940 the famous Mexican Muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, a devoted Stalinist, led an assassination attempt on Trotsky. His group machine-gunned the Blue House but Trotsky ducked under his bed with his wife Natalia and both survived. Siqueiros fled Mexico. Suddenly Mercador found himself as Stalin's "plan B".

On the morning of the 20th of August, Mercador, who by now had become a familiar figure at the Blue House, asked if Trotsky would be happy to review an article he had written on French economic statistics. Trotsky, thinking nothing of it, agreed to help out the young man in his assignment. That afternoon Mercador arrived wearing a long raincoat even though it was a bright sunny day. Underneath this he concealed a dagger and large mountaineer's ice-pick. When Natalia asked him why he was wearing a raincoat on such a fine day, he told her that heavy thunderstorms were expected in the evening. He gave his papers to Trotsky, who suspecting nothing, wandered into his study and began pouring over them. Mercador followed him in. He crept up behind Trotsky and with one deft movement brought the ice-pick crashing down on his head with a sickening thud. Although the blow was severe, it had penetrated three inches into his brain, he was not instantly killed. He staggered onto his feet, and in rage sprang at Mercador, biting at his hand before collapsing onto the ground. On hearing Trotsky's scream, his minders rushed into the office and apprehended Mercador delivering blows to his head with the butts of their pistols.

Trotsky was rushed to hospital, but despite the frantic efforts of no fewer than five of Mexico's top surgeons, he died the next day, Wednesday, 21st, August, 1940. It was the most spectacular and high profile assassination since that of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. The Mexican Ministry of the Interior took control of the funeral proceedings, fearing further Stalinist outrages. Trotsky's corpse was laid out in an open coffin, head bandages still in place. He was driven through the central streets of Mexico

City, and despite having been a militant atheist, an astonishing crowd of around 200,000 people, virtually all Catholics, turned out to pay their respects. Atheist he may have been, but Trotsky had always been an advocate and champion for the oppressed and the poor.

The Mexican government acting quickly to apprehend any they thought may have been coconspirators with Mercador, among those they interrogated were two of Mexico's most famous Artists, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Diego was known to have fallen out with Trotsky, for reasons, which even today remain somewhat obscure. Trotsky had left the Blue House for alternative living quarters, ostensibly on the grounds of differences of arcane political ideology with Diego, however his wife Frida had also had a brief but intense affair with the Russian. If Diego, who Frida believed quite capable of killing out of jealousy, had found out about the affair, then perhaps Trotsky's sudden departure becomes far more understandable.

Diego unable to take the heat from the police, fled Mexico for a short while to take up residence in San Francisco. Frida, by association with her husband, and on account of having known the assassin in Paris in 1938 and having invited him to her house in Coyoacan to dine, was also under suspicion. Together with her sister Cristina she was taken into custody for questioning, even though she had been one of Trotsky's strongest supporters. She was interrogated for twelve hours, then eventually let go when it became clear she was innocent. Though cleared the arrest and interrogation had been a terrifying experience.

"They sacked Diego's house", Frida later recalled. "They stole a magnificent clock that I had given him, drawings, watercolors, paintings, paints, suits - they looted the house through and through. There were thirty seven policemen here prying into everything in the house. I had known that they would come, and I arranged the papers and threw all political papers into the cellar of the big house under the kitchen. Then they brought the police as we - my sister and I - cried for two days in jail. And meanwhile the house was left empty, and my sister's little children had been left alone, without food, and we begged a policeman: "Be good enough to just go and give the children something to eat". After two days they freed us because we were not guilty either of the assassination attempt or of the shooting (i.e the botched Siqueiros assassination attempt).

The enigmatic entity, Primary Stabbing Headache, otherwise goes by the name of Ice-Pick headache. Though, not lethal, its character or nature may be well appreciated by a consideration of the method of assassination of the great Russian revolutionary leader, Leon Trotsky.

HEADACHE - PRIMARY STABBING (ICE - PICK)

Introduction

Primary stabbing headache, (also called **Ice pick headache**) is a unique headache type associated with **ultra-brief** stabs of “electric” pain.

The pains can occur **anywhere** in the head, including in both **trigeminal** and **extra-trigeminal regions**, the latter helping to distinguish it from trigeminal neuralgia.

The stabbing pains occur in the **absence** of organic disease.

Structural abnormalities however must be excluded by CT scan and /or MRI scan especially if the pain is invariably localized at one site or on one side only.

Isolated cases are usually so brief and infrequent that treatment is not warranted.

Persistent cases may respond to **indomethacin**.

See also separate documents on:

- **Headache- Neuralgic Chart (in Neurology folder) **
- **Indomethacin (in Drugs folder)**

History

Raskin and Schwartz first described a syndrome in 1980, whose characteristics were often encountered in practice but were rarely discussed in the literature.¹

They termed the symptoms “ice pick-like pain,” and described it as a severe, short-lived, ice pick, needle or nail-like pain that most often occurred in a unilateral temporal or orbital distribution

Primary stabbing headache has been known by several terms, primarily **ice-pick headache**, but also ophthalmodynia periodica, and jabs and jolts syndrome.

Epidemiology

Primary stabbing headache is an **uncommon** condition.

It has been described in both children and adults.

Pathophysiology

Primary stabbing headache, as the name suggests, occurs *without* any currently detectable evidence of structural pathology.

The pathophysiology therefore remains unclear.

Many patients with primary stabbing headache however also have another coexisting primary headache disorder, such as migraine or cluster headache. In these cases, the stabbing usually occurs in areas of the head that are also involved in the coexisting headache. The stabbing pain might result from spontaneous firing in individual nerve fibers sensitized by recurrent activation.

Clinical features

Clinical features include:

1. Nature:
 - Described as **sharp, electric** or **stabbing**
 - Intensity can range from mild to severe.
2. Duration:
 - **Ultra-brief** - lasting just **seconds**.
2. Pattern of occurrence:
 - They can occur as **single stabs** or in “**volleys**” lasting **1 - 15 minutes** at **irregular** intervals
 - Attacks can range from **rare** attacks to **daily**.
 - ♥ **Chronic daily** patterns have been described characterized by **longer lasting stabs** of **lower intensity**
 - Median attack duration is around 2 weeks
 - Recurrences can occur for up to 2 years
4. Distribution:
 - The pains can occur **anywhere** in the head, including in both **trigeminal** and **extra-trigeminal regions**, the latter helping to distinguish it from trigeminal neuralgia.
 - Symptoms are **localized** to a **small** specific area
 - The site of pain can **vary** from episode to episode
6. Associated features

- Frequently the patient will **wince**.
- Attacks are **not** associated with cranial autonomic symptoms, (in distinction to the Trigeminal Autonomic Cephalalgias).
- Most patients with primary stabbing headache also have another *coexisting* primary headache disorder, such as **migraine** or **cluster headache** and attacks often ease when migraine is treated.

Investigations

A structural abnormality should be excluded in persistent cases, especially if the pain is:

- Invariably localized at one site
- On one side only.

Imaging is done to exclude

- Structural disease (including malignant disease).
- Demyelinating diseases.

CT scan may be done as an initial screen

MRI is the best imaging modality

Management

Isolated cases are usually so brief and infrequent that treatment is not warranted.

Persistent cases will need treatment

Uncontrolled series have reported therapeutic responses to:

- Indomethacin (75 - 150 mg daily) - considered first line therapy.

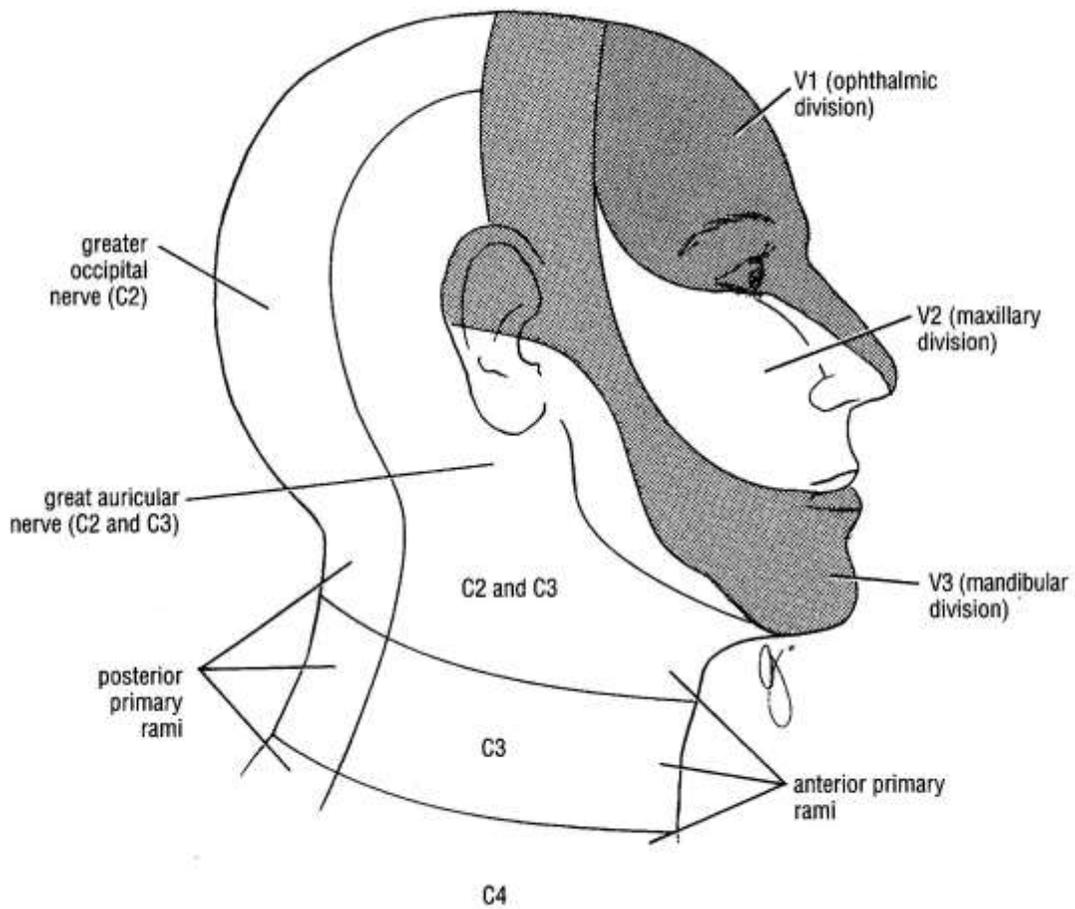
Second line therapies:

- Other COX-2 inhibiting NSAIDS (if gastric side effects are of concern).
- Melatonin (3 - 12 mg daily)
- Gabapentin 400 mg twice daily ⁴

Disposition:

Patients suspected of having Primary Stabbing headache, should be referred to a **Neurologist** for assessment.

Appendix 1



The sensory innervations of the three divisions of the Trigeminal Nerve, (Snell, 1995)

References

1. Raskin NH, Schwartz RK. Ice pick-like pain. *Neurology*. 1980; 3: 203 - 5.
2. eTG - Neurology Guidelines, March 2020.
3. F Michael Cutrer et al. Stabbing headache in Up to Date Website, September 2018.
4. MC França et al. Gabapentin-responsive idiopathic stabbing headache. *Cephalalgia*, 2004, 24, 993 - 996.
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