



Surviving During Civil War

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A 31 year old woman of Somali origin comes to F.'s surgery referring worsening headache, dizziness, limited heads movement, upper limbs paresthesia and fatigue.

The patient has recently moved to Italy. She comes to F. surgery declaring to have more and more difficulties not only in her work, but also in her daily activities.

She is working for a cleaning company and she complains of head's movements limitation, especially in head flexion/extension. Moreover she feels a pain spreading to the cervico-dorsal region which sometimes can involve also the lower limbs. In addition, she is suffering from upper limbs paresthesia, weakness and motor awkwardness which leads to difficulties in prehensing and manipulating objects.

Due to her unfamiliarity with the Italian language it is hard to take the medical history of the patient, but she seems to be negative for major illnesses.

Looking at the skin, many disfiguring scars are evident: they have different size and course, and are localized above all in the dorsal region. Some of them are keloid scars.

The physical examination reveals marked contractures and stiffness of the spinal muscles, in particular in the cervical region, with a very small excursion of heads movements (overall in flexion/extension). Touching the neck it evokes intensive pain. The patient presents bilateral muscle weakness too, largely concerning the upper limbs. There are no other signs or symptoms.

After an accurate, comprehensive and challenging conversation, finally F. succeed in understanding that many years ago this patient had been victim of repeated violence by Somali guerrilla fighters. She was brutally beaten up, also with rifle butts; she was scalded with hot irons and cigarettes and she often faced the threat of group rape.

In 1969, a military coup d'état brought to power General Siad Barre. Between the end of the 70s and early 80s, it began to appear guerillas groups that were hostile to the government. Along with this, it began an era of intermittent civil war which still continues today. In 1991, Barre has been ousted; the following power struggle set against different tribal groups to a new growing of violence, moreover accompanied by a terrible famine.

The patient belong to a well-to-do family, close to the old presidential party. She saw her family decimated by murders or by escaping into exile abroad, like to Saudi Arabia, Yemen or Italy.

While she was still living in Somalia, she never went to hospital and she never received any medical treatment: she just used to lie in bed for some weeks.

F. plan a spinal x-ray, a CT evaluation and a MRI scan of the cervical vertebrae.

These show the outcome of a fracture of the odontoid process of the axis. Also, there is evidence of a somatic inveterate collapse of D9 with preserved posterior wall.

Then, F. send the patient to the orthopedic surgeon who doesn't think that she should undergo surgery. F. tell her to see a physiatrist who prescribes her long-term physical therapy rehabilitation and recommends her to avoid efforts, especially raising efforts. He suggests her to plan periodic medical examinations.

F. try to do own best to help her in applying for civil invalidity, even because she has two children.

Finally she gets a disability percentage of 46%. This allows her to be included in specific lists in order to obtain a more suitable job for her health condition.