When comparing apples and oranges is all bananas!

Malachy Columb

When dealing with heterogeneity in a statistical sense, it is often said that it is like ‘comparing apples and oranges’ and makes no sense. In this issue of the Journal, we have a report that goes further and compares a variety of fruits! Most anaesthesiologists gain their early experience in performing epidural anaesthetic and analgesic procedures in the obstetric setting on the maternity suite on women in labour. Indeed, most of these are performed using anatomical rather than imaging techniques, although ultrasound scanning is becoming more widely available. \(^1\) This is in contrast to other medical specialties such as chronic pain, radiology and orthopaedics in which real-time imaging, such as fluoroscopy, is used to perform such procedures. So the novice anaesthetist is often faced with the requirement to ascend a steep learning curve to acquire proficiency, yet minimise the risks of dural puncture and more serious complications. \(^2,3\) Another issue is the increasing prevalence of obesity, which adds to the complexity.

The article by Raj \(^4\) et al. in this issue of the European Journal of Anaesthesiology describes a simple device to simulate the feeling of ‘loss of resistance’ to the passage of the tip of an epidural needle through the ligamentum flavum into the epidural space. They constructed a box in which a variety of hidden fruits (orange, kiwi, honeydew melon and banana) were mounted, and experienced blinded anaesthesiologists were asked to rate the feel of loss of resistance to injection of saline or air as the needle entered the various fruits. Interestingly, 63% of the participants identified the banana as the most realistic, followed by the melon.

The principal issue with simulation is, of course, the development of a high fidelity model. Although this simple epidural simulator clearly has limited face or construct validities and is far from the world of any virtual reality, at least patients should be less likely to be harmed in the process of the novice gaining initial experience of the feel for loss of resistance. The banana is cheap and readily available, which cannot be said for more sophisticated simulators. \(^5\) It must follow that it will be beneficial to our patients for the novice to err by slipping on a banana skin and cause virtual rather than actual harm. So while it may seem sometimes that time flies like an arrow, it is not only fruit flies who like bananas!

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References


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