PRACTICE

PRACTICE POINTER

Identifying and managing deprivation of liberty in adults in England and Wales

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Clinicians are required by law to be able to identify and manage deprivation of liberty—this article explains how to do so.

Why read this article?

In England and Wales, depriving an adult of their liberty without a legal framework in place is unlawful. In recent years, the law governing restriction and deprivation of liberty has undergone several important changes, which have resulted in more safeguards for adults lacking mental capacity when it comes to deciding on their place of accommodation. This new legislation has also considerably increased the complexity of the legal framework that clinicians have to engage with. Healthcare professionals have a legal duty to be aware of this legislation; claiming ignorance is not defensible. However, they will be protected from legal liability provided the guidance in the relevant code of practice is adhered to and decisions, including the reasons for them, are thoroughly documented.

The Mental Capacity Act 2005¹ came into force in October 2007. In April 2009 the Mental Capacity Act was amended by the deprivation of liberty safeguards² in response to the issues raised by the Bournewood judgment (box 1).²⁻³ The amendment went through Parliament with the Mental Health Act 2007,⁴ which was itself revised at the same time. In some emergency situations not covered by the aforementioned laws, when patients have capacity to make decisions about accommodation, the common law may still apply. The application of these laws is complex and we discuss these complexities for the benefit of healthcare professionals.

All doctors—particularly those who treat patients in hospital with dementia, learning difficulties, and brain injury, as well as GPs, physicians, and psychiatrists who treat residents of care homes—need to be able to identify patients who are at risk of deprivation of liberty and ensure that the correct legal framework is applied. Most do not, however, need to have a detailed knowledge of procedures beyond that point. We therefore suggest a practical approach to the identification and initial man-

Box 1 The Bournewood case and the European convention on human rights²⁻³

The Bournewood case involved a young man (HL) with autism and learning difficulties who was admitted informally (not under the Mental Health Act) in 1997 to a mental health unit following an episode of self harm. Requests from his carers for him to be discharged were refused and they were not allowed to visit him. The case went up to the European Court of Human Rights, where the judgment found that the admission constituted a deprivation of HL’s liberty that had not been in accordance with “a procedure prescribed by law.” Specifically this was in breach of article 5(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights, and also article 5(4), because HL had “no means of applying quickly to a court to see if the deprivation of liberty was lawful.” The European Court also said that “the key factor in the present case [is] that the healthcare professionals treating and managing the applicant exercised complete and effective control over his care and movements.” They found “the concrete situation was that the applicant was under continuous supervision and control and was not free to leave.”

Article 5 of the European convention on human rights (edited extract)

Right to liberty and security

1. Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be deprived of his liberty save in the following cases and in accordance with a procedure prescribed by law: …

(e) the lawful detention of persons for the prevention of the spreading of infectious diseases, of persons of unsound mind, alcoholics or drug addicts or vagrants; …

4. Everyone who is deprived of his liberty by arrest or detention shall be entitled to take proceedings by which the lawfulness of his detention shall be decided speedily by a court and his release ordered if the detention is not lawful.

SUMMARY POINTS

Two pieces of legislation in England and Wales deal with deprivation of liberty in the hospital and care home: the deprivation of liberty safeguards and the Mental Health Act

The deprivation of liberty safeguards allow deprivation of liberty of people in hospitals or care homes who lack capacity to consent to physical or mental healthcare

The Mental Health Act (under some of its sections) allows the deprivation of liberty of people in hospital for the purposes of assessment or treatment of a mental (not physical) disorder

Where the purpose of detention in hospital is for the assessment or treatment of mental disorder and the patient objects to admission or treatment, use of the Mental Health Act should be considered before deprivation of liberty safeguards

The Mental Capacity Act allows restriction, but not deprivation of liberty

Decisions should be carefully considered and documented. Always consider whether care could be provided in a less restrictive way that could avoid the need for application of a legal framework.
The decision-maker should consider:

Box 2 | Indicators that deprivation of liberty may be occurring

- Professionals exercising complete and effective control over care and movement for a substantial period
- Professionals exercising control over assessments, treatment, contacts, and residence
- Decision taken by institution that a person will not be released into care of others or live elsewhere unless staff consider it appropriate
- Use of restraint, including sedation, to admit a person who is resisting
- The person would be stopped from leaving if they made a meaningful attempt to do so
- Refusal of requests by carers for the person to be discharged to their care
- Inability to maintain social contacts because of restrictions placed on access to others
- Loss of autonomy owing to being under continuous supervision and control

Box 3 | Stages to go through to decide whether someone is being deprived of their liberty

The decision-maker should consider:

- All the circumstances of each and every case
- What measures are being taken in relation to the individual? When are they required? For what period do they endure? What are the effects of any restraints or restrictions on the individual? Why are they necessary? What aim do they seek to meet?
- What are the views of the relevant person, their family or carers? Do any of them object to the measures?
- How are any restraints or restrictions implemented? Do any of the constraints on the individual’s personal freedom go beyond restraint or restriction to the extent that they constitute a deprivation of liberty?
- Are there any less restrictive options for delivering care or treatment that avoid deprivation of liberty altogether?
- Does the cumulative effect of all the restrictions imposed on the person amount to a deprivation of liberty, even if individually they would not?

Methods

The primary sources for this article were the codes of practice for the Mental Capacity Act 2005, the deprivation of liberty safeguards and the Mental Health Act 2007. Further information was gleaned from a recent legal judgment on the Office of the Public Guardian website.

What are “restriction” and “deprivation” of liberty?

Neither term is given an exact definition by the codes of practice, nor can they be; the definition will be different for every individual. Each person’s situation needs to be carefully considered using the guidelines set out in the codes of practice to conclude whether or not they are being deprived of their liberty. The deprivation of liberty safeguards code of practice gives examples of situations that may indicate that the threshold for deprivation of liberty has been crossed (box 2), however restriction of liberty is not so clearly defined; it involves a degree of restriction of an individual’s movements and freedom that falls below this threshold. For practical purposes, the distinction between restriction and deprivation in the context of the individual is crucial, because deprivation of liberty in the absence of “a procedure prescribed by law” is in breach of article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, whereas restriction of liberty is not. In other words, depriving someone of their liberty is illegal unless you have in place a legal framework authorising it.

Restriction and deprivation of liberty are “a matter of degree or intensity, not nature or substance.” There are no convenient measures that tell us when someone is being deprived of their liberty, such as the number of days for which they have been asking to leave a hospital or the number of times they have been restrained. Rather, it is the combined effect of all aspects of the care proposed or already being given for that particular individual that tells us if restriction or deprivation of liberty is occurring.

The deprivation of liberty safeguards code of practice suggests that the factors that provide the degree or intensity that result in deprivation of liberty can relate to:

- The type of care being provided
- How long the situation lasts
- Its effects, or
- The way in which a particular situation came about.

Guidance on the impact of specific interventions on a person’s liberty status

Although no precise definitions are available, we can take further guidance from the codes of practice where people lacking capacity are concerned.

Restraint

Restraint is defined as occurring when a person uses force—or threatens to use force—to make someone do something that they are resisting, or to restrict a person’s freedom of movement, whether they are resisting or not. Restraint is permitted under the Mental Capacity Act provided it does not cause a deprivation of liberty. This situation may seem counterintuitive at first glance; however, the Mental Capacity Act tells us that restraint in many cases will only restrict someone’s liberty. A more detailed discussion of this issue can be found in the online version of this article.

Medical and nursing care

Medical and nursing care can be given to individuals without necessarily depriving them of their liberty.

Emergency treatment

Short-lived actions immediately necessary to prevent harm and/or provide emergency treatment may not, in themselves, constitute a deprivation of liberty.

Change of residence

A change of residence, even if someone is objecting, does not necessarily constitute a deprivation of liberty.

Transport

Transporting someone to a hospital or care home will not usually amount to a deprivation of liberty, even where restraint is required or where there is an expectation that the person will be deprived of their liberty at the destination care home or hospital.

Short lived illness

Holding a patient in hospital to treat short lived physical illnesses that are causing a disturbance in mental state...
### Differences between Mental Capacity Act, deprivation of liberty safeguards, and Mental Health Act

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the mental capacity status needed for a person to qualify for consideration under the legislation?</th>
<th>Mental Capacity Act</th>
<th>Deprivation of liberty safeguards</th>
<th>Mental Health Act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The person must lack capacity</td>
<td>The person must lack capacity</td>
<td>The person can either have or lack capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is deprivation of liberty authorised?</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes (certain sections)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| What is the basic threshold set for someone to qualify for consideration under the legislation? | To lack capacity, a person must have an impairment of mind or brain that means that they are unable to do one or more of: (1) understand and (2) retain the information relevant to the decision, (3) use or weigh the information to reach a decision and (4) communicate their decision | The person must have a mental disorder as defined by the Mental Health Act (any disorder or disability of the mind) | The person must have a mental disorder (any disorder or disability of the mind) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whom does the legislation protect?</th>
<th>Just the person lacking capacity</th>
<th>Just the person lacking capacity</th>
<th>The patient themselves and/or others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Are there restrictions on which patients with learning disability qualify for consideration under the legislation? | No—covers all people with learning disability (provided they lack capacity) | No—covers all people with learning disability (provided they lack capacity) | Yes—some sections (eg, 3, 37) only cover people with learning disability when they display abnormally aggressive or seriously irresponsible behaviour |

| When is restraint permitted under the legislation? | Allows restraint that is necessary to prevent harm to the person lacking capacity and proportionate to that harm, but not if it deprives the person of their liberty | Allows restraint that is necessary to prevent harm to the person lacking capacity, and proportionate to that harm. The conditions of the individual deprivation of liberty authorisation must be followed | Allows restraint under certain sections |

| Does the legislation permit treatment? | Allows mental and physical health treatment in those lacking capacity, provided it is in their best interests. | Do not themselves authorise treatment. Where a person lacks capacity for a particular treatment, use the provisions of the Mental Capacity Act to provide it. Where they have capacity for a particular treatment use the common law and respect their decision. | Some sections (eg, sections 2 and 3) authorise mental health treatment. Physical health treatment is not authorised, except (rarely) when a physical condition is a consequence of or is causing a mental disorder |

that is likely to resolve in a few days with treatment (for example, delirium) is unlikely to constitute a deprivation of liberty. However, delirium that is not responding to treatment, or where the patient is being repeatedly restrained or prevented from leaving, represents a situation where the threshold for deprivation of liberty may be crossed and where the use of an appropriate legal framework should be considered.

It is important to realise that most factors could either give rise to no restriction, restriction, or deprivation of liberty; these states are on a continuum.

### Additional Educational Resources

**General resources**
- Mental Capacity Act code of practice (www.publicguardian.gov.uk/mca/code-of-practice.htm)
- Office of the Public Guardian website (www.publicguardian.gov.uk/index.htm)—large resource containing a lot of information and forms concerning all aspects of the Mental Capacity Act
- In your trust or area
- Local policies and guidelines
- Senior colleagues and local leads for mental health and mental capacity issues
- On call or local community or liaison psychiatrists
- Duty approved mental health practitioner (formerly known as approved social worker)
- Local Mental Health Act office
- Hospital legal team
- Local social services and/or primary care trust (they are likely to have an office set up to administer deprivation of liberty safeguards)
- Your personal medical defence organisation

**The Mental Health Act 2007**

The Mental Health Act\(^1\) permits deprivation of liberty in hospital for people with mental disorder (regardless of whether they have mental capacity or not) under some of its sections.

**The Mental Capacity Act 2005**

The broader Mental Capacity Act\(^1\) deals only with people aged 16 or over who lack capacity. It permits restriction, but not deprivation, of liberty except for people placed under the deprivation of liberty safeguards (see below) or people subject to a Court of Protection order that allows the person’s deprivation of liberty.

The deprivation of liberty safeguards\(^2\) are used to authorise deprivation of liberty for those aged 16 or over who lack capacity to make decisions about care or treatment in hospital or a care home, when circumstances amounting to deprivation of liberty are required to provide this care. They do not apply to other settings, such as a person’s home. The proposed deprivation of liberty must be in the person’s best interests. For a more detailed account of the provisions, see the Code of Practice\(^2\) and Zigmond, 2009.\(^4\)

Two types of deprivation of liberty authorisation exist\(^5\): urgent (lasting seven days) and standard (lasting up to a year). For the latter, the “managing authority” (the hospital trust or care home) must apply to a “supervisory body,” which is the primary care trust for hospital patients in England and the Welsh ministers or the local health board in Wales. For patients in care homes in both countries the supervisory body is the local authority.

Urgent authorisations are usually required in unforeseen circumstances where the need for deprivation of liberty is so urgent that it must start before the standard authorisation can be completed, for example where someone in hospital is already being deprived of their liberty. The managing authority itself grants an urgent authorisa-
Possibility of patient being deprived of liberty now or in near future

Does the patient lack capacity to make decisions about admission for care/treatment?

Yes

Patient makes own decision unless detained under Mental Health Act

No

Assess whether deprivation of liberty is occurring or likely to occur soon using guidelines in box 3. Decide whether restriction or deprivation of liberty is taking place (preferably at multidisciplinary meeting involving family carers). Always thoroughly document decision and reasons for it.

Restriction of liberty

Deprivation of liberty

Treat under Mental Capacity Act; review liberty regularly

Identify what care and treatment is being given, and whether it is being given for physical and/or mental health purposes

Considering the care and treatment being given, is the purpose of deprivation of liberty to provide mental health treatment or physical health treatment?

The deprivation of liberty is wholly or partly for the purpose of treatment of mental disorder

Yes

The only effective purpose of the deprivation of liberty is to provide physical health care or treatment

No

Is the patient objecting to the admission and/or all or part of the treatment?

Yes

Does the patient lack capacity to make decisions about admission for care/treatment?

No

Does the patient have a lasting power of attorney or court appointed deputy who consents to the treatment to which the patient objects?

Yes

Assess whether deprivation of liberty is occurring or likely to occur soon using guidelines in box 3. Decide whether restriction or deprivation of liberty is taking place (preferably at multidisciplinary meeting involving family carers). Always thoroughly document decision and reasons for it.

No

Does the patient meet criteria for detention under section 2 or 3 Mental Health Act:

Patient has a mental disorder of a nature or degree that warrants detention in hospital for assessment/treatment

Detention/treatment necessary for their health or safety or the protection of others?

Yes

Fill out request for deprivation of liberty safeguards urgent authorisation

No

Care planning suggests deprivation of liberty may occur in near future

Fill out request for deprivation of liberty safeguards standard authorisation

What to do when you suspect that someone in hospital is being deprived of their liberty

tion and must only do so if they reasonably believe that the patient will meet criteria for a standard authorisation (which must be applied for at the same time).

The common law

In some emergency situations, the common law may still be applicable to the detention of people who have capacity, for example those being detained in the emergency department while a Mental Health Act assessment is convened. It may also apply to someone who lacks capacity, but requires emergency restraint or removal to prevent them harming others. 6

How to identify deprivation of liberty

It is important to be vigilant for deprivation of liberty when assessing and treating patients, especially since the problem is not always obvious (box 2). Where this possibility is raised, we suggest a careful judgment must be made for each case following the guidelines contained within the deprivation of liberty safeguards shown in box 3 and using the indicators outlined in box 2. We maintain that it is good practice to arrive at this judgment at a multidisciplinary meeting that includes family and other people involved in the patient’s care, and it is vital to carefully document that the possibility of deprivation of liberty has been considered, including a summary of the arguments for and against, which factors apply to your patient, and why you have reached the conclusion that you have. Once deprivation of liberty is identified, action must be taken to apply the appropriate legal framework.

How to decide which legal framework applies to your situation

a) In hospital

The flowchart and table provide guidance on deciding which legal framework is appropriate for a patient who is being deprived of their liberty in hospital. A detailed discussion to accompany the flowchart is included in the online version of this article at bmj.com.

Before legal means are used to deprive someone lacking capacity of their liberty, consideration should be given to whether care and treatment could be achieved in a less restrictive manner. 6 For example, might a patient with
Vignette 1

An 81 year old man with no history of cognitive impairment is admitted with pneumonia. On the first night he is confused and agitated, saying that he is in a police station and demanding to leave. He requires restraint and sedation for his own safety. This also occurs the next night.

What power should be used here: Mental Capacity Act, Mental Health Act, or deprivation of liberty authorisation?

Answer—In view of the guidance in the deprivation of liberty safeguards code of practice, this is restriction of liberty and not a situation where a deprivation of liberty authorisation should be considered. The delirium is expected to resolve as the pneumonia improves, therefore there is no expectation that the criteria for a standard authorisation would be met. The broader Mental Capacity Act does cover situations such as these and also requires that the least restrictive option is followed. It would therefore be quite proper to manage the situation under the Mental Capacity Act, but to regularly review the person’s liberty.

After a further two days, the situation has worsened; the man requires a nurse to remain with him all the time to prevent him leaving and being physically aggressive to other patients. He is requiring restraint more frequently and for longer periods and is being given regular intramuscular sedative medication in an attempt to reduce his agitation.

Is he now being deprived of his liberty, and if so, which legal framework would authorise the detention?

Answer—The cumulative effect of all the restrictions placed upon him mean that the threshold has been crossed into deprivation of liberty because: the situation has not begun to resolve after a few days; he needs a nurse with him to stop him leaving; and prolonged and repeated restraint, together with intramuscular sedation is required.

In this situation assessment under the Mental Health Act should be considered rather than deprivation of liberty safeguards because: he has a mental disorder (delirium); he is being detained in part for treatment of that mental disorder; he is objecting to remaining in hospital; he meets criteria for detention under the Mental Health Act, and; he is being deprived of his liberty in part to protect other people, and the deprivation of liberty safeguards do not provide a legal framework for depriving liberty in order to protect others.

He is detained under section 2 of the Mental Health Act. After two weeks he has settled to the point that the liaison psychiatrist discharges him from the section 2. As his pneumonia resolves, it becomes clear that he is left with severe cognitive impairment, and further investigation reveals a cerebrovascular accident. Occupational therapy assessment makes it clear that he is unsafe to return home, even with a full package of care. He is adamant that he won’t go into a residential home and repeatedly says he will go home when discharged as he can look after himself.

How might placement in a residential home be legally achieved?

Answer—Where it is thought likely (as in this case) that placement in the residential home will result in deprivation of liberty, the residential home will need to request a deprivation of liberty standard authorisation before the placement starts.

Vignette 2

Mrs Z, a 72 year old woman with moderate Alzheimer’s disease is a resident in a care home. She lacks capacity to decide on her place of residence. Her general practitioner visits her for a routine health check. While she is being examined, she tells the GP that she wants to go home, and asks him if he can help her escape. She then becomes tearful and pleads with him to take her home.

What should the GP do in this situation?

Answer—The GP should approach the care home manager to check whether the lady is under a deprivation of liberty authorisation. If she is not, then he should inform the manager that he is concerned this woman is being deprived of her liberty and that the home needs to review the situation. If they conclude that she is being deprived of her liberty, they either need to review and adjust her care plans in order to remove the deprivation of liberty, or they need to apply immediately for a deprivation of liberty authorisation.

The GP returns a week later to see another patient. The manager is not on duty, so he asks the deputy manager what the outcome of the situation with Mrs Z has been. The deputy manager says that no review of her care plans has taken place and no deprivation of liberty authorisation application has been made. The GP overhears Mrs Z asking a relative of another resident to take her home.

What should the GP do now?

Answer: He should approach the supervisory authority to inform them of his concerns that the patient is being illegally deprived of her liberty.

dementia who becomes agitated in the evenings be more settled if family members sat with them during that period? In circumstances where patients are being restricted in their liberty only, the principles of the Mental Capacity Act apply.1 We suggest that patients should be reviewed regularly to assess whether the circumstances have changed.

Where a patient who lacks capacity is being, or is about to be deprived of their liberty, it must be determined whether the deprivation of liberty safeguards or the Mental Health Act is the more appropriate legal framework. This area is complex; consultation with an approved mental health professional or psychiatrist may be needed in uncertain cases, and an approved mental health professional is always required when the Mental Health Act is to be used. Recent case law has confirmed the primacy of the Mental Health Act over the deprivation of liberty safeguards11 and reinforced that the purpose of the detention (whether for mental or physical health treatment) is the key to distinguishing which legal framework to use. This judgment concluded that use of the Mental Health Act must be considered first and ruled out only if the person does not meet the criteria for detention.
Hypothyroidism in a patient with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease

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Consider hypothyroidism as a cause of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is increasingly recognised as a cause of chronic liver disease (affecting in some series 30–40% of the population)1 and the commonest cause of abnormal liver function tests. The disease spans a spectrum of histopathological abnormalities, ranging from simple hepatic steatosis and steatosis with necroinflammation to steatosis with necroinflammation accompanied by varying degrees of fibrosis (which may progress to cirrhosis and its complications, including liver failure and hepatocellular carcinoma).2

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is characterised by a bright liver echo pattern on abdominal ultrasonography, and although it is often accompanied by raised liver enzymes, in many cases liver biochemistry is normal.3 Most patients are asymptomatic, with liver disease identified incidentally from abnormalities discovered in routine biochemistry tests or imaging performed for other reasons.

Although obesity is the commonest and primary metabolic cause, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease may arise secondary to several other endocrine disorders, including thyroid dysfunction, growth hormone deficiency, adrenal insufficiency, and polycystic ovary syndrome.3 It is important to consider and screen for underlying conditions in the diagnostic approach to non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

We report the case of a young man diagnosed with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease in whom an underlying cause was discovered.

Case report
A 33 year old, previously healthy man presented to his general practitioner with a hot swollen ankle of recent onset. He had no joint involvement and no systemic symptoms apart from general lethargy, which he attributed to his shift work. He did not drink alcohol and was not taking any prescribed medication or over the counter drugs. He had a history of untreated obstructive sleep apnoea. His general practitioner diagnosed gout and recommended treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatories but arranged to check renal function and liver function. These initial investigations showed abnormal liver biochemistry (aspartate aminotransferase 91 (normal range 13–42) U/L, alanine aminotransferase 60 (11–55) U/L, and gamma-glutamyl transferase 31 (0–55) U/L). Renal function showed a raised creatinine concentration of 143 (0–135) μmol/L and an estimated glomerular filtration rate of 54 mL/min/1.73m². Over the following three months his liver and renal function remained abnormal, and he was therefore referred to the gastroenterology clinic for further investigation and management.

Clinical examination at the hospital was unremarkable. Initial laboratory investigations confirmed his abnormal
treatment, both of which resolved on follow-up scanning. Fig 2

Further biochemical investigations, undertaken to explain the hepatic fat content of 12.7% (normal range <5.6%, fig 1A). Clinical diagnosis of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease with abnormal liver biochemistry performed for an unrelated reason, in this case presenting with an episode of acute gout. Most importantly, however, this case shows that primary hypothyroidism may mimic liver disease and in particular drive the development of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and associated obesity and dyslipidaemia. Gout in this instance may have been precipitated by the patient’s hypothyroid state. General practitioners and hospital specialists should be alert to the possibility of thyroid dysfunction in any patient with unexplained liver biochemistry or with a clinical suspicion of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. In our patient, primary hypothyroidism was discovered only opportunistically, through his participation in a clinical research study and the discovery of the clinically silent small pericardial effusion. His clinical and biochemical abnormalities would otherwise have been attributed solely to non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. Treatment of the primary hypothyroidism resulted in normalisation of liver biochemistry and reduction in liver fat and probably reduced the risk of long term hepatic or cardiovascular sequelae of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

The diagnostic investigations for any patient with suspected non-alcoholic fatty liver disease include serology for hepatitis B and C, autoantibodies, iron studies, serum ceruloplasmin, fasting glucose and lipids, and liver ultrasonography. The diagnosis of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is often a diagnosis of exclusion, made when the tests mentioned above are normal and when the patient has other concomitant features of the metabolic syndrome such as central obesity, dyslipidaemia, hypertension, and glucose intolerance. The possibility of hypothyroidism as an underlying cause is rarely considered in the assessment of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease despite the common clinical and biochemical features of central obesity, abnormal liver transaminases,
and hypertriglyceridaemia observed in both non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and hypothyroidism.

The many clinical associations between hypothyroidism and liver diseases are unsurprising given the multiple effects of thyroid hormones on liver function, cholesterol regulation, and insulin sensitivity. The prevalence of hypothyroidism in patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is twice that in patients with other chronic liver diseases (15% vs 7.2%), and even in patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease whose thyroid function is normal, free thyroxine and triiodothyronine concentrations are significantly lower than in controls. Rodent models of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease support a direct hepatic, therapeutic effect of thyroid hormones with regression of hepatic steatosis using either thyroid hormones or liver specific thyroid hormone receptor agonists. Mild hypothyroidism may also cause increased gamma-glutamyl transferase and alanine aminotransferase and promotes gallstone disease. The incidence of hypothyroidism is also higher in patients with hepatocellular carcinoma.

Although obesity has independent effects on liver fat, hepatic steatosis in hypothyroidism is likely to be the result of additional factors. The link between non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and features of the metabolic syndrome (including insulin resistance) and type 2 diabetes mellitus is well described. However, other endocrinopathies are increasingly implicated in the aetiology of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. Patients with hypopituitarism have an increased incidence of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, particularly patients with growth hormone deficiency, and growth hormone levels are lower in men with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease than in normal controls. Growth hormone replacement normalised steatosis with necroinflammation and hypercholesterolaemia in a single case report. Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is said to be more prevalent in both polycystic ovarian syndrome and adrenal insufficiency. Secondary endocrine causes of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease are increasingly recognised, and some specialists have suggested such causes should be systematically considered in all patients in whom non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is diagnosed.

This case illustrates that primary hypothyroidism and other endocrinopathies are important conditions to consider as possible underlying causes in patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease or with abnormalities of liver biochemistry. The diagnosis of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is not an end in itself but should provoke consideration of underlying conditions.

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Studendpedia

Our final MB exam was only a few weeks away, and one of our senior lecturers was taking the last tutorial before the exam. We could feel the tension in the room, anxiety was written all over our faces.

The lecturer, experienced in this sort of situation, was trying to reduce the stress and make us relax. “After all,” he said, “as an MBBS doctor, you will only be expected to know the common presentations of common diseases. When you specialise and become a consultant then you will be expected to know, in addition, the common presentations of rarer diseases and the rarer presentations of common diseases.”

At that point a student put his hand up to ask a question: “Sir, who then will know the rarer presentations of rare diseases?”

“Students,” replied the lecturer without batting an eye, “medical students.”

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