

Task fixation- a case of two missed interstitial ectopic pregnancies



Objective: Task fixation occurs when a person fixates their attention on a task that they are performing. Here the fixation on measuring the nuchal translucency of the fetus, resulted in a missed interstitial ectopic pregnancy. The end results were disastrous

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Case report: **1st patient** attended A&E at 16 weeks gestation with severe acute abdominal pain. Clinically unstable and transferred to resus. A bedside scan showed a ruptured interstitial ectopic pregnancy. She had an emergency laparotomy, right salpingectomy and uterine wedge resection. Two scans earlier in the pregnancy, claimed this an intrauterine pregnancy.

2nd patient attended A&E at 17 weeks gestation with abdominal pain and dizziness. A bedside ultrasound identified a fetus and significant free fluid. Emergency laparotomy identified a ruptured interstitial ectopic pregnancy. A left uterine wedge resection was undertaken. The patient lost 4000mls of blood. The 12 week scan was reported the pregnancy as intrauterine.

Discussion: In both cases task fixation and loss of situational awareness led to a misdiagnosis. The clinicians were so fixated on measuring the nuchal translucency, their routine work, that they missed the ectopic pregnancy. It is a common human factor that can lead to patient error. Causes for the loss of situational awareness includes high workload, distractions, lack of communication, execution of improper procedure, lack of experience, fatigue and interestingly the weather. It is one of Du Pont's dirty dozen. These are 12 factors that occur in the work place and lead to patient harm. Healthcare professionals should be aware of DuPont's dirty dozen and try to recognise when it is affecting their work.



An interstitial pregnancy

Conclusions: A lack of situational awareness has many hazards associated with it. Understanding and being aware of how human factors effects scanning is essential to avoid patient morbidity and potentially mortality. There are ways that healthcare professionals can recover or maintain situational awareness such as remaining vigilant, don't rush, communicate openly and avoiding confirmation bias.