



Report #14 – CATASTROPHIC INJURIES: Paralysis, Amputation, Burns

Overview:

A catastrophic injury or illness usually occurs suddenly and without warning. Injuries may be considered catastrophic when they disrupt a person's life and livelihood, or ability to earn a living. Management of catastrophic injuries is complex and may require the expertise of a team of health care professionals as the injured person moves from hospital to rehabilitation, and return to home and community.

The financial fallout from a catastrophic injury makes essential the careful valuation of the claim by an experienced personal injury attorney working with economic and vocational specialists, life care planning specialists, and specialists in rehabilitation medicine.

The goal of an attorney handling these matters is simple: to secure for the client the Best Possible Future.

Paralysis

One type of catastrophic injury is paralysis.

Definition: "Complete loss of strength to an affected limb or muscle group."

Normal muscle function requires unbroken nerve connection from the brain to a particular muscle. Damage at any point along this path reduces the brain's ability to move a muscle and may cause muscle weakness. Complete loss of the nerve prevents movement and is called paralysis.

Weakness may sometimes lead to paralysis. Other times, strength may be restored to a paralyzed limb.



While paralysis may affect an individual muscle, it usually affects an entire body region. Some types of paralysis are:

quadriplegia: where the arms, legs and chest are paralyzed;

paraplegia: where both legs, and sometimes part of the chest, are paralyzed;

hemiplegia: where one side of the body is paralyzed.

Paralysis may be caused by damage to the brain or spinal cord.

- Damage to the brain may come from a stroke, tumor, certain diseases and a fall or blow to the head.
- Damage to the spinal cord is most often caused by trauma, such as a fall or car accident. There may be other causes, such as a herniated disc or various diseases or conditions.

The type of paralysis may give important clues to its origin. Paraplegia, or paralysis of the legs, occurs after damage to the lower spinal cord, and quadriplegia occurs after injury to the upper spinal cord, at the shoulders or higher. Spinal cord damage too high on the neck will affect the nerves serving the lungs and heart paralyzing the muscles that circulate blood and cause breathing, resulting in death.

Not all paralysis is treatable. But for non-permanent paralysis, the only way to treat paralysis is to repair its underlying cause. Rehabilitation may include: physical therapy to rebuild the muscles; occupational therapy to help restore the ability to perform daily activities, such as bathing, getting dressed; respiratory therapy to help breathing; vocational rehabilitation to retrain for a job; social worker to help adjust to one's condition; speech-language pathologist; nutritionist and others.



Legal consequences: In a lawsuit from an accident causing paralysis, an injury attorney may have to consult many of these specialized experts, in addition to medical doctors, to best understand what the future holds for a paralyzed accident victim and how best to present that person's claim to a jury.

Where the paralysis affects the injured person's ability to earn a living, there may also be coordination with Medicare, Medicaid, private health and disability insurance, and other alternative sources of income or payment for medical care.

Amputation

Another type of catastrophic injury is amputation.

Definition: "Loss of a body part." Usually a finger, toe, arm or leg, due to an injury, accident or trauma.

Sometimes an amputated body part can be re-attached, especially when care is taken both of the body part and site of the amputation.

In a partial amputation, some tissue remains connected. Re-attachment may or may not be possible.

Complications common to this type of injury include bleeding, shock and infection.

50% to 80% of amputees experience the phenomenon of "phantom limbs." This means that they feel as if the missing body part is still there. These phantom limbs can itch, ache and feel as if they are moving.

Some causes of amputation: factory, farm or power tool accidents or from motor vehicle accidents.

Long-term care for amputees may include a prosthesis and training in its use.



In a lawsuit from an accident causing amputation, an injury attorney will have to focus on rehabilitation and the injured client's ability to earn a living. Vocational and occupational experts are frequently consulted. The question often arises about future expenses, such as future medical costs and care and replacement of the prosthesis.

Burns

From kids washing under a too-hot faucet to the accidental steam explosion from a car radiator, burns are a potential hazard. Babies and young children are especially susceptible to burns, as they are small and curious and have sensitive skin.

Common causes of burns are:

- scalding (from hot liquids or steam)
- contact with open flame or heated objects (stove, fireplace, etc.)
- chemical burns (bleach, battery acid, etc.)
- electrical burns
- sun burn

Types of burns:

First-degree: Mildest. Limited to top layer of skin. Redness, pain minor swelling. No blisters.

Second-degree: More serious. Involve skin layers beneath the top layer.

Third-degree: Most serious. Involves all layers of skin and underlying tissue. Nerve damage may mean little pain.

What to do:



Seek medical assistance if:

- Burned area is large or looks infected (swelling, pus, redness, etc.);
- Burn is from a fire, electrical or chemical source;
- Smoke was inhaled;
- Burn is on the face, scalp, hands or genitals.

A lawsuit for an accident involving burns can require sophisticated engineering assistance to show negligence, particularly in the cases of chemicals and/or defective products. An experienced legal team is essential.