

DEBATE: NEUROIMAGING IS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DIAGNOSIS OF HEADACHE DISORDERS – YES

Z. Katsarava

Germany

Headache is one of the most common complaints. While the majority of headaches are benign and self-limited, a subset is associated with potentially life-threatening intracranial pathology.

In everyday clinical practice it is however, first and probably most important to exclude secondary headache. These patients may present with unremarkable symptoms and physical findings, impeding timely diagnosis.

Studies demonstrate an increase in CT and MRI orders both in emergency department and outpatient clinics. Several factors help to explain the observed trends.

- 1) Sometimes scans are ordered due to patient demand and/or medicolegal concerns.
- 2) In addition to medicolegal fears, clinical guidelines remain ambiguous representing 'generally accepted principles for patient management that reflect a high degree of certainty' based on currently available evidence.
- 3) Given the potentially devastating consequences of a missed diagnosis, many emergency physicians may feel uncomfortable trusting their own judgment in the absence of clear evidence-based guidelines. This may explain why some physicians think that all patients presenting to an ED with headache should categorically receive imaging.
- 4) Finally, the proliferation of faster scanners and their increased availability may promote increased imaging utilization more generally.