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CONTENTS

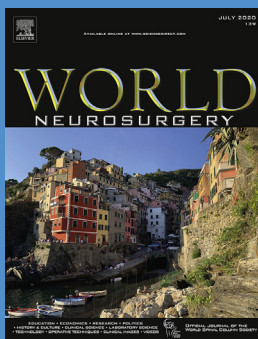
XXV **UPCOMING EVENTS:** *Max Jägersberg*

EDITOR'S LETTER

XXVI "I'm Sorry": *Ed Benzel*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- 264 – 265 Letter to the Editor Regarding Effects of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Northern Italy: Perspectives from the Bergamo Neurosurgery Department, and the Role of Radiosurgery as a Minimally Invasive Procedure for Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma in the Pandemic Outbreak: *Andres M. Alvarez Pinzon, Aizik L. Wolf, Victor Delgado, Jose E. Valerio, Arturo González, José Ramón Alonso*
- 373 – 375 Letter to the Editor Regarding "Implementation and Workflow of a Telehealth Clinic in Neurosurgery During the COVID-19 Pandemic": *Gregory Glauser, Connor Wathen, Stephen P. Miranda, Rachel Blue, Ryan Dimentberg, William C. Welch, John Y.K. Lee, Neil R. Malhotra*
- 376 Letter to the Editor "Effects of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic on Neurological Surgery Care and Education; Our Experience from Iran": *Mohammad Hossein Khosravi, Alireza Mohsenian Sisakht, Danial Kiani, Sayedali Ahmadi*
- 426 Letter to the Editor: Coronavirus Disease 2019 and Resilience: Neurosurgical Perspectives: *Moshiur Rahman, Muhtamim Chowdhury, Ezequiel Garcia-Ballestas, William A. Florez-Perdomo, Amit Agrawal, Luis Rafael Moscote-Salazar*
- 456 – 459 Letter to the Editor "Virtual Neurosurgery Clerkship for Medical Students": *Reem A. Dawoud, Brandon Philbrick, J. Tanner McMahon, J. Miller Douglas, Neil Bhatia, Razan Faraj, Alex Greven, Bryan Buster, Rima S. Rindler, Nealen G. Laxpati, Matthew F. Gary*
- 634 – 635 Letter to the Editor Regarding "Intracranial Aneurysms Associated with Moyamoya Disease in Children: Clinical Features and Long-Term Surgical Outcome": *Pietro Fiaschi, Domenico Tortora, Marco Pavanello*
- 636 – 637 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding "Intracranial Aneurysms Associated with Moyamoya Disease in Children: Clinical Features and Long-Term Surgical Outcome": *Zhiyong Shi, Youxiang Li, Peng Liu*
- 638 – 641 Letter to the Editor Regarding "Type 1.5 Split Cord Malformations: An Uncommon Entity": *Can Sarica, Gokhan Canaz, Huseyin Canaz*
- 642 – 644 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding "Type 1.5 Split Cord Malformations: An Uncommon Entity": *Rajesh Kumar Meena and Ramesh S. Doddamani*
- 645 – 647 Letter to the Editor Regarding "Surgical Treatment of Tethered Cord Syndrome in Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis": *Anas Abdallah*
- 648 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding "Surgical Treatment of Tethered Cord Syndrome in Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis": *Camille K. Milton, Kyle P. O'Connor, Michael D. Martin*



ON THE COVER

Abraham Schlauderaff (Neurosurgery Resident at Penn State Hershey) 'View of Riomaggiore in the Cinque Terre from the ocean'

Continued on page II

Continued from page I

- 649 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Surgical Treatment of Chronic Subdural Hematoma: Predicting Recurrence and Cure”: *Nolan J. Brown and Brian V. Lien*
- 650 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Surgical Treatment of Chronic Subdural Hematoma: Predicting Recurrence and Cure”: *Sami Ridwan, Alexander Grote, Matthias Simon*
- 651 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Make Clipping Great Again: Microsurgery for Cerebral Aneurysms by Dual-Trained Neurosurgeons”: *Ricky H. Wong*
- 652 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Make Clipping Great Again: Microsurgery for Cerebral Aneurysms by Dual-Trained Neurosurgeons”: *Stephan A. Munich, Kunal Vakharia, Matthew J. McPheeters, Michael K. Tso, Muhammad Waqas, Kenneth V. Snyder, Adnan H. Siddiqui, Jason M. Davies, Elad I. Levy*
- 653 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Optimal Bone Flap Size for Decompressive Craniectomy for Refractory Increased Intracranial Pressure in Traumatic Brain Injury: Taking the Patient’s Head Size into Account”: *Daniel Buzaglo Gonçalves, Laura Raquel da Silva Costa, Maria Izabel Andrade dos Santos, Robson Luis Oliveira de Amorim, Wellingson Silva Paiva*
- 654 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Optimal Bone Flap Size for Decompressive Craniectomy for Refractory Increased Intracranial Pressure in Traumatic Brain Injury: Taking the Patient’s Head Size into Account”: *Solon Schur, Philippe Martel, Judith Marcoux*
- 655 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Factors Influencing Medical Student Interest in a Career in Neurosurgery”: *Keng Siang Lee and Mario Teo*
- 656 – 657 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Predictors of Surgical Site Infection in Autologous Cranioplasty: A Retrospective Analysis of Subcutaneously Preserved Bone Flaps in Abdominal Pockets”: *Mauro Dobran and Davide Nasi*
- 658 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Predictors of Surgical Site Infection in Cranioplasty: A Retrospective Analysis of Subcutaneously Preserved Bone Flaps in Abdominal Pockets”: *Ali Alkhaibary, Ahoud Alharbi, Sami Khairy*
- 659 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Temporal Muscle as an Indicator of Sarcopenia Is Independently Associated with Hunt and Kosnik Grade on Admission and the Modified Rankin Scale Score at 6 Months of Patients with Subarachnoid Hemorrhage Treated by Endovascular Coiling”: *Umut Safer, Ilker Tasci, Vildan Binay Safer*
- 660 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Mixed Reality-Based Preoperative Planning for Training of Percutaneous Transforaminal Endoscopic Discectomy: A Feasibility Study”: *Dimitrios Chytas, Efstathios Chronopoulos, Marios Salmas, George C. Babis, Vasileios S. Nikolaou*
- 661 – 663 Letter to the Editor Regarding: “Clinical, Radiographic, and Morphometric Risk Factors for Adjacent and Remote Vertebral Compression Fractures Over a Minimum Follow-up of 4 Years After Percutaneous Vertebroplasty for Osteoporotic Vertebral Compression Fractures: Novel Three-dimensional Voxel-Based Morphometric Analysis”: *Hai-Lin Wu, Bo-Wen Zheng, Fu-Sheng Liu, Xiao-Bin Wang, Guo-Hua Lv, Jing Li, Ming-Xiang Zou*
- 664 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Pure Endoscopic Supracerebellar Infratentorial Approach to the Pineal Region: A Case Series”: *Jibo Zhang and Jincao Chen*
- 665 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Pure Endoscopic Supracerebellar Infratentorial Approach to the Pineal Region: A Case Series”: *Shane Shahrestani and Gabriel Zada*
- 666 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Double Microcatheter Technique within a 5 French Guiding Catheter for Intracranial Aneurysm: Technical Notes”: *Youngjin Jung*
- 667 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Treatment of Atlantoaxial Tuberculosis with Neurological Impairment: A Systematic Review”: *Saraswati Shenoy and Varadaraya S. Shenoy*

- 668 — 669 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Case of Calcifying Pseudoneoplasms of the Neuraxis Coexisting with Interhemispheric Lipoma and Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum: Involvement of Infiltrating Macrophages”: *Jian-Qiang Lu, France Berthelet, Michel W. Bojanowski*
- 670 — 671 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “A Case of Calcifying Pseudoneoplasms of the Neuraxis Coexisting with Interhemispheric Lipoma and Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum: Involvement of Infiltrating Macrophages”: *Madoka Inukai, Ichiyo Shibahara, Toshihiro Kumabe*
- 672 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Is Cervical Sagittal Balance Related to the Progression of Patients with Cervical Spondylotic Myelopathy?": *Chengqiang Yu, Jianxun Wei, Yufu Ou, Xiaoping Mu*
- 673 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Is Cervical Sagittal Balance Related to the Progression of Patients with Cervical Spondylotic Myelopathy?": *Taotao Lin, Zhenyu Wang, Gang Chen, Wenge Liu*
- 674 — 675 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Radiolucent Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Pedicle Screws for the Treatment of Spinal Tumors: Advantages for Radiation Planning and Follow-Up Imaging”: *Giuseppe Emmanuele Umana, Maurizio Passanisi, Marco Fricia, Giuseppe Distefano, Salvatore Cicero, Giovanni Federico Nicoletti, Gianluca Scalia*
- 676 — 687 Letter to the Editor Regarding “The Top 100 Most-Cited Articles on Kyphoplasty and Vertebroplasty”: *Yuh-Shan Ho*
- 688 — 689 In Reply to “The Top 100 Most-Cited Articles on Kyphoplasty and Vertebroplasty”: *Yuanyuan Zhao, Tingxiao Zhao, Yazeng Huang, Haiyu Shao, Mengran Jin, Jun Zhang*
- 690 Letter to the Editor Regarding “When the Drain Hits the Brain”: *Jibo Zhang and Jincuo Chen*
- 691 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “When the Drain Hits the Brain”: *Maria Kamenova, Stefan Wanderer, Patrick Lipps, Serge Marbacher, Luigi Mariani, Jehuda Soleman*
- 692 — 693 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Minimally Invasive Thoracolumbar Corpectomy and Stabilization for Unstable Burst Fractures Using Intraoperative Computed Tomography and Computer-Assisted Spinal Navigation”: *Giuseppe Emmanuele Umana, Maurizio Passanisi, Marco Fricia, Salvatore Cicero, Alessandro Narducci, Giovanni Federico Nicoletti, Gianluca Scalia*
- 694 — 695 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Positioning Issues of Spinal Surgery During Pregnancy”: *Rajnish K. Patidar, Manbir Kaur, Jaskaran Singh Gosal, Mayank Garg, Suryanarayanan Bhaskar, Deepak Kumar Jha*
- 696 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Positioning Issues of Spinal Surgery During Pregnancy”: *Daniele Bongetta, Alessandro Versace, Roberto Assietti*
- 697 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Styloidectomy and Venous Stenting for Treatment of Styloid-Induced Internal Jugular Vein Stenosis: A Case Report and Literature Review”: *Alba Scerrati, Pasquale De Bonis, Paolo Zamboni*
- 698 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Twist Drill Procedure for Chronic Subdural Hematoma Evacuation—An Analysis of Predictors for Treatment Success”: *Giuseppe Emmanuele Umana, Stefano Chiriatti, Marco Fricia, Nicola Alberio, Salvatore Cicero, Giovanni Federico Nicoletti, Angelo Spitaleri, Gianluca Scalia*
- 699 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Acupuncture-Induced Cranial Epidural Abscess: Case Report and Review of the Literature”: *Li-Yang Tzeng, Li-Kai Huang, Yao-Tung Lee*
- 700 — 702 Letter to the Editor: Factors that Influence Quantification of Fluorescent Signal During the 5-ALA-Guided Surgery: *Evgenii Belykh, Leonard Y. Nelson, Eric J. Seibel, Mark C. Preul*
- 703 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Deep Brain Stimulation in Intractable Epilepsy: Pedunculopontine Nucleus versus Thalamic Nuclei: A Perspective”: *Harinder Jaseja*

Continued on page IV

Continued from page III

- 704 – 705 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Global Diversity and Academic Success of Foreign-Trained Academic Neurosurgeons in the United States”: *Ankush Chandra, Yazeed W. Haddad, Cole T. Lewis, Jordan Spatz, Diego Carrera, Manish K. Aghi*
- 706 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Global Diversity and Academic Success of Foreign-Trained Academic Neurosurgeons in the United States”: *Akshikumar M. Mistry, John C. Wellons III, Robert P. Naftel*
- 707 Letter to the Editor Regarding: “Recruiting Medical Students to Neurosurgery Through a Focused Neuroanatomy Lab Initiative”: *Marios Salmas, Alik Fiska, Aikaterini Vassiou, Theano Demesticha, Georgios Paraskevas, Dimitrios Chytas*
- 708 – 709 In Reply to the Letter to the Editor Regarding “Recruiting Medical Students to Neurosurgery Through a Focused Neuroanatomy Lab Initiative”: *Sakibul Huq, Adham M. Khalafallah, Alan R. Cohen, Debraj Mukherjee*
- 710 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Effect of Sarcopenia on Mortality After Percutaneous Vertebral Augmentation Treatment for Osteoporotic Vertebral Compression Fractures in Elderly Patients: A Retrospective Cohort Study”: *Vildan Binay Safer, Ilker Tasci, Umut Safer*
- 711 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Thank You”: *Nida Fatima*
- 712 – 713 Letter to the Editor Regarding “Opinion Piece: Microsurgery in COVID-19—Positive Patients”: *Francesca Vincitorio, Fabio Cofano, Giulia Colzani, Paolo Titolo, Andrea Lavorato, Bruno Battiston, D. Garbossa*
- 714 Letter to the Editor “The Battle of Humans and COVID-19: A War without Smoke”: *Jun Zhang, Haili Wang, Yuping Li, Lun Dong*
- 715 – 717 Letter to the Editor Management of Neurosurgical Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic: *Alfio Spina, Nicola Boari, Filippo Gagliardi, Michele Bailo, Francesco Calvanese, Pietro Mortini*
- 718 – 719 Letter to the Editor Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Neurosurgical Residency Training in New Orleans: *Tyler Scullen, Mansour Mathkour, Christopher M. Maulucci, Aaron S. Dumont, Cuong J. Bui, Joseph R. Keen*
- 720 – 722 Letter to the Editor New Design for Aerosol Protection During Endotracheal Intubation in the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic Era: The “Anti-Aerosol Igloo” (AAI): *Enrique Osorio-Fonseca, Hugo Blanco, Jorge E. Alvernia*
- 723 Letter to the Editor: Two Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic Nobody Is Talking About—and It’s Costing Lives: *Alejandro M. Spiotta and Roberto Crosa*
- 724 – 725 Letter to the Editor: Is COVID-19 the Cause of Delayed Surgical Treatment of Spine Trauma in Latin America?: *Juan P. Cabrera, Ratko Yurac, Alfredo Guiroy, Charles A. Carazzo, Andrei F. Joaquim, Juan J. Zamorano, Marcelo Valacco, and the AO Spine Latin America Trauma Study Group*
- 726 – 727 Letter to the Editor: Embracing Disruptive Change During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) Pandemic: *Ryan Hess, Jennifer Z. Mao, Kyungduk Rho, Asham Khan, Elad Levy, John Pollina, Jeffrey P. Mullin*
- 728 – 731 Letter to the Editor “Incorporating Telehealth to Improve Neurosurgical Training During the COVID-19 Pandemic”: *Stephen P. Miranda, Gregory Glauser, Connor Wathen, Rachel Blue, Ryan Dimentberg, William C. Welch, M. Sean Grady, James M. Schuster, Neil R. Malhotra*
- 732 – 733 Letter to the Editor “COVID-19 and Neurosurgical Education in Africa: Making Lemonade from Lemons”: *Ulrick Sidney Kanmounye and Ignatius N. Esene*

- 734 – 740 Letter to the Editor “Changes to Neurosurgery Resident Education Since Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic”: *Zach Pennington, Daniel Lubelski, Adham M. Khalafallah, Jeff Ehresman, Daniel M. Sciubba, Timothy F. Witham, Judy Huang*
- 741 – 743 Letter to the Editor “Service and Training During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from a Neurosurgical Center in the Philippines”: *Gerardo D. Legaspi, Abdelsimar T. Omar II, Ronnie E. Baticulon, Alaric Emmanuel M. Salonga, Mairre James S. Gaddi, Manilyn Ann C. Hong, Kenny S. Seng, Kathleen Joy O. Khu*
- 744 – 745 Letter to the Editor ‘Aneurysmal Subarachnoid Hemorrhage: Collateral Damage of COVID?’: *Jose Danilo Bengzon Diestro, Yang Mei Li, Carmen Parra-Fariñas, Dipanka Sarma, Aditya Bharatha, Thomas R. Marotta, Julian Spears*
- 746 – 748 Letter to the Editor: The Use of Telemedicine by Neurosurgeons During the Covid Era: Preliminary Results of a Cross-Sectional Research: *Pravesh S. Gadjradj, Roshni H. Matawlie, Biswadjit S. Harhangi*
- 749 Letter to the Editor: Impact of COVID-19 Outbreak on Acute Low Back Pain: *Stefano Borsa, Mauro Pluder, Giorgio Carrabba, Antonella Ampollini, Marta Pirovano, Francesco Lombardi, Massimo Tomei, Marco Locatelli*

NEWS AND OPINIONS

- 614 – 615 Histotripsy: Potential Noninvasive Management of Intracerebral Hemorrhage: *Aditya S. Pandey, Tyler Gerhardson, Jonathan R. Sukovich, Zhen Xu*
- 616 – 617 Which is the Optimal Revascularization Surgery in Moyamoya Disease?: *Ken Kazumata*
- 618 – 619 Overcoming the Blood–Brain Barrier to Target Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma: What’s New?: *Victor M. Lu, Erica A. Power, Liang Zhang, David J. Daniels*
- 620 – 621 The International Year of the Nurse: Why Neurosurgeons Should Care: *Andrea Strayer*
- 622 – 623 Middle Meningeal Artery Embolization for Chronic Subdural Hematoma: Current State and Future Directions: *Jeffrey Gilligan and Yakov Golagorsky*
- 624 – 627 How Neurosurgeons Are Coping with COVID-19 and How It Impacts Our Neurosurgical Practice: Report from Geneva University Medical Center: *Granit Molliqaj and Karl Schaller*
- 628 Online Neuroanatomy Education and Its Role During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Lockdown: *Samuel Hall and Scott Border*
- 629 – 631 COVID-19 and the Role of Neurosurgeons in Nepal: *Amit Thapa*
- 632 – 633 Silver Lining During COVID-19: Transformation in Neurosurgery Education: *William J. Kemp III, Pablo F. Recinos, Edward C. Benzel, Richard P. Schlenk*

PERSPECTIVES

- 1 – 3 Advances in Noninvasive Neurodiagnostics: *Kamran Urgun, Benjamin Zachary Ball, Frank P.K. Hsu*
- 57 – 59 Avoiding Lumbar Segmental Arteries Injury in Oblique Lateral Interbody Fusion Procedure: *Giovanni Grasso*
- 83 – 89 Challenging Dogma in Arteriovenous Malformation Surgery: Personal Reflections and Lessons Learned from 350 Cases: *Aaron Cohen-Gadol*
- 453 – 455 Perspective on Variation in Lumbar Segmental Arteries and Their Importance on Oblique Lateral Interbody Fusion: *Scott C. Robertson, Yousuf Shaikh, Salman Sharif*

Continued on page VI

Continued from page V

DOING MORE WITH LESS

- 51 — 56 Giant Encephalocele in Sokoto, Nigeria: A 5-Year Review of Operated Cases: *Gyang Markus Bot, Nasiru J. Ismail, Muhammad Raji Mahmud, Ismail Hassan, Ali Lasseini, Danaan J. Shilong, Joseph O. Obande, Babagana Usman, Lena Mary Houlihan, Mark C. Preul, Bello B. Shehu*
- 75 — 82 Training Neurosurgeons in Myanmar and Surrounding Countries: The Resident Perspective: *Jacob R. Lepard, Jacquelyn Corley, Eric W. Sankey, Tyler Prentiss, Brandon Rocque, Kee B. Park, Jack Rock, Kyi Hlaing, Win Myaing*
- 200 — 207 Awake Craniotomy with Functional Mapping for Glioma Resection in a Limited-Resource-Setting: Preliminary Experience from a Lower-Middle Income Country: *Zakariae Benyaich, Farouk Hajhouji, Mehdi Laghmari, Houssine Ghannane, Khalid Aniba, Mohamed Lmejjati, Said Ait Benali*
- 289 — 293 A Roadmap to Reopening a Neurosurgical Practice in the Age of COVID-19: *Randy S. D'Amico, Griffin Baum, Yafell Serulle, Danilo Silva, Michael L. Smith, Rebecca A. Wallack, Jason A. Ellis, Mitchell Levine, Rafael Ortiz, John A. Boockvar, David J. Langer*
- 361 — 369 Intraoperative Shortening of Aneurysm Clips: Revisiting an Old Technique in a New Era: *Vikas Parmar, Ulas Cikla, Sima Sayyahmelli, Burak Ozaydin, Abdulfettah Tunturk, Azam S. Ahmed, Mustafa K. Baskaya*
- 495 — 504 An Attitude Survey and Assessment of the Feasibility, Acceptability, and Usability of a Traumatic Brain Injury Decision Support Tool in Uganda: *Cyrus Elahi, Charis A. Spears, Sarah Williams, Timothy W. Dunn, Josephine N. Najjuma, Catherine A. Staton, João Ricardo Nickenig Vissoci, Anthony Fuller, David Kitya, Michael M. Haglund*
- 512 — 518 Scaling Up Global Collaborations for Neurosurgical Education and Care Capacity Development in West Africa: Are There Low-Hanging Fruits Where It Tolls?: *Enoch Ogbonnaya Uche, Mats Ryttefors, Magnus Tisell*

NEUROSURGERY NURSING

- 427 — 433 Evaluating Educational Material from the Perspective of Informal Caregivers of Children with Hydrocephalus: A Qualitative Study: *Paloma de Aro Jorge Tavares, Tamires Baraviera Ukawa, Pedro Tadao Hamamoto Filho, Marla Andréia Garcia de Avila*

HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

- 106 — 110 Life and Death in Italian Prehistory: The Case of the Sailor from Spina: *Emanuela Gualdi-Russo, Vanessa S. Manzon, Ilaria Saguto, Natascia Rinaldo*

LITERATURE REVIEWS

- 39 — 50 Spinal Intramedullary Epidermoid Cyst: Case Report and Updated Literature Review: *Octavian-Mihai Sîrbu, Alin-Vasile Chirteş, Marian Mitrică, Carmen-Adella Sîrbu*
- 121 — 131 Incidental Brain Tumors in the Pediatric Population: A Systematic Review and Reappraisal of Literature: *Fareed Jumrah, Michael S. Rallo, Travis Quinoa, Bharath Raju, Vinayak Narayan, Gaurav Gupta, Anil Nanda*
- 151 — 157 Paralysis Caused by Spinal Cord Injury After Posterior Fossa Surgery: A Systematic Review: *Alexander T. Yahanda and Michael R. Chicoine*
- 186 — 195 Enhancing Reality: A Systematic Review of Augmented Reality in Neuronavigation and Education: *James Cho, Shervin Rahimpour, Andrew Cutler, C. Rory Goodwin, Shivanand P. Lad, Patrick Codd*

- 274 – 280 Klippel–Feil Syndrome with Cervical Diastematomyelia in an Adult with Extensive Cervicothoracic Fusions: Case Report and Review of the Literature: *Ethan S. Srinivasan, Vikram A. Mehta, Gabriel C. Smith, Khoi D. Than, Anna R. Terry*
- 344 – 354 Neurological Impact of Coronavirus Disease of 2019: Practical Considerations for the Neuroscience Community: *Cassidy Werner, Tyler Scullen, Mansour Mathkour, Tyler Zeoli, Adam Beighley, Mitchell D. Kilgore, Christopher Carr, Richard M. Zweifler, Aimee Aysenne, Christopher M. Maulucci, Aaron S. Dumont, Cuong J. Bui, Joseph R. Keen*
- 387 – 394 Sarcoidosis of the Skull: A Systematic Review: *Luis A. Robles, Antonio F. Matilla, María Paz Covarrubias*
- 445 – 452 Cranioplasty: A Comprehensive Review of the History, Materials, Surgical Aspects, and Complications: *Ali Alkhaibary, Ahoud Alharbi, Nada Alnefaie, Abdulaziz Oqalaa Almubarak, Ahmed Aloraidi, Sami Khairy*
- 460 – 470 Endoscopic Anterior Skull Base Reconstruction: A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review of Graft Type: *Arash Abiri, Parinaz Abiri, Khodayar Goshtasbi, Brandon M. Lehrich, Ronald Sahyouni, Frank P.K. Hsu, Gilbert Cadena, Edward C. Kuan*
- 549 – 557 Telemedicine in the Era of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): A Neurosurgical Perspective: *Rachel Blue, Andrew I. Yang, Cecilia Zhou, Emma De Ravin, Clare W. Teng, Gabriel R. Arguelles, Vincent Huang, Connor Wathen, Stephen P. Miranda, Paul Marcotte, Neil R. Malhotra, William C. Welch, John Y.K. Lee*

TECHNICAL NOTES

- 23 – 30 S3 Sacral-Alar Iliac Screw: A Salvage Technique for Pelvic Fixation in Complex Deformity Surgery: *Tobias A. Mattei*
- 294 – 297 Membrane Retraction Technique in Bypass Surgery for the Treatment of Adult Moyamoya Disease with Deep-Seated Recipient Artery: *Gang Wang, Songtao Qi, Guozhong Zhang, Yunyu Wen, Mingzhou Li, Shichao Zhang, Yanyi Yin, Orazmyradov Berdimyrat, Wenfeng Feng*
- 330 – 336 Temporary Bridge Occipitocervical Fixation for Comminuted Atlantoaxial Fracture: *Jae Jun Yang, Sehan Park, Jae Youn Yoon, Ji Weon Mun*
- 488 – 494 Percutaneous Endoscopic Thoracic Decompression for Thoracic Spinal Stenosis Under Local Anesthesia: *Xiao-Kang Cheng and Bin Chen*
- 558 – 566 Surgical Management of Posterior Communicating Artery Aneurysms in the Presence of a Low-Coursing Internal Carotid Artery and Narrowed Retrocarotid Window: *Michael Kim, Alexander I. Evins, Hitoshi Fukuda, Namhee Kim, Philip E. Stieg, Antonio Bernardo*

CLINICAL IMAGES

- 318 – 321 Invasive Solitary Fibrous Tumor/Hemangiopericytoma of the Filum Terminale: *Deli Wei, Mingzhu Ma, Hao Li*
- 382 – 386 Holocord Syrinx Associated with Shunt Malfunction in Tetraventricular Hydrocephalus: *Pietro Spennato, Alessandra Marini, Giuseppe Cinalli*
- 423 – 425 Unusual Malignant Thoracic Cystic Lesion: *Mayur Sharma, Fabian C. Madrigal, Thomas Altstadt*

VIDEO ARTICLES

- 148 Microsurgical Clipping of Giant P3 Segment Posterior Cerebral Artery Aneurysm: 2-Dimensional Operative Video: *Pinar Eser Ocak and Hasan Kocaeli*
- 149 – 150 Simultaneous Left Superficial Temporal Artery–Middle Cerebral Artery Bypass and Encephalodurovenosynangiosis for Progressive Atherosclerosis of the Left Internal Carotid Artery Communicating Segment: *Turki Elarjani, Faris Alebdi, Abdullah Alobaid*

Continued on page VIII

Continued from page VII

- 309 Curative Removal of Small Vestibular Schwannoma with Functional Preservation: *Iwao Yamakami and Yoshinori Higuchi*
- 343 The Utility of 5-Aminolevulinic Acid for Microsurgical Resection of Meningiomas: *Evelyn L. Turcotte, Rudy J. Rahme, Sarah A. Merrill, Ryan A. Hess, Salvatore C. Lettieri, Bernard R. Bendok*
- 377 Closed Reduction of Ping-Pong Fracture in a Neonate: *Ahmed El Damaty, David Jurgowski, Andreas Unterberg*
- 548 Endoscopic Carpal Tunnel Release: *Steven B. Housley, Kunal Vakharia, Evan K. Winograd, Adnan H. Siddiqui*
- 582 Far Lateral Approach for In Situ Occlusion of Craniospinal Cervicomedullary Arteriovenous Malformation Presenting with Subarachnoid Hemorrhage: *Roberto Rodriguez Rubio, Daniel Raper, Hongwei Zhu, Adib A. Abla*
- 603 Translamina Terminalis Approach to Laser-Assisted Resection of Thalamomesencephalic Cavernous Malformation: *Mark G. Bigder, Yiping Li, Mauricio Mandel, Gary K. Steinberg*

CASE REPORTS

- 4 – 6 Spontaneous Extrusion of Ventriculopleural Shunt Catheter Associated with Pleural Effusion: *Luis A. Robles and Mario Messina-Lopez*
- 7 – 11 Awake Craniotomy in a Patient with Previously Diagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: *Lina Marengo-Hillebrand, Paola Suarez-Meade, David S. Sabsevitz, Bruce J. Leone, Kaisorn L. Chaichana*
- 12 – 19 Capicua Transcriptional Repressor-Rearranged Undifferentiated Round Cell Sarcoma Metastatic to the Brain Treated with Surgery and Stereotactic Radiosurgery: *Ahmed Helal, Christopher S. Graffeo, Avital Perry, John C. Chevillie, Michael J. Link, Bruce E. Pollock*
- 20 – 22 Ten-Segment Intramedullary Ependymoma and Whole Spinal Syringomyelia: *Chao Shen, Tianwen Li, Zengxin Qi, Junjie Zhong, Zhifeng Shi, Bojie Yang*
- 31 – 38 Oculomotor Neurofibroma: A Different Histology Implying an Unsatisfying Clinical Outcome: *Fumihiko Matano, Paolo di Russo, Atsushi Okano, Thibault Passeri, Nicolas Penet, Arianna Fava, Breno Camara, Marc Polivka, Lorenzo Giammattei, Sébastien Froelich*
- 60 – 62 An Unusual Bump on the Head: Intracranial and Extracranial Cytokeratin-Positive Interstitial Reticular Cell Tumor: *Noëmi Eberhard and Dominik Cordier*
- 63 – 69 Pituitary Adenoma and Papillary Craniopharyngioma: A Rare Case of Collision Tumor and Review of the Literature: *Fred Bteich, Lea El Khoury, Georges Nohra, Viviane Trak, Sandrine Yazbek, Mira Akiki*
- 70 – 74 Posterior Calvarial Augmentation for Chiari Malformation Type 1 Refractory to Foramen Magnum Decompression: *Fardad T. Afshari, Guirish A. Solanki, William B. Lo, Desiderio Rodrigues*
- 90 – 96 Congenital Glioblastoma Multiforme with Long-Term Childhood Survival: A Case Report and Systematic Review: *Adrian I. Espiritu, Bernadette B. Terencio, Roland Dominic G. Jamora*
- 97 – 100 Extremely Late Recovery of Unusual Cervical Ankylosing Spondylitis—Related Dysphagia: Anesthesiologic, Surgical, and Pathophysiological Considerations, and Review of the Literature: *Vito Stifano, Antonio Leone, Luca Revelli, Federica Tosi, Massimiliano Visocchi*
- 101 – 105 Bilateral Transradial Access for Complex Posterior Circulation Interventions: *Evan Luther, David McCarthy, Michael Silva, Ahmed Nada, Allison Strickland, Stephanie Chen, Joshua Burks, Samir Sur, Dileep Yavagal, Eric Peterson, Robert M. Starke*

- 111 – 120 **Woven Endobridge (WEB) Device as a Retreatment Strategy After Unsuccessful Surgical Clipping:** *Thomas C. Booth, Carmen Parra-Farinas, Ruth-Mary deSouza, Naga Kandasamy, Jo Bhattacharya, Prem Rangi, Jonathan Downer*
- 132 – 135 **Natural History of a Patient with Sacral Chordoma: Case Report and Literature Review:** *Brooke T. Kennamer, Daniel G. Gridley, Laurence D. Rhines, Geetha R. Nair, Salvatore C. Lettieri, Karole M. Davis, Iman Feiz-Erfan*
- 136 – 141 **Giant Granular Cell Tumor of the Cervical Spinal Cord Resected via Anterior Corpectomy with Reconstruction: Technical Note and Review of Literature:** *Sauson Soldozy, Hasan R. Syed, R. Tushar Jha, Kelly O'Connell, Metin Ozdemirli, Jean-Marc Voyadzis*
- 142 – 147 **Reduction and Open Fixation of a Cervical Teardrop Fracture: A Technical Note:** *Gregory W. Basil, Vignesh Kumar, Steven Vanni*
- 158 – 162 **Deep Brain Stimulation Surgery for Essential Tremor in a Patient with Type A Hemophilia:** *Ryan Palsma, Nicholas Gravbrot, Robert Bina, Manas Agastya, Willard S. Kasoff*
- 163 – 168 **Cervical Spine Aneurysmal Bone Cyst in a Pediatric Patient: Embolization Considerations and Potential Pitfalls:** *Landon D. Ehlers, Joe McMordie, Pasha Lookian, Daniel Surdell, Mark Puccioni*
- 169 – 174 **Treatment of Severe Kyphoscoliosis in Children with Mucopolysaccharidosis Type I (Pfaundler—Hurler Syndrome) Using the Growing Rod Technique: A Case Series with Mid-Term Results:** *Alexander Hofmann, Christoph-Eckhard Heyde, Anna Völker, Eckehard Schumann, Nicolas Heinz von der Höh*
- 175 – 178 **Guillain-Barré Syndrome After a Gunshot Wound to the Thoracic Spine:** *Megan M. Finneran, Brandon Gaynor, Ellen Omi*
- 179 – 181 **Supraglottic Airway Device in Acute Ischemic Stroke Undergoing Mechanical Thrombectomy: Is It Feasible?:** *Alessandro De Cassai, Giulio Andreatta, Joseph-Domenico Gabrieli, Francesco Causin, Annalisa Boscolo, Paolo Navalesi, Marina Munari*
- 182 – 185 **Bronchogenic Cyst: Skull Base Lesions with Extracranial Extension:** *Gui-lu He, Ye-hai Li, Jian-hao Lin, Jing Ye, Fo-bao Huang, Rui-rui Yun, Qiao Li, Liang Zhang*
- 196 – 199 **A Rare Case of Chronic Subdural Hematoma Coexisting With Metastatic Tumor:** *Toshiya Ichinose, Megumi Ueno, Takuya Watanabe, Ken-ichi Murakami, Hiroshi Minato, Yutaka Hayashi*
- 208 – 214 **Occipital Artery to Middle Cerebral Artery Bypass Using the Descending Branch of the Lateral Circumflex Femoral Artery as an Interposition Graft for Blood Flow Augmentation in Progressive Moyamoya Disease:** *Visish M. Srinivasan, Peter Kan, Andrew T. Huang, Jan-Karl Burkhardt*
- 215 – 218 **Case Demonstrating the Nuances of Acute Cortical Venous Thrombosis Anticoagulation Guidelines:** *Sean P. Polster, Seán B. Lyne, Ali Mansour*
- 219 – 222 **Minimally Invasive Resection of Symptomatic Cervical Rib for Treatment of Thoracic Outlet Syndrome:** *Charlotte Hawks, Sarah Herrera-Nicol, Mark E. Pruzansky, Arthur L. Jenkins III*
- 223 – 225 **Osteosarcoma and Epidermoid Cyst in the Cerebellopontine Angle of an Adult:** *Hongliang Zhang, Yugong Feng, Huanting Li, Bingke Lv, Lin Wang*
- 226 – 231 **Severe Radiation Necrosis Refractory to Surgical Resection in Patients with Melanoma and Brain Metastases Managed with Ipilimumab/Nivolumab and Brain-Directed Stereotactic Radiation Therapy:** *Diana D. Shi, Omar Arnaout, Wenya L. Bi, Elizabeth I. Buchbinder, Daniel N. Cagney, Megan L. Insko, David Liu, Jonathan D. Schoenfeld, Ayal A. Aizer*
- 232 – 237 **Primary Brainstem Angiosarcoma Mimicking Cavernous Malformation:** *Changik Lee, Yong Sam Shin, Jai Ho Choi*
- 238 – 241 **Sinus Pericranii Complicated by Hydrocephalus: Case Report and Literature Review:** *Nasser Almujaivel, Ghadeer Alsager, Abdulaziz Oqalaa Almubarak, Abdulrazag Aylan*

Continued on page X

Continued from page IX

- 242 – 244 Simultaneous Treatment of Petroclival Meningiomas and the Trigeminal Nerve with Gamma Knife Radiosurgery for Tumor-Related Trigeminal Neuralgia: *Monica C. Mureb, Yosef Dastazigada, Carolina Benjamin, John G. Golfinos, Douglas Kondziolka*
- 245 – 249 Acute-on-Chronic Vertex Epidural Hematoma with Diastasis of the Sagittal Suture in an Adult: *Tomasz Klepinowski, Paweł Kawalec, Michał Larysz, Leszek Sagan*
- 250 – 252 A Rare Anomalous Origin of the Right Vertebral Artery from the Internal Carotid Artery with an Aberrant Right Subclavian Artery: *Takahiro Ota, Shigeta Fujitani, So Fujimoto, Hiroshi Saito, Masayuki Ueda*
- 253 – 259 Sarcoid Infiltration of the Skull with Epidural Extension: Case Report and Literature Review: *Anzhela D. Moskalik, Melanie R. Graber, Santhanam Lakshminarayanan, Ketan R. Bulsara*
- 260 – 263 Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma in a Patient on Adalimumab Therapy for Chronic Plaque Psoriasis: *Riyaz Abd' Farah, Ahmad Alduaij, Carlos Ugas, Ramon Navarro*
- 266 – 267 Metastatic Pituitary Carcinoma Causing Cord Compression: *Wai Cheong Soon, Marcin Czyz, Jasmeet Dhir*
- 268 – 273 Endoscopic Transforaminal Drainage of a Ventrally Located Thoracic Epidural Abscess: *Omar S. Akbik and Peter C. Shin*
- 281 – 285 Non-Union After Multiple Lumbar Fusion Surgeries in a Patient With Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy: A Case Report and Review of the Literature: *Anuj V. Mehta, Robert Maurer, G. Timothy Reiter*
- 286 – 288 Intracranial Fetus In Fetu—a Pediatric Rarity: *Apurva Surana, Ankita Aggarwal, Venkatram Krishnan, Amita Malik, Ritu N. Misra*
- 298 – 308 Dural Arteriovenous Fistula Presenting as Trigeminal Neuralgia: 2 Case Reports and Review of the Literature: *Erik C. Brown, Pavlos Texakalidis, Brittany Stedelin, Muhibullah S. Tora, Rima S. Rindler, Jonathan A. Grossberg, Ryan B. Peterson, Melissa Campbell, Justin S. Cetas, Nicholas M. Boulis, Ahmed M. Raslan*
- 310 – 313 Pituitary Blastoma in a 19-Year-Old Woman: A Case Report and Review of Literature: *Youliny Chhuon, Young Cheol Weon, Gyeongmin Park, Misung Kim, Jun Bum Park, Sang Kyu Park*
- 314 – 317 Glossopharyngeal Neuralgia/Neuropathy with Hemodynamic Instability and Associated Syncope Treated with Stereotactic Radiosurgery: *Christopher Banerjee, Angela Viers, John Vender*
- 322 – 329 Surgical Resection of Solitary Bone Plasmacytoma of Atlas and Reconstruction with 3-Dimensional—Printed Titanium Patient-Specific Implant: *Yuxi Li, Guan Zheng, Ting Liu, Yuwei Liang, Jiajun Huang, Xiangge Liu, Junshen Huang, Ziyang Cheng, Shixin Lu, Lin Huang*
- 337 – 342 Mobile Myxopapillary Ependymoma with Associated Filum Terminale Cyst: *Panagiotis Mastorakos, Isaac Jonathan Pomeraniec, Smit Shah, Alireza Shoushtarizadeh, Martha M. Quezado, John Heiss*
- 355 – 360 Initial Report of an Intradural Extramedullary Metastasis of a Pancreatic Neuroendocrine Tumor to the Cervical Spine: A Case Report and Review of the Literature: *Brian F. Saway, Islam Fayed, Ehsan Dowlati, Roshanak Derakhshandeh, Faheem A. Sandhu*
- 370 – 372 Hangman's Fracture in a Child with Osteopetrosis: *Abhidha Shah, Saswat Dandpat, Atul Goel*
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- 395 — 400 Visual Evoked Potentials and Intraoperative Awakening in Ophthalmic Artery Sacrifice During Aneurysm Clipping: 2 Cases and Literature Review: *Kamil W. Nowicki, Stephen A. Johnson, Ezequiel Goldschmidt, Jeffrey Balzer, Bradley A. Gross, Robert M. Friedlander*
- 401 — 404 Radial Artery Graft for Giant Common Carotid Artery Pseudoaneurysm After Carotid Artery Stenting: *Fumihito Matano, Masanori Suzuki, Takayuki Mizunari, Toshimasa Yamada, Yasuo Murai, Akio Morita*
- 405 — 409 Massive Ossification with Hematopoietic Marrow on Both Surfaces of the Expanded Polytetrafluoroethylene Artificial Dura Mater: *Naoki Maehara, Takato Morioka, Takafumi Shimogawa, Satoshi O. Suzuki, Masahiro Mizoguchi, Sei Haga*
- 410 — 414 Multiple Large-Size Cystic Cerebral Cavernomas: *Ibrahim E. Efe, Orhun Utku Aydin, Alper Alabulut, Ozgur Celik, Kerameddin Aydin*
- 415 — 418 Dural-Based Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma with Bone Invasion: *Seung-won Lee, Tae-Young Jung, Hee-Jo Baek, Seul-Kee Kim, Kyung-Hwa Lee*
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- 434 — 439 Simultaneous Sacroiliac Joint Fusion in Patients with Long Lumbo-sacral Constructs: Case Report and Operative Technique: *Mohammad Hassan A. Noureldine, Thomas B. Freeman, Puya Alikhani*
- 440 — 444 Spinal Subdural Hematoma owing to the Removal of Cerebrospinal Fluid Drainage Tube During Thoracic Endovascular Aortic Repair: *Hiroki Mitsuoka, Yuki Orimoto, Makiyo Hagihara, Kojiro Suzuki, Takahiro Arima, Taiki Isaji, Masakazu Takayasu, Hiroyuki Ishibashi*
- 471 — 477 Metal Hypersensitivity After Spinal Instrumentation: When to Suspect and How to Treat: *Kara L. Curley, Chandan Krishna, Tanmoy K. Maiti, Jamal McClendon Jr, Bernard R. Bendok*
- 478 — 482 Surgical Management of Symptomatic Boxing-Induced Spinal Cerebrospinal Fluid Leak After Failed Epidural Blood Patch: *Deepak Khatri, Randy D'Amico, Amy Tucker, Mariya Abel, David Langer, John Boockvar*
- 483 — 487 Case Report of Immuno-Oncotherapy (IO) Provoked Encephalitis Mimicking Brain Metastasis in a Patient with History of Traumatic Brain Injury: *Shane P. Bross, Gino J. Mongelluzzo, Andrew R. Conger, Mayur A. Patel, Joseph Vadakara, Michelle Grant, Na Tosha N. Gatson*
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- 577 — 581 Cerebellar Pleomorphic Xanthoastrocytoma with *BRAF* V600E Mutation: *Sang Ho Kim, Kihwan Hwang, Kyu Sang Lee, Gheeyoung Choe, Chae-Yong Kim*
- 583 — 587 Devascularization of a Hemorrhagic Pineocytoma by Laser Thermal Ablation Followed by Endoscopic Resection: A Proof-of-Principle Case Report: *David Freeman, Daniel Guillaume, William Robert Bell, Clark C. Chen*
- 588 — 591 Orbital Compartment Syndrome without Evidence of Orbital Mass or Ocular Compression After Pterional Craniotomy for Removal of Meningioma of the Frontal Lobe: A Case Report and Literature Review: *John M. Dunford and Charles Miller*

Continued on page XII

Continued from page XI

- 592 – 602 Idiopathic Ventral Spinal Cord Herniation: Video Report and Systematic Review: Eduardo Augusto Nunes, Enrico Affonso Barletta, Fernando Seiji Suzuki, Telmo Augusto Barba Belsuzarri, Daniel de Araújo Paz, Fabio Veiga de Castro Sparapani, Franz Jooji Onishi, Sergio Cavalheiro, Thiago Salati, Vinicius de Meldau Benites, Guilherme Riechelmann, Andrei Fernandes Joaquim
- 604 – 607 Primary Orbital Dedifferentiated Liposarcoma: Daisuke Yamazaki, Naoki Ogihara, Tetsuyoshi Horiuchi
- 608 – 613 Three Cases of Brucellar Spondylitis with Noncontiguous Multifocal Involvement: Zhang Tao, Liu Hua, Yang Chengwei, Fan Bo, Qu Tao, Li Songkai

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- 775 – 788 Innovations in the Neurosurgical Management of Epilepsy: Caitlin E. Hoffman, Whitney E. Parker, Benjamin I. Rapoport, Mingrui Zhao, Hongtao Ma, Theodore H. Schwartz

ERRATUM

- 789 Erratum to “Meta-Analysis of Pterional Versus Supraorbital Keyhole Approach for Clipping Intracranial Aneurysms: Direct Comparison of Approach-Related Complications” [World Neurosurgery 135 (2020) e246-e257]: Wen-qiang Xin, Wei-han Wang, Qiang Yin, Qi-qiang Xin, Shi-fei Cai, Xin-yu Yang

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.01.115>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.02.078>

- e32 — e37 **Internal Carotid Artery Test Balloon Occlusion Using Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography Scan in the Management of Complex Cerebral Aneurysms and Skull Base Tumors: A 20-Year Review:** *Ram Sivakumaran, Amr Z. Mohamed, Christopher Y. Akhunbay-Fudge, Richard J. Edwards, Shelley A. Renowden, Richard J. Nelson*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.006>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.037>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.095>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.124>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.137>
- e113 — e120 **Subperiosteal versus Subdural Drain After Burr-hole Drainage Under Blood Thinners: A Subanalysis of the cSDH-Drain RCT:** *Maria Kamenova, Katharina Lutz, Sabine Schaedelin, Javier Fandino, Luigi Mariani, Jehuda Soleman*
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- e127 — e135 **Nomogram Model for Predicting Risk of Postoperative Delirium After Deep Brain Stimulation Surgery in Patients Older Than 50 Years with Parkinson Disease:** *Ling Zhan, Xue-qi Wang, Li-xiang Zhang*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.160>

Continued on page XIV

Continued from page XIII

- e136 — e143 **Blocking VEGF by Bevacizumab Attenuates VEGF-Induced Vasospasm After Experimental Subarachnoid Hemorrhage in Rabbits:** *Umut Dogu Akturk, Cengiz Tuncer, Huseyin Bozkurt, Omer Selcuk Sahin, Husamettin Bulut, Ata Arikok, Cem Dinc, Bora Gurer, Erhan Turkoglu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.151>
- e144 — e150 **Interspinous Process Fixation Device Versus Extended Pedicle Screw Fixation for Symptomatic Adjacent Segment Disease: 3-Year Retrospective Study:** *In-Suk Bae, Koang-Hum Bak, Hyoung-Joon Chun*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.147>
- e151 — e158 **Posterior-Only Surgical Correction with Heavy Halo-Femoral Traction for the Treatment of Severe and Rigid Congenital Scoliosis Associated with Tethered Spinal Cord and Type II Split Cord Malformation:** *Hong-Qi Zhang, Ang Deng, Shao-Hua Liu, Yu-Xiang Wang, Emmanuel Alonge*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.145>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.175>
- e166 — e181 **Minimally Invasive Lateral Retropleural and Retroperitoneal Approaches in Patients with Thoracic and Lumbar Osteomyelitis: Description of the Techniques and a Series of 14 Patients:** *Mohammad Hassan A. Noureldine, Elliot Pressman, Paul R. Krafft, Donald A. Smith, Mark S. Greenberg, Puya Alikhani*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.172>
- e182 — e188 **Cervical Pedicle Screw Insertion Using O-Arm-Based 3D Navigation: Technical Advancement to Improve Accuracy of Screws:** *Keiji Wada, Ryo Tamaki, Tomohisa Inoue, Kenji Hagiwara, Ken Okazaki*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.171>
- e189 — e202 **Development and Evaluation of Pediatric Mixed-Reality Model for Neuroendoscopic Surgical Training:** *Giselle Coelho, Eberval Gadelha Figueiredo, Nicollas Nunes Rabelo, Matheus Rodrigues de Souza, Caroline Ferreira Fagundes, Manoel Jacobsen Teixeira, Nelci Zanon*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.170>
- e203 — e211 **Medical Students' Perceived Interests and Concerns for a Career in Neurosurgery:** *Sergio W. Guadix, Iyan Younus, Graham Winston, Mahmoud ElJalby, Jimmy Xia, Joel Jose Nario, Michael Rothbaum, Ryan E. Radwanski, Jeffrey P. Greenfield, Susan C. Pannullo*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.169>
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.168>
- e220 — e229 **Roadmap for Developing Complex Virtual Reality Simulation Scenarios: Subpial Neurosurgical Tumor Resection Model:** *Abdulrahman J. Sabbagh, Khalid M. Bajunaid, Norah Alarifi, Alexander Winkler-Schwartz, Ghusn Alsideiri, Gmaan Al-Zhrani, Fahad E. Alotaibi, Abdulgadir Bugdadi, Denis Laroche, Rolando F. Del Maestro*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.187>
- e230 — e236 **The Impact of Preoperative Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on Postoperative Outcomes in Lumbar Spine Degenerative Disease: 3-Month and 12-Month Results of a Pilot Study:** *Juneyoung L. Chavez, Christina A. Porucznik, Lisa H. Gren, Jian Guan, Evan Joyce, Darrel S. Brodke, Andrew T. Dailey, Mark A. Mahan, Robert S. Hood, Brandon D. Lawrence, William R. Spiker, Nicholas T. Spina, Erica F. Bisson*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.186>

- e237 — e244 **Emerging Insight in the Use of an Active Post Discharge Surveillance Program in Spine Surgery: A Retrospective Pilot Study:** *Alexander von Glinski, Basem Ishak, Christopher J. Elia, Ryan Goodmanson, Clifford Pierre, Daniel C. Norvell, Darius Ansari, Polly Brune, Rod J. Oskouian, Jens R. Chapman*
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- e255 — e264 **Biomechanical Model Study of the Effect of Partial Facetectomy on Lumbar Stability Under Percutaneous Endoscopy:** *Xin-ru Li, Jia Yu, Wen Zhang, Gong-ming Gao, Long Han, Liang Chen, Lu-ming Nong*
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- e271 — e285 **Increased Risk of Subsequent Meningioma Among Women with Malignant Breast Cancer:** *Victor Lopez-Rivera, Ping Zhu, Antonio Dono, Songmi Lee, Peng Roc Chen, Leomar Y. Ballester, Sunil A. Sheth, Yoshua Esquenazi*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.203>
- e286 — e292 **Comparison of Union Rates Between Autogenous Iliac Crest Bone Graft and Local Bone Graft as Fusion Materials in Lumbar Fusion Surgery: An Evaluation of Up to 3-Level Fusion:** *Jong-Beom Park, Jae Hyuk Yang, Dong-Gune Chang, Se-Il Suk, Seung-Woo Suh, Gang-Un Kim, Jung Yun Choi, Jun-Yeong Seo, Hyung-Youl Park, Sang-Il Kim, Young-Hoon Kim, Kee-Yong Ha*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.211>
- e293 — e296 **Fixed Positioning for Decompressive Hemispherectomy Provides a Larger Diameter Flap than Nonfixed Positioning: A Single-Institution Experience:** *Courtney Pendleton, Lohit Velagapudi, Rachel Cain, Jack I. Jallo*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.205>
- e297 — e307 **A Phantom Study of the Spatial Precision and Accuracy of Stereotactic Localization Using Computed Tomography Imaging with the Leksell Stereotactic System:** *Ali R. Tafreshi, Terrance Peng, Cheng Yu, Daniel R. Kramer, Angad S. Gogia, Morgan B. Lee, Michael F. Barbaro, Rinu Sebastian, Roberto Martin Del Campo-Vera, Kuang-Hsuan Chen, Spencer S. Kellis, Brian Lee*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.204>
- e308 — e315 **Rates, Risk Factors, and Complications of Red Blood Cell Transfusion in Metastatic Spinal Tumor Surgery: An Analysis of a Prospective Multicenter Surgical Database:** *Rafael De la Garza Ramos, Yaroslav Gelfand, Joshua A. Benton, Michael Longo, Murray Echt, Vijay Yanamadala, Reza Yassari*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.202>
- e316 — e324 **Functional Connectivity Analysis and Prediction of Pain Relief in Association with Spinal Decompression Surgery:** *Masahiro Sawada, Takuro Nakae, Toshihiro Munemitsu, Masato Hojo*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.200>
- e325 — e334 **Surgical Designs of Revascularization for Moyamoya Disease: 15 Years of Experience in a Single Center:** *Yoshio Araki, Kenji Uda, Kinya Yokoyama, Fumiaki Kanamori, Takashi Mamiya, Masahiro Nishihori, Takashi Izumi, Kuniaki Tanahashi, Masaki Sumitomo, Sho Okamoto, Toshihiko Wakabayashi, Atsushi Natsume*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.217>

Continued on page XVI

Continued from page XV

- e335 — e344 **Does Lateral Lumbar Interbody Fusion Decrease the Grading of Lenke-Silva Classification and Determine the Optimal Fusion Level in Severe Adult Degenerative Scoliosis?:** *Hao Li, Zhengkuan Xu, Fangcai Li, Qixin Chen*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.215>
- e345 — e354 **Lessons Learned in Using Laser Interstitial Thermal Therapy for Treatment of Brain Tumors: A Case Series of 238 Patients from a Single Institution:** *Jianning Shao, Nathan R. Radakovich, Matthew Grabowski, Hamid Borghei-Razavi, Konrad Knusel, Krishna C. Joshi, Baha'eddin A. Muhsen, Lee Hwang, Gene H. Barnett, Alireza M. Mohammadi*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.213>
- e355 — e362 **Subdural Drain versus Subdural Evacuating Port System for the Treatment of Nonacute Subdural Hematomas: A Single-Center Retrospective Cohort Study:** *Michael Ortiz, Patrick Belton, Matthew Burton, N. Scott Litofsky*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.226>
- e363 — e372 **Gamma Knife Surgery for Brain Metastases from Uterine Malignant Tumor:** *Akiyoshi Ogino, Tatsuo Hirai, Toru Serizawa, Atsuo Yoshino*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.225>
- e373 — e382 **A Survey of Applicant Views Regarding the Neurosurgical Fellowship Application Process:** *Rimal Dossani, Michael Karsy, Muhammad Waqas, Richard Menger, Bharat Guthikonda*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.03.224>
- e383 — e390 **Spasm Freedom Following Microvascular Decompression for Hemifacial Spasm: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis:** *Katherine Holste, Ronald Sahyouni, Zoe Teton, Alvin Y. Chan, Dario J. Englot, John D. Rolston*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.001>
- e391 — e398 **Clinicopathologic Features of Thoracolumbar Interdural Disc Herniations: A Retrospective Case Series with a Systematic Literature Review:** *Vito Fiorenza, Francesco Ascanio, Ida Di Lorenzo*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.015>
- e399 — e405 **National Imaging Trends in Pediatric Traumatic Brain Injury and Hydrocephalus:** *Allie Harbert, Kathleen Bradford, Victor Ritter, Weston T. Northam, Carolyn Quinsey*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.014>
- e406 — e411 **Outcomes in a Case Series of Elderly Patients with Aneurysmal Subarachnoid Hemorrhages in the Barrow Ruptured Aneurysm Trial (BRAT):** *Joshua S. Catapano, Christopher E. Louie, Michael J. Lang, Joseph D. DiDomenico, Alexander C. Whiting, Mohamed A. Labib, Tyler S. Cole, Vance L. Fredrickson, Daniel D. Cavalcanti, Michael T. Lawton*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.007>
- e412 — e420 **Cranial Kyphotic Change After Multilevel Anterior Cervical Corpectomy and Fusion May Lead to Myelopathy Recurrence:** *Norimasa Ikeda, Seiichi Odate, Jitsuhiko Shikata*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.006>
- e421 — e427 **Spinal Emergency Surgery During Pregnancy: Contemporary Strategies and Outcome:** *Majid Esmailzadeh, Bujung Hong, Manolis Polemikos, Shadi Al-Aff, Elvis J. Hermann, Dirk Scheinichen, Constantin von Kaisenberg, Peter Hillemanns, Joachim K. Krauss*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.019>
- e428 — e438 **The Caudate Nucleus: Its Connections, Surgical Implications, and Related Complications:** *Musa Çırak, Kaan Yağmurlu, Kathryn N. Kearns, Eduardo C. Ribas, Kamran Urgan, Mark E. Shaffrey, M. Yashar S. Kalani*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.027>

- e439 — e448 **Long-Term Effect of Diabetes on Reoperation After Lumbar Spinal Surgery: A Nationwide Population-Based Sample Cohort Study:** *Chang-Hyun Lee, Chi Heon Kim, Chun Kee Chung, Yunhee Choi, Min-Jung Kim, Dahae Yim, Seung Heon Yang, Dong Hwan Kim, Young San Ko, Sung Bae Park*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.026>
- e449 — e454 **Assessment of Patient Outcomes and Proximal Junctional Failure Rate of Patients with Adult Spinal Deformity Undergoing Caudal Extension of Previous Spinal Fusion:** *Alan H. Daniels, Daniel B.C. Reid, Wesley M. Durand, Breton Line, Peter Passias, Han Jo Kim, Themistocles Protopsaltis, Virginie LaFage, Justin S. Smith, Christopher Shaffrey, Munish Gupta, Eric Klineberg, Frank Schwab, Doug Burton, Shay Bess, Christopher Ames, Robert A. Hart, and the International Spine Study Group*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.024>
- e455 — e462 **Involvement of Hippocampal AMPA Receptors in Electroacupuncture Attenuating Depressive-Like Behaviors and Regulating Synaptic Proteins in Rats Subjected to Chronic Unpredictable Mild Stress:** *Li Jiang, Hao Zhang, Junhe Zhou, Xiaorong Tang, Le Luo, Peidong Huang, Wei Yi, Nenggui Xu, Jianhua Liu, Wenbin Fu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.042>
- e463 — e473 **Pharyngo-Esophageal Perforations After Anterior Cervical Spine Surgery: Management and Outcomes:** *Michael Ghirelli, Giulia Molinari, Maria Rosini, Federico De Iure, Alessandro Gasbarrini, Francesco Mattioli, Matteo Alicandri-Ciuffelli, Livio Presutti*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.040>
- e474 — e479 **Sexual Dysfunction Secondary to Lumbar Stiffness in Adult Spinal Deformity Patients Before and After Long-Segment Spinal Fusion:** *Alan H. Daniels, Daniel Reid, Wesley Durand, Kevin Disilvestro, David K. Hamilton, Peter Passias, Han Jo Kim, Themistocles Protopsaltis, Virginie LaFage, Justin S. Smith, Christopher Shaffrey, Munish Gupta, Eric Klineberg, Frank Schwab, Doug Burton, Shay Bess, Christopher Ames, Robert Hart, International Spine Study Group*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.033>
- e480 — e488 **Adjacent Segment Reoperation and Other Perioperative Outcomes in Patients Who Underwent Anterior Lumbar Interbody Fusions at One and Two Levels:** *Michael L. Martini, Dominic A. Nistal, Jonathan Gal, Sean N. Neifert, Robert J. Rothrock, Jinseong D. Kim, Brian C. Deutsch, Lisa Genadry, Colin D. Lamb, John M. Caridi*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.053>
- e489 — e495 **Comparison of Radiation Exposure Between O-Arm Navigated and C-Arm Guided Screw Placement in Minimally Invasive Transforaminal Lumbar Interbody Fusion:** *Chih-Chang Chang, Hsuan-Kan Chang, Jau-Ching Wu, Tsung-Hsi Tu, Henrich Cheng, Wen-Cheng Huang*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.052>
- e496 — e500 **Improvements in Neck Pain and Disability Following C1-C2 Posterior Cervical Instrumentation and Fusion for Atlanto-Axial Osteoarthritis:** *Owoicho Adogwa, Jacob M. Buchowski, J. Alex Sielatycki, Maksim A. Shlykov, Aleksos A. Theologis, James Lin, Travis CreveCoeur, Colleen Peters, K. Daniel Riew*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.051>
- e501 — e507 **Visual Outcomes After Endoscopic Endonasal Resection of Orbital Lesions:** *Kaiyun Yang, Yosef Ellenbogen, Almunder R. Algird, Doron D. Sommer, Kesava Reddy*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.050>
- e508 — e516 **Clinical Characteristics, Surgical Outcomes, and Prognostic Factors of Intracranial Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma:** *Taohui Ouyang, Long Wang, Na Zhang, Zongyong Zhang, Yifeng Xiong, Meihua Li, Tao Hong*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.049>
- e517 — e525 **Efficacy of Using Platelet-Rich Plasma in Spinal Fusion Surgery—A Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses—Compliant Meta-Analysis:** *Huang Ji-jun, Sun Hui-hui, Lan Qing, Zhang Heng-zhu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.047>

Continued on page XVIII

Continued from page XVII

- e526 — e540 **Identification and Management of Progressive Enhancement After Radiation Therapy for Brain Metastases: Results from a Neurosurgical Survey:** *Alexa Semonche, Nitesh V. Patel, Isaac Yang, Shabbar F. Danish*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.046>
- e541 — e547 **Defining an Algorithm of Treatment for Severe Cervical Deformity Using Surgeon Survey and Treatment Patterns:** *Sohrab Virk, Jonathan Elysee, Munish Gupta, Eric Klineberg, Frank Schwab, Han Jo Kim, Douglas Burton, Peter Passias, Themistocles Protopsaltis, Justin Smith, Christopher Ames, Renaud Lafage, Virginie Lafage*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.057>
- e548 — e552 **Anterior Callosal Angle: A New Marker of Idiopathic Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus?:** *Paolo Mantovani, Luca Albini-Riccioli, Giulia Giannini, David Milletti, Thomas J. Sorenson, Michelangelo Stanzani-Maserati, Federico Oppi, Benjamin D. Elder, Sabina Cevoli, Pietro Cortelli, Giorgio Palandri, the BOLOGNA PRO-HYDRO Study Group*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.085>
- e553 — e571 **Therapeutic Effect of Enteral Nutrition Supplemented with Probiotics in the Treatment of Severe Craniocerebral Injury: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis:** *Tianjiao Du, Xiyue Jing, Sirong Song, Shan Lu, Lixia Xu, Xiaoguang Tong, Hua Yan*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.083>
- e572 — e579 **Comparison of Radiation Exposure Among 3 Different Endoscopic Discectomy Techniques for Lumbar Disk Herniation:** *Abdullah Merter, Oguz Karaeminogullari, Motohide Shibayama*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.079>
- e580 — e584 **Small Aneurysms with Low PHASES Scores Account for Most Subarachnoid Hemorrhage Cases:** *Caleb Rutledge, Soren Jonzson, Ethan A. Winkler, Daniel Raper, Michael T. Lawton, Adib A. Abl*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.074>
- e585 — e591 **Magnetic Resonance Imaging Surveillance for Vestibular Schwannoma After Microsurgical Resection Using a Retrosigmoid Transmeatal Approach:** *José M. González-Darder, Pau Capilla-Guasch, Félix Pastor Escartín*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.073>
- e592 — e600 **Impact of Early Reoperation on the Prognosis of Patients Operated on for Glioblastoma:** *Marta Troya-Castilla, Ariel Kaen, Francisco Javier Márquez-Rivas, Pedro Infante-Cossio, Francisca Rius Díaz, José Luis Narros Gimenez, Marta Gonzalez-Pombo, Palomares Cancela, Miguel Segura Fernández-Nogueras, Miguel Ángel Arráez Sánchez*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.072>
- e601 — e607 **Vertebral Artery Sacrifice versus Skeletonization in the Setting of Cervical Spine Tumor Resection: Case Series:** *Erick M. Westbroek, Zach Pennington, Jeff Ehresman, A. Karim Ahmed, Philippe Gailloud, Daniel M. Sciubba*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.071>
- e608 — e617 **Management of Aneurysmal Subarachnoid Hemorrhage: Variation in Clinical Practice and Unmet Need for Follow-up among Survivors—A Single-Center Perspective:** *Claire Delpirou Nouh, Danny G. Samkutty, Swathy Chandrashekhar, Joshua A. Santucci, Lance Ford, Chao Xu, Kimberly M. Hollabaugh, Bradley N. Bohnstedt, Bappaditya Ray*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.067>
- e618 — e625 **Interhemispheric Surgical Approaches for Ruptured Intraventricular Arteriovenous Malformation—Associated Aneurysms: Technical Report and Case Series:** *Daniel M.S. Raper, Ethan A. Winkler, W. Caleb Rutledge, Steven W. Hetts, Adib A. Abl*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.066>

- e626 — e634 **Is the Risk of Aorta Injury or Impingement Higher During Correction Surgery in Patients with Severe and Rigid Scoliosis?:** *Honghao Yang, Ziyang Liu, Li Guan, Yuzeng Liu, Tie Liu, Yong Hai*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.065>
- e635 — e642 **Neurologic Complications in Patients with Left Ventricular Assist Devices: Single Institution Retrospective Review:** *Wittstatt Alexandra Whitaker-Lea, Brittney Toms, Jamie B. Toms, Keyur B. Shah, Mohammed Quader, Daniel Tang, Vigneshwar Kasirajan, Dennis J. Rivet, John F. Reavey-Cantwell*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.064>
- e643 — e651 **Impact of Osteoporosis on Different Type of Short-Segment Posterior Instrumentation for Thoracolumbar Burst Fracture—A Finite Element Analysis:** *Jen-Chung Liao*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.056>
- e652 — e657 **Classifying Device-Related Complications Associated With Intrathecal Baclofen Pumps: A MAUDE Study:** *Mickey Abraham, Justin Gold, Jack Dweck, Max Ward, Julian Gendreau, Neal Panse, Keshav Holani, Priya Gupta, Antonios Mammis*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.070>
- e658 — e662 **Endovascular Treatment of Ruptured Enlarging Dissecting Anterior Spinal Artery Aneurysm:** *Mary Cobb, Andrew Griffin, Isaac Karikari, L. Fernando Gonzalez*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.100>
- e663 — e671 **Assessing the Role of Patient Race in Disparity of 90-Day Brain Tumor Resection Outcomes:** *Debanjan Haldar, Gregory Glauser, Eric Winter, Stephen Goodrich, Kaitlyn Shultz, Scott D. McClintock, Neil R. Malhotra*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.098>
- e672 — e676 **Prognostic Significance of Sentinel Headache Preceding Aneurysmal Subarachnoid Hemorrhage:** *Tanuwong Viarasilpa, Priyanka Ghosh, Suman Gidwani, Hector Lantigua, Gian Marco De Marchis, Nicha Panyavachirapom, J. Michael Schmidt, Kiwon Lee, Neeraj Badjatia, Sachin Agarwal, Jan Claassen, Stephan A. Mayer*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.097>
- e677 — e685 **Application of the Three Points and Three Lines Method to Accurately Open the Sellar Floor in Microscopic Transsphenoidal Surgery of Pituitary Adenomas:** *Jianhe Zhang, Chenyu Ding, Jianjun Gu, Jianwu Wu, Bin Zhu, Jun Li, Ziqian Chen, Shousen Wang*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.110>
- e686 — e690 **Surgical Results of Intraoperative C-arm Fluoroscopy Versus O-arm in Transarticular Screw Fixation for Atlantoaxial Instability:** *Keiji Wada, Tomohisa Inoue, Kenji Hagiwara, Ryo Tamaki, Ken Okazaki*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.109>
- e691 — e699 **Anatomic Relationship of Bony Structures in Pedicle-Rib Unit and its Significance:** *Feifei Chen, Xiaoyang Liu, Guodong Wang, Jianmin Sun, Xingang Cui*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.108>
- e700 — e707 **Pediatric Glioma Outcomes: Predictors of Early Mortality:** *Xingwang Zhou, XiaoDong Niu, Kaijun Sun, Junhong Li, Qing Mao, Yanhui Liu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.107>
- e708 — e715 **Identifying the Geographic Profile of International Visitors to the United States for Neurosurgical Education: A Single Institution's Experience:** *Victor M. Lu, Kristen Scheitler, Avital Perry, Christopher S. Graffeo, Lucas P. Carlstrom, David J. Daniels, Fredric B. Meyer*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.105>
- e716 — e723 **Risk Factors Related to Superior Facet Joint Violation During Lumbar Percutaneous Pedicle Screw Placement in Minimally Invasive Transforaminal Lumbar Interbody Fusion (MIS-TLIF):** *Yiwei Zhao, Suomao Yuan, Yonghao Tian, Xinyu Liu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.118>

Continued on page XX

Continued from page XIX

- e724 — e729 **Correlation Between the Oswestry Disability Index and the North American Spine Surgery Patient Satisfaction Index:** *Timothy J. Yee, Kelsey J. Fearer, Mark E. Oppenlander, Osama N. Kashlan, Nicholas Szerlip, Martin J. Buckingham, Kevin Swong, Victor Chang, Jason M. Schwalb, Paul Park*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.117>
- e730 — e736 **Ultrasonographic Diagnosis of Lipomatosis of Nerve: A Review of Ultrasonographic Finding for 8 Cases:** *Ping Xu, Bo Lu, He-Ping Deng, Ya-Ru Mi, Chun-Xia Yin, Yang Ding, Xin-Zhong Shao, Gui-Sheng Zhang, Xiao-Fei Xiu*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.116>
- e737 — e747 **Transcorticosubcortical Approach for Left Posterior Mediobasal Temporal Region Gliomas: A Case Series and Anatomic Review of Relevant White Matter Tracts:** *Desmond A. Brown, Sahin Hanalioglu, Kaisorn Chaichana, Hugues Duffau*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.147>
- e748 — e753 **Large Infarct Volume Post Thrombectomy: Characteristics, Outcomes, and Predictors:** *Daniel A. Tonetti, Shashvat M. Desai, Joseph Hudson, Bradley A. Gross, Ruchira M. Jha, Bradley J. Molyneaux, Brian T. Jankowitz, Tudor G. Jovin, Ashutosh P. Jadhav*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.139>
- e754 — e760 **How Safe Is Minimally Invasive Transforaminal Lumbar Interbody Fusion for Octogenarians?: A Perioperative Complication Analysis:** *Ioannis Vasilikos, Panagiotis Fistouris, Marie Therese Krüger, Christoph Scholz, Evangelos Kogias, Roland Roelz, Ronen Sircar, Jürgen Beck, Ulrich Hubbe, Jan-Helge Klingler*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.128>
- e761 — e768 **Surgical Treatment of Symptomatic Small Medial Petrous Meningiomas Causing Trigeminal Neuralgia:** *Mehdi Khani, Kelsey Hundley, Thomas W. Morris III, Jeffrey C. Henson, Kevin Thomas, Ka Hin Wong, Analiz Rodríguez, John D. Day*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.127>
- e769 — e773 **Patients with Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) and Surgery: Guidelines and Checklist Proposal:** *Michael Grelat, Benjamin Pommier, Sylvain Portet, Aymeric Amelot, Cédric Barrey, Henri-Arthur Leroy, Rachid Madkouri*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.155>
- e774 — e783 **Barriers to Management of Nontraumatic Neurosurgical Diseases at 2 Cameroonian Neurosurgical Centers: Cross-Sectional Study:** *Stéphane Nguemu, Ulrick Sidney Kanmounye, Francklin Tétinou, Dylan Djiofack, Régis Takoukam*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.162>
- e784 — e791 **Kinesthetic Cells within the Subthalamic Nucleus and Deep Brain Stimulation for Parkinson Disease:** *Erik Bolier, Maarten Bot, Pepijn van den Munckhof, Gian Pal, Sepehr Sani, Glenn T. Stebbins, Leo Verhagen Metman*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.160>
- e792 — e799 **Increased Rate of Successful First Passage Recanalization During Mechanical Thrombectomy for M2 Occlusion:** *Humain Baharvahdat, Yinn Cher Ooi, Kasra Khatibi, Lucido L. Ponce Mejia, Naoki Kaneko, May Nour, Viktor Szeder, Reza Jahan, Satoshi Tateshima, Fernando Vinuela, Gary Duckwiler, Geoffrey Colby*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.159>
- e800 — e806 **Coil Embolization of Wide-Neck Bifurcation Aneurysms via Shouldering and Framing: A Safe Alternative to Conventional Techniques:** *Joshua H. Weinberg, Ahmad Sweid, Ashlee Asada, Rawad Abbas, Daniel Joffe, Kareem El Naamani, Michael Reid Gooch, Nabeel Herial, Stavropoula Tjoumakaris, Robert H. Rosenwasser, Pascal Jabbour, Hekmat Zarzour*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.172>

- e807 — e811 **Outcome Comparison Between Surgically Treated Brain Arteriovenous Malformation Hemorrhage and Spontaneous Intracerebral Hemorrhage:** *Wenhua Sun, Menno R. Germans, Martina Sebök, Jorn Fierstra, Zsolt Kulcsar, Annika Keller, Luca Regli*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.170>
- e812 — e817 **Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Neurosurgery: Literature and Neurosurgical Societies Recommendations Update:** *Antonino Germanò, Giovanni Raffa, Filippo Flavio Angileri, Salvatore Massimiliano Cardali, Francesco Tomasello*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.181>
- e818 — e826 **Neurosurgical Practice During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) Pandemic: A Worldwide Survey:** *Marco M. Fontanella, Lucio De Maria, Luca Zanin, Giorgio Saraceno, Lodovico Terzi di Bergamo, Franco Servadei, Bipin Chaurasia, Alessandro Olivi, Peter Vajkoczy, Karl Schaller, Paolo Cappabianca, Francesco Doglietto*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.04.204>
- e827 — e835 **Preliminary Study of Eye-Tracking During the Coil Insertion Task in a Silastic Model of Intracranial Aneurysms:** *Masaaki Shojima, Yoshihiro Okamoto, Makoto Ohta, Kuniyasu Niizuma, Nobuyuki Sakai, Teiji Tominaga*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.012>
- e836 — e847 **Medical Student Concerns Relating to Neurosurgery Education During COVID-19:** *Sergio W. Guadix, Graham M. Winston, John K. Chae, Arsalan Haghdel, Justin Chen, Iyan Younus, Ryan Radwanski, Jeffrey P. Greenfield, Susan C. Pannullo*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.090>
- e848 — e858 **Neurosurgery Residents' Perspective on COVID-19: Knowledge, Readiness, and Impact of this Pandemic:** *Ahmad K. Alhaj, Tariq Al-Saadi, Fadiil Mohammad, Said Alabri*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.087>
- e859 — e863 **Telemedicine for Outpatient Neurosurgical Oncology Care: Lessons Learned for the Future During the COVID-19 Pandemic:** *Lekhaj C. Daggubati, Daniel G. Eichberg, Michael E. Ivan, Simon Hanft, Alireza Mansouri, Ricardo J. Komotar, Randy S. D'Amico, Brad E. Zacharia*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.140>
- e864 — e871 **An Australian Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications on the Practice of Neurosurgery:** *Joyce Antony, William Thomas James, Anna Jolly Neriamparambil, Dwarkesh Dharmendra Barot, Teresa Withers*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.136>
- e872 — e876 **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Neurosurgical Practice at an Academic Tertiary Referral Center: A Comparative Study:** *Mohammad Hassan A. Noureldine, Elliot Pressman, Paul R. Krafft, Mark S. Greenberg, Siviero Agazzi, Harry van Loveren, Puya Alikhani*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.150>
- e877 — e884 **Impact of COVID-19 on an Academic Neurosurgery Department: The Johns Hopkins Experience:** *Adham M. Khalafallah, Adrian E. Jimenez, Ryan P. Lee, Jon D. Weingart, Nicholas Theodore, Alan R. Cohen, Rafael J. Tamargo, Judy Huang, Henry Brem, Debraj Mukherjee*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2020.05.167>

Letter to the Editor Regarding Effects of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Northern Italy: Perspectives from the Bergamo Neurosurgery Department, and the Role of Radiosurgery as a Minimally Invasive Procedure for Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma in the Pandemic Outbreak



LETTER:

Physician scientists around the world are working against COVID-19, and continuation of less invasive brain oncology treatments demands action now.^{1,2} The effects of the COVID-19 outbreak in Northern Italy and the perspectives from the Bergamo Neurosurgery Department has been described by Bernucci et al.,¹ and we are writing to advocate for the use of minimally invasive urgent procedures and Gamma Knife radiosurgery (GKRS) as a first-line and/or palliative treatment in brain tumors, in specific, in primary central nervous system lymphoma (PCNSL).^{3,4}

COVID-19 is extremely infectious, and as described in the article all hospitalizations for elective surgical procedures were stopped in Italy,¹ and currently worldwide, especially in the elderly population.^{2,5} This pandemic is changing our lives radically: nations are working at home, mass transportation is shutting down, main central towns and worldwide cities are doomed.⁶ Medicine practice is shifting too because many clinical providers and clinical resources are isolated, and specifically dedicated to the COVID-19 worldwide emergency.^{2,6} Although neurooncologic treatment is changing in the senior population, avoiding prompt chemotherapy treatment and open surgery and/or invasive procedures in most cases could be a challenge.⁷ Wherever possible invasive procedures should be delayed in the COVID-19 era. Surgical procedures may induce the immune response and may increase the risk of rising severe acute respiratory disease in patients with COVID-19.⁶ Additionally, open approach should be avoided to reduce the length of hospital stay and potential postoperative morbidity, thus reducing in-hospital spread of nosocomial infections and COVID-19.^{3,5,6}

In a recent systematic review analyzing current clinical studies in PCNSL, and in a level III, single-center, retrospective, non-randomized, observational study, the authors found that life expectancy and patient-reported outcomes were found to be superior at 3-year follow-up when using GKRS combined with methotrexate compared with methotrexate only.⁴ Although concerns have been raised regarding the use of GKRS, a systematic review published this year by Palmer et al.,⁴ provides support for use of radiosurgery when encountering the challenging situation of multiple patient comorbidities, and the inability to proceed with chemotherapy due to systemic instability or the inability to receive in-patient medical treatment due to the COVID-19 outbreak.⁵

Standard treatment for PCNSL consists of different methotrexate-based chemotherapy regimens associated with whole-brain radiotherapy (WBRT).^{1,7,8} Unfortunately, standard treatment requires high-dosage regimens that can result in methotrexate toxicity and a broad range of serious side effects, especially in

elderly or immunocompromised patients.³ Additional concerns have been noted for the use of WBRT. Increasingly, research has demonstrated the hazards of using WBRT.^{8,9} Several studies and a recent systematic review have demonstrated that in patients diagnosed with PCNSL with multiple lesions (>5), there is a significantly higher rate of complications, especially in senior patients, due to chemotherapy and radiotherapy side effects.^{4,8}

Concordantly, GKRS has proven to be an effective therapeutic option for the treatment of brain tumors, including both single and multiple smaller brain metastases.⁶ The technique results in a reduction of adverse patient events, as well as an increased ability to attack surgically inaccessible lesions and achieve local tumor control.³ Various studies have demonstrated the utility of stereotactic radiosurgery (SRS) in the treatment of central nervous system (CNS) lymphomas. Palmer et al.,⁴ in a systematic review of 16 studies evaluating the use of SRS for the treatment of CNS lymphoma found that although many current studies using SRS lacked methodologic rigor, SRS provided favorable local control in patients with refractory CNS lymphoma. In a similar vein of inquiry, Shin et al.⁵ demonstrated that the use of GKRS as a rescue therapy could enhance treatment outcomes for patients. In this study, 14 patients that had relapsed or were refractory to salvage SRS experienced local control of 95%, 91%, and 75% at 3, 6, and 12 months, respectively, post-SRS.⁵

The data evaluated in the systematic review are reliable with Palmer et al.⁴ regarding the use of GKRS for the treatment of PCLS. In reports by Alvarez-Pinzon et al.³ and Kasenda et al.,⁷ no patients with CNS lymphoma treated with GKRS at various stages were noted to have a local recurrence at last follow-up, despite several instances of distal failure. Remarkably, response rates to GKRS were greater, with more than 80% of lesions diminishing or disappearing on magnetic resonance imaging follow-up, resulting in better cognition and overall clinical performance status.

Collectively, these data support the use of GKRS as a viable treatment for adults diagnosed with PCNSL. However, several questions remain to be answered, including what outcomes can be achieved through the use of GKRS in patients that have developed PCNSL due to HIV.^{3,4} Immunocompromised patients have consistently been shown to have the highest mortality rates when provided with all existing treatments, and significantly higher adverse events with the use of whole-brain radiation and/or methotrexate.^{6,9} Neurosurgeons and oncologists have a responsibility to utilize existing evidence-based information to improve the treatment outcomes and quality of life in these patients. In infectious disease outbreaks, such as COVID-19, providing counseling and information for potentially utilizing GKRS as a first-line treatment option in PCNSL is clearly warranted in light of this evidence, and minimizes the compromise of social distancing during cancer care delivery.

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