Police Use of Neck Restraints Isn't Medically Justified

Neck restraints used by police can result in stroke, seizure and death.

January 5, 2021 By Alicia Green

Since the police killings of Black Americans such as George Floyd and Eric Garner, people are increasingly calling on police departments to stop teaching officers to use neck restraints. Now, an opinion piece published in JAMA Neurology by Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) neurologists suggests that there is no medical justification for using this method.

Neck restraints are considered a safe method for controlling so-called agitated or aggressive people by some police departments. These agencies often advise their officers to use a carotid restraint—or stranglehold—which reduces blood flow to the brain, temporarily causing unconsciousness.

However, neurologists at MGH noted that this technique, which involves compressing the two large blood vessels on either side of the neck, can result in stroke, seizure and even death. (Carotid compression can occur with as little as 13 pounds of force, similar to the weight of a typical house cat.)

According to Altaf Saadi, MD, an MGH neurologist and senior author of the opinion piece, how neck restraints are used by law enforcement and whether they result in death or disability ought to be made public.

"As a neurologist, I know that there is never a scenario where stopping the flow of blood and oxygen to the brain is medically appropriate," said Saadi. "What shocked me most was that much of the literature supporting these techniques hides behind medical language but lacks a real understanding of the pathophysiology of the significant harm they cause to an individual."

Saadi believes that increased awareness about the effect of neck restraints could reduce police use of the procedure. There isn't any medical justification for neck restraints in policing, she said.

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