**Review**

**Is age associated with emergency medical service transport to a trauma centre in patients with major trauma? A systematic review**

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https://doi.org/10.33151/ajp.17.742

**Abstract**

**Introduction**
Older adults with major trauma are known to have higher mortality rates than their younger counterparts and there is a known survival benefit of treatment in trauma centres. This systematic review sought to answer the question: are older patients with major trauma more or less likely to be transported to a trauma centre by emergency medical services (EMS) than younger patients?

**Methods**
The following databases were searched: Ovid MEDLINE, Ovid EMBASE, EBSCO CINAHL, Scopus, Cochrane Library and grey literature until 7 March 2019. Studies meeting each of the following criteria were included: 1) comparative study, including randomised controlled trials, cohort studies, cross-sectional studies, case-control studies; 2) study participants must be patients with major trauma; 3) the patients must have been initially transported from the accident scene to hospital by EMS, and 4) the study must report the association between major trauma patient, age and trauma centre transport.

**Results**
We identified 3365 unique citations and one study was identified through other sources. In total, 17 studies were included. The studies defined major trauma patients either by the meeting of pre-hospital trauma triage criteria or a retrospective diagnosis. All of the included studies reported that older age was associated with a reduced likelihood of EMS trauma centre transport when compared to younger age in major trauma patients.

**Conclusion**
The studies included in this review all showed that older age is associated with a reduced likelihood of EMS trauma centre transport when compared to younger age in major trauma patients.

**Keywords:**
older adults; major trauma; trauma center; trauma centre; EMS

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Introduction

In both developed and developing countries, injury is known to be a significant cause of morbidity and mortality (1,2). Major trauma has traditionally been perceived as being a disease of the young (3). However, over recent years the mean age of patients with major trauma has increased (3) and older adults with major trauma are known to have higher mortality rates than their younger counterparts (4).

Emergency medical services (EMS) are often the first point of medical care for patients with trauma, with the prevention of further injury, initiation of resuscitation and timely transport to an appropriate hospital facility the key objectives of this care (5,6). The survival benefit of trauma centre (TC) care is well documented (7,8) and this survival benefit has also been shown to be present in older adults with major trauma (9,10). Despite this, it is suggested that older patients with major trauma are less likely to be transported by EMS to specialised trauma services (under triaged) (11-13). This systematic review sought to answer the question of whether older patients with major trauma are more or less likely to be transported to a TC by EMS than younger patients.

Methods

Protocol and registration
The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) statement was followed for this systematic review and meta-analysis (14). Details of the protocol for this systematic review were registered on PROSPERO (CRD42018115532) and can be accessed at www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO

Eligibility criteria
To be included in this review, studies needed to meet all of the following criteria: 1) be a comparative study, including randomised control trials, cohort studies, cross-sectional studies, case-control studies; 2) study participants must be patients with major trauma; 3) the patients must have been initially transported from the accident scene to hospital by EMS, and 4) the study must report the association between major trauma patient age and TC transport. We excluded reviews, letters, editorials, case studies and all other commentaries. The literature search was not limited by language or publication date.

Information sources
To identify studies eligible for review, computerised searches of bibliographic databases were performed. We searched Ovid MEDLINE, Ovid EMBASE, EBSCO CINAHL, Scopus, Cochrane Library and grey literature via Mednar until 7 March 2019.

Search strategy
Our search strategy involved three key concepts: 1) major trauma 2) age and 3) EMS transport to a TC (Table 1). Terms were mapped to the appropriate MeSH/EMTREE subject headings and ‘exploded’. Keywords relating to these three concepts were combined with the boolean operator ‘AND’. We used review articles to find other relevant articles and identified additional sources through the article reference lists.

| #  | Medline terms                                                                 | Results     |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1  | (Major trauma or injury severity score or traum* or injur*).mp                | 1,27,624    |
| 2  | (multiple trauma or "wounds and injuries" or injury severity score).sh        | 93,892      |
| 3  | 1 or 2                                                                        | 1,27,624    |
| 4  | (older adult or older age or elderly or advanc* age or old* or age*).mp       | 11,116,811  |
| 5  | (aged or adult).sh                                                            | 5,826,220   |
| 6  | 4 or 5                                                                        | 11,116,811  |
| 7  | (young*).mp                                                                   | 1,233,006   |
| 8  | (young adult or middle aged).sh                                               | 4,302,937   |
| 9  | 7 or 8                                                                        | 4,734,633   |
| 10 | (emergency medical service* or paramedic* or ambulance* or transport* or pre hospital or prehospital or pre-hospital or emergency medical technician).mp | 742,110     |
| 11 | (emergency medical services or ambulances or emergency health service or emergency service, hospital).sh | 99,432      |
| 12 | 10 or 11                                                                      | 796,169     |
| 13 | (trauma centre or trauma center or trauma cent* or trauma unit or hospital or accident and emergency or emergency department or casualty).mp | 125,051     |
| 14 | (trauma centers or trauma unit).sh                                            | 9354        |
| 15 | 13 or 14                                                                      | 131,281     |
| 16 | (triage or triage protocol* or protocol* or triage guideline* or guideline* field triage or field medicine or underetriage OR under?triage).mp | 532,232     |
| 17 | (triage or “transportation of patients”).sh                                    | 18,735      |
| 18 | 16 or 17                                                                       | 540,297     |
| 19 | 3 and 6 and 9 and 12 and 15 and 18                                             | 1263        |
| 20 | Limit to humans                                                               | 1249        |

Study selection
To select potentially relevant papers, EB performed the database search and conducted a review based on title and abstract to identify potentially relevant studies. Full-text articles were obtained if the abstract contained relevant information or if
more information was required to inform inclusion or exclusion. To ensure the eligibility criteria were met, included studies were then independently assessed by EB and HT. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. As the authors of this systematic review are the authors of one of the studies included in the review (10), an independent person assessed that study to ensure the eligibility criteria were met.

Data collection process and data items
Descriptive, methodological and outcome data were extracted from the included studies using a pre-determined electronic spreadsheet developed by EB. Data extracted included the year of publication, research design, sample size, the population of interest, predictor and outcome measures. EB extracted information and double-checked the accuracy and details of the data.

Risk of bias in individual studies
The checklist developed by GRADE for methodological assessment of observational studies (which can be found in Table 5.5 of the GRADE handbook) was used to assess the methodological quality of studies included in this systematic review (15). Results were collated and accuracy independently checked by two authors (EB and HT). The consensus was reached by discussion. As the authors of this review are the authors of one of the studies included in this review (10) the risk of bias for this study was undertaken by an independent person.

Summary measures
Odds ratios (OR) were used to compare the likelihood of EMS transport to a TC between younger and older major trauma patients. Crude OR were calculated for studies that provided numbers of patients transported and not transported by EMS to a TC and their ages. When the raw number of patients, their ages and/or their transport destination were not available then these numbers were calculated from the available data. If the extraction of raw numbers was not possible from the data in the paper, the study authors were contacted for further information. If no response was received the findings were only included in the descriptive summation of results.

Statistical analysis and synthesis of results
The outcome of interest was transport to a TC by EMS in patients with major trauma. The likelihood of EMS TC transport in younger and older major trauma patients was compared using odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). Statistical heterogeneity between studies was assessed using the I² statistic and we applied the rule that results would not be pooled if I² exceeded 50% (high heterogeneity) (16). Results were summarised by forest plots of the OR if two or more studies reported data for older and younger age groups. RevMan Version 5.3.5. was used to create the Forest plots (17) and funnel plots were examined for publication bias.

Results
Study selection
Our search strategy yielded 3365 unique citations and one study was identified through other sources (a study that was undertaken by ourselves and had been accepted for publication) (10). EB screened the titles and abstracts, identifying 20 potentially relevant articles (10-12,18-34). The full text of these articles was then reviewed by EB and HT for eligibility according to the inclusion criteria. We excluded three studies, the first because only patients over 55 years of age were included with no comparison age, the second because major trauma was not defined and patients with trauma of all severities were included, and the third as the outcome was not transport to a TC, but sustaining major trauma. In total, 17 studies met the selection criteria and were included in the systematic review.

Study characteristics
The characteristics of the included studies are summarised in Table 2. All studies were retrospective with the majority being retrospective cohort studies. To define major trauma, five studies used a pre-hospital trauma triage criteria, 11 studies used a retrospective major trauma diagnosis and one study used death in the emergency department (ED). The majority of studies were undertaken in the United States, three were undertaken in Australia and one in Canada.

Risk of bias within studies
Bias was assessed using the checklist developed by GRADE for observational studies (Table 5.5 of the GRADE handbook) (15). All studies were judged as having a high risk of confounding as it would not be possible to control for all factors that may affect the EMS providers’ transport decision. No study was excluded for its methodological quality.

Results of individual studies
The results of the individual studies will be reported under the specific criterion that the study used to define major trauma. Additional data were requested from nine authors and responses were received from two authors.

Pre-hospital trauma triage criteria
A total of five studies used the meeting of a pre-hospital trauma triage criteria (PTTC) to define major trauma. Of these, four compared the likelihood of TC transport between older and younger patients (11,19,22,29) and one study compared the likelihood of trauma centre transport between major trauma patients and non-trauma patients (21). The four studies that used the meeting of a PTTC to define major trauma, all reported a reduced likelihood of TC transport in older patients with major trauma compared to younger patients (11,19,22,29). The pooled estimate from these four studies showed a decreased odds of EMS TC transport in older patients with
| Study                | Country | Study design        | Sample size | Population                                                                 | Exclusion                                                                 | Exposure   | Comparison                                                                 | Outcome                                                                 |
|---------------------|---------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Baez et al (2003)   | US      | Retrospective cross-sectional | 1068        | Patients ≥18yrs who met at least one criterion from Step 1 or Step 2 of ACSTTC and ISS >15 | Patients with poisoning; single-system burns; late effects of injuries          | Not defined| Not defined                                                               | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC                      |
| Brown et al (2019)  | Australia | Retrospective cohort | 1625        | Patients ≥16yrs and ISS >15                                                | Patients with poisoning; drowning; hanging; late effects of injury             | Age ≥65yrs | Age 16-64yrs                                                              | EMS transport to Level I TC, or non-TC                                  |
| Chang et al (2008)  | US      | Retrospective cohort | 26,565      | Patients who met ACSTTC for physiology, injury pattern and mechanism of injury who were declared priority 1 status by EMS personnel | Patients being transferred between hospitals                                  | Age ≥65yrs | Age <65yrs                                                                | EMS transport to Level I, Level II or Level III TC, or non-TC           |
| Cox et al (2014)    | Australia | Retrospective cohort | 60,751 (7461 retrospectively confirmed as major trauma) | Patients ≥16yrs who met a trauma triage criteria then retrospectively defined as major trauma if they had one or more of the following: ISS >12, ICU admission with mechanical ventilation >24hrs or urgent surgery | Patients with injuries secondary to a non-traumatic cause                   | Age >55yrs | Age 16-55yrs                                                              | EMS transport to major trauma service equivalent to Level I TC, or non-TC |
| Davis et al (2012)  | US      | Retrospective cohort | 2051        | Patients ≥15yrs with an injury-related diagnosis or an emergency classified admission then defined as meeting a trauma triage criteria or retrospectively defined as major trauma if ISS ≥16 | No exclusions                                                               | Age ≥55yrs | Age 15-54yrs                                                              | EMS transport to Level II TC, or non-TC                                 |
| Doumouras et al (2012) | Canada | Retrospective cohort | 898         | Patients ≥16yrs who met physiologic Toronto Field Trauma Triage Criteria    | Patients with burns; drowning; suffocation; electric shock; poisoning; non-mechanical causes of injury. Patients for whom TC was nearest hospital | Age ≥65yrs | Age 16-64yrs                                                              | EMS transport to Level I, or non-TC. Excluding patients for whom TC was nearest hospital |
Table 2. Characteristics of included studies (continued)

| Study               | Country | Study design | Sample size | Population | Exclusion                                                                 | Exposure       | Comparison                                                                 | Outcome                                           |
|---------------------|---------|--------------|-------------|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|                                                  |
| Fitzharris et al (2012) | Australia | Retrospective cohort | 9344        | Patients of all ages who met one or more physiologic, anatomic or mechanism trauma triage criteria | Patients who refused treatment; were only assisted; transported by air; dead on examination; recorded as ‘other’; inter-hospital transfers | Age ≥50yrs | Age <50yrs | EMS transport to major or regional TC, or non-TC |
| Flottemesch et al (2016) | US       | Retrospective cohort | 140,766     | Patients ≥18yrs with head injury AIS ≥4 | Patients being transferred from other acute care hospitals and patients initially treated at Level III TC | Age 45-64yrs, 65-84yrs, ≥85yrs | Age 18-44yrs | Initial treatment at Level I or Level II TC, or initial treatment at Level IV or V TC |
| Garwe et al (2017) | US       | Retrospective cohort | 84,930      | Patients ≥17yrs who met Oklahoma’s major trauma definition | Patients who died at scene; had overexertion injuries; submersions; poisonings; asphyxiation; injuries caused by pre-existing conditions (eg. osteoporosis) | Age ≥55yrs | Age 17-55yrs | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Holst et al (2016) | US       | Retrospective cohort | 3971        | Patients ≥18yrs with trauma related ED visit defined by the injury variable in the National Emergency Department Sample, which resulted in death in ED | No exclusions stated | Age 35-49yrs, 50-64yrs, ≥65yrs | Age 18-34yrs | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Hsia et al (2011) | US       | Retrospective cohort | 430,081     | Patients ≥18yrs with trauma defined by ICD 9 codes 800-904.9, 910-929.9 and 950-959.9 | Patients without external cause of injuries; scheduled admissions; admitted for late effects of injury. Patients with ICD-9 codes indicative of drowning; bites and stings; overexertion; poisoning or suffocation; ICD-9 codes for minor injuries; closed hip fractures | Age ≤65yrs | Age 18-64yrs | Admission to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
Table 2. Characteristics of included studies (continued)

| Study                  | Country | Study design      | Sample size | Population                                                                 | Exclusion                                                                                                           | Exposure  | Comparison                      | Outcome                                      |
|------------------------|---------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Lane et al (2003)      | US      | Retrospective cross-sectional | 8980        | Patients with ICD-9 code signifying an injury as an external cause of the principal diagnosis and ISS >15 | Patients with no E-code; burn as the only injury; late effects of injury; an E-code but no codable injury diagnosis (800-959) | Age ≥65yrs | Age <65yrs                      | Discharge from Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Ma et al (1998)        | US      | Retrospective cohort | 7652        | Patients of all ages who met at least one ACSTTC for physiology, anatomic injury severity and mechanism of injury | Patients with incomplete physiological parameters recorded. Patients attending a hospital outside Maryland, invalid entries and those attending military hospitals | Age ≥75yrs | Age <75yrs                      | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Nakamura et al (2012)  | US      | Retrospective cohort | 46,414      | Patients with an EMS primary impression recorded as ‘injury’ or ‘trauma’ who met ACSTTC and/or had ISS ≥16 | Inter-hospital transfers without the initial presentation involving EMS, non-transported patients and deaths on scene | Age ≥61yrs | Age <61yrs                      | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Scheetz (2004)         | US      | Retrospective cohort | 817         | Patients >25yrs sustaining injuries in motor vehicle crashes with ISS ≥16    | No exclusions                                                                                                       | Age ≥65yrs | Age 25-64yrs                    | Admission to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC |
| Xiang et al (2014)     | US      | Retrospective cohort | 36,395      | Patients with ISS ≥16 in the Nationwide Emergency Department Sample         | Patients with only late effects of injury (ICD-9 codes 905-909.9) or injuries due to foreign bodies (ICD-9 code 930-939.9) | Age ≥65yrs | Age 18-64yrs                    | EMS transport to Level I or Level II TC, or non-TC including inter-hospital transfers |
| Zimmer-Gembeck et al (1995) | US | Retrospective cohort | 2628        | Patients with a hospital discharge diagnosis in ICD-9-CM range 800-959; trauma patients meeting triage criteria and ISS ≥16 | Patients with only late effects of injury (ICD-9 codes 905-909) or injuries due to foreign bodies (ICD-9 code 930-939) | Age >65yrs | Age ≤65yrs                      | Admission to Level I TC, or non-TC             |

ACSTTC = American College of Surgeons Trauma Triage Criteria, AIS = Abbreviated Injury Scale, EMS = emergency medical service, ICD = International Classification of Diseases, ISS = Injury Severity Score, non-TC = non-trauma centre, TC = trauma centre
major trauma compared to younger patients, however, there was high statistical heterogeneity ($I^2=100\%$) and therefore the pooled result was deemed to be unreliable and therefore not reported.

The study undertaken by Davis et al (21) compared patients ≥15 years with a non-trauma related emergency admission with trauma patients who were retrospectively defined as meeting a PTTC. This study found that, compared to patients with a non-traumatic emergency admission, patients meeting a PTTC aged 15–54 years were almost five times more likely to be transported to a TC (OR=4.86, 95% CI 3.51–6.74) (Table 3). However, compared to patients with a non-trauma related emergency admission, patients meeting a PTTC aged ≥55 years had only a 36% increased likelihood of TC transport (OR=1.36, 95% CI 1.05–1.74). From the reported data we were able to calculate those trauma patients aged ≥55 years had a 61% reduced likelihood of TC transport (OR=0.39) compared to those aged 15–54 years. However, this was all trauma patients not specifically those with major trauma.

Beaz et al (18) used the meeting of one element of a PTTC and having an ISS >15 to define major trauma patients. Their study found that the mean age of patients was significantly older in those who were not transported to the TC (63.63±16.0 vs. 46.62 ±18.54 p<0.001) (Table 3). No raw patient numbers were available to compare older and younger major trauma patients. The authors were contacted for further information but we received no response.

Retrospective major trauma diagnosis

The eight studies using a retrospective diagnosis of major trauma reported a reduced likelihood of TC transport in older patients compared to their younger counterparts (10,20,24,26,28,32-34). The pooled effect of these studies showed a reduced likelihood of TC transport in older major trauma patients in comparison with younger patients. However, there was high statistical heterogeneity ($I^2=99\%$), therefore, the pooled result was deemed to be unreliable and therefore not reported. As only the unadjusted OR was available for the study undertaken by Cox et al (20), a sensitivity analysis was undertaken excluding this study. The results of this analysis showed a reduced likelihood of TC transport in older patients in comparison with younger patients, however, there was high statistical heterogeneity ($I^2=99\%$).

There were two studies that analysed specific major trauma subpopulations: those with head injuries and those who died in the ED. Flottemesch et al (23) included only patients with severe head trauma, defined as being an abbreviated injury scale (AIS) score of ≥4. The study used the initial ED presentation as a proxy for pre-hospital triage decision, however, it was unclear if all included patients were transported by EMS, and although attempts were made to contact the authors, we were unable to gain further clarification. This study found that compared with patients aged 18–64 years, patients ≥65 years of age had a 53% reduced likelihood of initial treatment at a TC (OR 0.47, 95% CI 0.46–0.48) (Table 3). Holst et al (25) included only trauma patients who died in the ED and found that patients aged ≥65 years had a 30% reduction in the likelihood of TC transport when compared to those aged 18–64 years (OR=0.70, 95% CI 0.60–0.82) (Table 3).

Davis et al (21) compared the odds of TC transport between trauma patients with an ISS ≥16 and those with a non-trauma related emergency admission. This study found that trauma patients aged 15–54 years had more than six times the odds of TC transport (OR=6.53, 95% CI 4.07–10.47) than those with an emergency classified admission (Table 3). However, for those aged ≥55 years the odds were only 1.67 times (95% CI 1.08–2.58) that of emergency classified admissions.

Other included studies

Nakamura et al (12) used both a PTTC and/or ISS ≥16 to define major trauma and found that after the age of 60 years the percentage of patients transported to a non-TC increased. The unadjusted odds for TC transport in patients aged ≥61 years was 0.32 (95% CI 0.32–0.33) compared to those aged <60 years (Table 3). It is important to note that this refers to all EMS transported trauma patients included in the study, not just those defined prospectively or retrospectively as major trauma. The authors were contacted for further information but we received no response.

Publication bias

The odds ratios for EMS TC transport in studies included in the pooled analysis were used to construct a funnel plot to investigate the likelihood of publication bias (Figure 1). In the absence of bias, the plot should resemble a symmetric inverted funnel (15). If a bias exists, the plot will appear asymmetric with the presence of a gap at the right-hand side of the graph (15). Although the funnel plot does not fully resemble a funnel shape it is not asymmetrical as it would be if a bias existed (36).
## Table 3. Results from individual studies

| Study           | Exposure age | Hospital destination | Comparison age | Hospital destination | Measurement               | Unadjusted | Adjusted | Adjusted for confounders |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Baez et al (2003) | Not defined-reported mean | Not specified | Not defined-reported mean | Not specified | Mean ± SD | Mean age TC=46.62yrs (±18.54) Mean age non-TC=63.63yrs (±16.02) p<0.001 | Not stated | Not stated |
| Brown et al (2019) | ≥65yrs | TC=188 Non-TC=232 | 16-64yrs | TC=578 Non-TC=168 | OR for TC transport Age ≥65yrs OR=0.24 (95% CI 0.18-0.32) | Age 65-74yrs AOR=0.52 (95% CI 0.35-0.78), 75-84yrs AOR=0.48 (95% CI 0.33-0.71), ≥85yrs AOR=0.37 (95% CI 0.24-0.55) | Mechanism of injury, pre-hospital GCS, ISS, major injury (AIS ≥3), gender |
| Chang et al (2008) | ≥65yrs (with 50-69yrs, ≥70yrs as subgroups) | TC=1800 Non-TC=1790 | <65yrs (with <50yrs the reference for subgroups) | TC=18,882 Non-TC=4093 | OR for TC transport Age ≥65yrs OR=0.22 (95% CI 0.20-0.23) | Age ≥65yrs AOR=0.48 (95% CI 0.30-0.76) Subgroups: 50-69yrs AOR=0.67 (95% CI 0.57-0.77), ≥70yrs AOR=0.45 (95% CI 0.39-0.53) | Year, gender, physiology, injury, or mechanism criteria, transport reasons, EMS provider training level, presence or absence of 18 specific injuries, jurisdictional region |
| Cox et al (2014) | >55yrs (with 26-35yrs, 36-45yrs, 46-55yrs, 56-65yrs, 66-75yrs, 76-85yrs, ≥86yrs as subgroups) | Not specified | 16-55yrs (with 16-25yrs the reference for subgroups) | Not specified | OR for TC transport Age >55yrs OR=0.43 (95% CI 0.42-0.44) | Age 26-35yrs OR=1.03 (95% CI 0.95-1.12), 36-45yrs AOR=0.90 (95% CI 0.83-0.97), 46-55yrs AOR=0.85 (95% CI 0.78-0.93), 56-65yrs AOR=0.76 (95% CI 0.69-0.83), 66-75yrs AOR=0.68 (95% CI 0.62-0.75), 76-85yrs AOR=0.58 (95% CI 0.54-0.64), ≥86yrs AOR=0.62 (95% CI 0.56-0.68) | Trauma cause, ISS, paramedic type, comorbidities, inter-hospital transfer, transport time, paramedic judgement, injury count, region |
| Davis et al (2012) | ≥55yrs | Not specified | 15-54yrs | Not specified | OR for discharge from TC Age ≥55yrs OR=0.43 (95% CI 0.42-0.44) Age ≥55yrs OR=0.39 compared to non-trauma patients, patients meeting Pre-hospital Trauma Triage Criteria 15-54yrs OR=4.86 (95% CI 3.51-6.74) and age ≥55yrs OR=1.36 (95% CI 1.05-1.74) compared to non-trauma patients, patients with ISS ≥16, 15-54yrs OR=6.53 (95% CI 4.07-10.47) and age ≥55yrs OR=1.67 (95% CI 1.08-2.58) | Not stated | Not stated |
| Study | Exposition | TC | Non-TC | OR for EMS transport to TC | Unadjusted | Adjusted | Adjusted for confounders |
|-------|-------------|----|--------|---------------------------|------------|---------|----------------------------|
| Doumouras et al (2012) | ≥65yrs | TC=329 | Non-TC=298 | CR for TC destination | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.25 (95% CI 0.18-0.34) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.25 (95% CI 0.18-0.34) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.25 (95% CI 0.18-0.34) |
| Fitzharris et al (2012) | ≥65yrs | TC=1311 | Non-TC=1099 | CR for TC transport | Age ≥70yrs OR=0.42 (95% CI 0.37-0.48) | Age ≥70yrs OR=0.42 (95% CI 0.37-0.48) | Age ≥70yrs OR=0.42 (95% CI 0.37-0.48) |
| Flottemesch et al (2016) | ≥65yrs | TC=37,159 | Non-TC=44,999 | CR for initial treatment at TC | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.46-0.48) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.46-0.48) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.46-0.48) |
| Garwe et al (2017) | ≥55yrs | TC=6086 | Non-TC=6737 | OR for EMS transport to TC | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) |
| Holst et al (2016) | ≥65yrs | TC=487 | Non-TC=501 | CR for EMS transport to TC | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) | Age ≥65yrs OR=0.47 (95% CI 0.45-0.49) |
| Study            | Exposure age | Hospital destination | Comparison age | Hospital destination | Measurement                      | Unadjusted | Adjusted | Adjusted for confounders |
|------------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Hsia et al (2011) | ≥65yrs (with 26-45yrs, 46-65yrs, 66-85yrs, ≥85yrs as subgroups) | TC=34,155 Non-TC=84,027 | 18-65yrs (with 18-25yrs the reference for subgroups) | TC=197,120 Non-TC=114,779 | OR for admission to TC Age ≥65yrs OR=0.24 (95% CI 0.23-0.25) | Age >65yrs AOR=0.53 (95% CI 0.45-0.63), 26-45yrs AOR=0.75 (95% CI 0.71-0.80), 46-65yrs AOR=0.57 (95% CI 0.54-0.60), 66-85yrs OR=0.35 (95% CI 0.30-0.41) ≥85yrs AOR=0.30 (95% CI 0.25-0.36) | Gender, insurance, race/ethnicity, income, ISS, type of injury, Elixhauser comorbidities, proximity to TC, availability of TC, metropolitan statistical area |
| Lane et al (2003) | ≥65yrs | TC=1144 Non-TC=1981 | <65yrs | TC=2749 Non-TC=3106 | OR for receiving Age ≥65yrs OR=0.65 (95% CI 0.60-0.70) | Not stated | Not stated | Not stated |
| Ma et al (1998) | ≥55yrs | TC=10,684 Non-TC=33,207 | <55yrs (with 0-14yrs, 15-54yrs, 55-74yrs as subgroups) | TC=8096 Non-TC=16,270 | OR for EMS transport to TC Age ≥55yrs OR=0.65 (95% CI 0.62-0.67) | Patients meeting major trauma criteria: age 0-14yrs AOR=1.53 (95% CI 0.87-2.71), 15-54yrs AOR=1.43 (95% CI 0.93-2.20), 55-74yrs AOR=1.23 (95% CI 0.69-2.20) Patients meeting mechanism criteria only: age 0-14yrs AOR=1.71 (95% CI 1.22-2.38), 15-54yrs AOR=1.35 (95% CI 1.03-1.77), 55-74yrs AOR=1.05 (95% CI 0.75-1.48) Patients meeting physiology criteria: age 0-14yrs AOR=2.14 (95% CI 2.43-3.02), 15-54yrs AOR=1.55 (95% CI 1.43-1.68), 55-74yrs AOR=1.07 (95% CI 0.96-1.19) | Not stated |
| Nakamura et al (2012) | ≥61yrs | TC=16,759 Non-TC=59,498 | <61yrs | TC=84,880 Non-TC=98,891 | EMS transport to TC Age ≥61yrs OR=0.32 (95% CI 0.32-0.33) | Not stated | Not stated | Not stated |
| Scheetz (2004) | ≥65yrs | TC=134 Non-TC=88 | 25-64yrs | TC=467 Non-TC=128 | OR for admission to TC Age ≥65yrs OR=0.42 (95% CI 0.30-0.59) | Not stated | Not stated | Not stated |
| Xiang et al (2014) | ≥65yrs (with 55-64yrs, 65-74yrs, 75-84yrs, ≥85yrs as subgroups) | TC=7443 Non-TC=7295 | 18-64yrs | TC=16,129 Non-TC=5523 | OR for treatment, admission or death at TC Age ≥65 OR=0.37 (95% CI 0.35-0.38), 55-64yrs OR=0.61 (95% CI 0.54-0.69), 65-74yrs OR=0.39 (95% CI 0.33-0.47), 75-84yrs OR=0.31 (95% CI 0.25-0.38) ≥85yrs OR=0.23 (95% CI 0.18-0.29) | Patients with ISS ≥16: age 55-64yrs AOR=0.74 (95% CI 0.66-0.83), 65-74yrs AOR=0.63 (95% CI 0.52-0.76), 75-84yrs AOR=0.58 (95% CI 0.47-0.74), ≥85yrs AOR=0.49 (95% CI 0.38-0.63) | Gender, chronic condition, primary expected payer, median household income, patient location, external cause, admission on weekend |
| Study                        | Exposure age | Hospital destination | Comparison age | Hospital destination | Measurement          | Unadjusted                     | Adjusted                     | Adjusted for confounders                        |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Zimmer-Gembeck et al (1995)  | >65yrs       | TC=912               | ≤65yrs         | TC=1156              | OR for admission to TC | Age >65yrs OR=0.62 (95% CI 0.52-0.74) | Age ≥65yrs AOR=0.18 (95% CI not available) | Gender, comorbidities, multisystem injury, AIS for all injury regions |

AIS = Abbreviated Injury Scale, AOR = adjusted odds ratio, CI = confidence interval, EMS = emergency medical service, GCS = Glasgow Coma Score, ISS = Injury Severity Score, Non-TC = non-trauma centre, OR = odds ratio, SD = standard deviation, TC = trauma centre
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Discussion

Summary of evidence
We identified 17 studies that described the association between age and EMS TC transport, using the definition of major trauma as either patients meeting a PTTC or a retrospective diagnosis. Overall, we found that all studies reported a reduced likelihood of EMS transport to a TC in older patients when compared to younger patients. However, the pooled result of these studies was highly statistically heterogeneous and therefore a meta-analysis could not be performed. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review undertaken to answer this question. As the results of this study suggest that older patients are unequivocally less likely to be transported to a TC, it is necessary to gain an understanding as to why this under triaging occurs and how this can be addressed.

There were five studies included in this review that used a PTTC to define their major trauma patients. The reasons for older patients who meet a PTTC not being transported by EMS to TCs are likely to be multifaceted. Suggested reasons for this occurring include, but are not limited to, poor adherence to the triage guidelines (37), geographic location (24,38), ambulance diversion, physician or law enforcement choice (37) and feeling of not being welcome at TCs when transporting older adults with suspected major trauma (19). However, the most common reason for selecting transport to specific hospitals was found by Newgard et al to be patient or family choice (37). Furthermore, Newgard et al found that the influence of patient or family choice on the selection of hospitals increases with patient age (37) and this is likely to be due to patients’ prior history at local hospitals (19,39). It is also plausible that although an older trauma patient may meet a PTTC, EMS providers consider that active trauma care as futile or ‘not worth it’ due to age, injury severity, existing comorbidities and likely prognosis and therefore, choose not to transport older patients to the TC (10,19).

It is important to note that the studies that used PTTC alone (without a concurrent retrospective diagnosis), are likely to underestimate the magnitude of the under triaging of older patients and over triaging of patients who will later be found not to have major trauma on retrospective diagnosis. Standard adult triage criteria have been found to be too restrictive in identifying the need for TC care in older patients (40-42). Reasons for this include the ability of older patients to sustain major trauma as a result of low-velocity mechanisms such as falls (12), which are often not recognised as a mechanism of injury on PTTCs (42). Furthermore, after trauma, older patients have the ability to appear deceptively uninjured (43) and often have significant comorbidities, polypharmacy, anticoagulation therapy and physiologic changes that can alter their response to a traumatic insult (12). For example, for the equivalent severity of intracranial injury, the presenting Glasgow Coma Scale score is higher in older patients than their younger counterparts (44). Similarly, vital signs have been found to be different and less predictive of mortality in older trauma victims than younger patients (42,45). Older patients are also more susceptible to occult hypoperfusion, which requires high levels of suspicion to recognise (12). This lack of overt physiological derangement results in older trauma patients not meeting the physiological criteria of the PTTC (42).

The studies that use a retrospective diagnosis of major trauma will have produced a better estimate of the under triaging of older patients with major trauma. However, it is important to

Figure 1. Funnel plot of publication bias using the odds ratio of EMS transport to a trauma centre x-axis= odds ratio (OR), y-axis= standard error of the log odds ratio (SE log OR)
consider that these diagnoses are based on information that is not necessarily available pre-hospital, such as results from imaging. It is, therefore, important to develop ways in which to identify pre-hospital major trauma in older patients and ensure that these patients receive appropriate care. For example, the adoption of specific PTTC has been shown to significantly improve the detection of older patients requiring this specialised care (40). However, this increase in sensitivity needs to occur without resulting in unnecessary levels of over triaging (reduced specificity). Similarly, further EMS provider training in regard to older patient response to trauma insults may assist in better identification of major trauma in older patients (19).

Limitations

Despite searching for grey literature, a limitation of this study could be the non-identification of unpublished literature. Publication bias is thought to occur with the favouring of positive results for publication (46). Although our funnel plot did not provide evidence of asymmetry, bias cannot be fully excluded (15). Furthermore, a reporting bias may be present as, although we did not have any language restrictions, studies published in a language other than English may have been missed in our search (36). The studies included in the review were from three countries, Australia, Canada and the United States, it is not possible to determine whether the findings could be extrapolated to EMS systems in other countries. It was not possible to report definitions of older and younger age in the composite data as different definitions were used within the PTTC and retrospective major trauma diagnosis groups.

Conclusion

The studies included in this review all showed that older age is associated with a reduced likelihood of EMS TC transport when compared to younger age in major trauma patients. Ensuring that older major trauma patients have access to appropriate hospital care is important. This may be achieved by employing interventions aimed at reducing the rate of under triaging, including specific PTTCs for older adults and focusing on extended EMS training pertaining to the complexities of major trauma in these patients.

Competing interests

Elizabeth Brown, Hideo Tohira, Paul Bailey and Judith Finn are the authors of a study included in this review. Paul Bailey is the Medical Director of St John Western Australia (SJ-WA) and Judith Finn receives partial salary support from SJA-WA. Elizabeth Brown is a SJ-WA paramedic and was a PhD candidate and the recipient of a scholarship funded by a National Health and Medical Research Council Prehospital Emergency Care Centre for Research Excellence grant (1116453). Each author of this paper has completed the ICMJE conflict of interest form.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Peter Buzzacott for his independent assessment of our study against the eligibility criteria and his independent risk of bias assessment.

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