Asterixis

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Asterixis is well known as the word to describe flapping tremor. It is best shown in the hand-flapping tremor when the arms are outstretched in extension and the wrist is dorsiflexed. Adams and Foley first described asterixis in 1949 in patients with severe liver failure and encephalopathy. Typically, there are brief, arrhythmic interruptions of sustained voluntary muscle contraction causing brief lapses of posture. It is bilateral, and may be asymmetrical with a frequency of 3–5 Hz (fig. 1).

Asterixis is seen most often in drowsy or stuporose patients with metabolic encephalopathies, especially in liver cell failure. It is also seen in some patients with renal failure and azotaemia, and in the carbon dioxide narcosis of respiratory failure.

The word derives from *a-* + Greek *sterixis*, a fixed position, but it is not an allusion to the fixed stars (Greek *asteror*).

Fig. 1. Electromyography. Normal postural activity suddenly interrupted (↓). The limb ‘flaps’, with brief acceleration, until the normal postural muscle activity returns.

Reference

- 1 Adams RD, Foley JM: The neurological changes in the more common types of severe liver disease. *Trans Am Neurol Assoc* 1949; 74:217–219.