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# Fast care might have saved Natasha Richardson

By Tom Avril

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How can someone fall and hit her head on a beginner's ski slope, seem to be OK at first, and then die two days later?

Such dire consequences are unusual. But given the wrong set of circumstances, the sort of traumatic head injury suffered by actress Natasha Richardson can be fatal, experts said.

Her condition - an epidural hematoma, according to an autopsy released yesterday - can also be successfully treated with prompt surgery. And it can be prevented entirely by using a helmet.

"It's a real tragedy," said Robert Rosenwasser, chairman of neurological surgery at Thomas Jefferson University Hospitals. "If it's caught early and treated, patients can make a full recovery, particularly a young person who's 45."

Richardson, the daughter of English actress Vanessa Redgrave, died Wednesday of a slow, unchecked bleed that led to an accumulation of blood between the skull and the outer layer of the brain, the autopsy found.

It was caused by blunt-force impact to the head, said Ellen Borakove, a spokeswoman for the New York City medical examiner's office.

On Broadway last night, lights were dimmed for one minute in a tribute to the Tony winner. Also, a family spokesman said he had no information on funeral arrangements.

Richardson, 45, who was also the wife of Irish actor Liam Neeson, initially declined medical

attention after falling Monday at the Mont Tremblant resort, according to published reports. But later she took a turn for the worse at her hotel and was rushed to a Montreal hospital. She was taken to Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, where she died.

This phenomenon, in which the victim is lucid for a while before the blood builds up enough to exert fatal pressure on the brain, is sometimes referred to in medical slang by the chilling term "talk and die."

It happens rarely. During a 10-year period at an Australian hospital, 15 patients met this description out of 569 people who died of brain injury, according to a 2007 paper in the Journal of Clinical Neuroscience.

When people remain conscious like that, they sometimes make the fatal mistake of shrugging it off, said Douglas H. Smith, director of the Center for Brain Injury and Repair at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

"A lot of people are stoic about it," Smith said. "They want to go on with their day."

Rosenwasser and Smith both said it would be very unusual for someone to suffer an epidural hematoma from hitting his or her head on packed snow. That outcome would be more likely if the person hit a harder surface, such as ice, a rock, or a ski, they said.

The actress may also have been prone to this sort of bleed for some reason, they said.

Helmets can help, experts said. In Quebec, where Richardson fell, officials have pushed to make them mandatory.

Rosenwasser said the bleeding could have come from a tear in a major blood vessel called the middle meningeal artery, or perhaps one of its branches.

"The bleeding is gradual, and the blood clot has nowhere else to go except push in on the brain," he said.

If a hematoma is suspected, the ordinary course in a hospital is to perform a CT scan.

If someone doesn't want to - or can't - go to a hospital, a new option may soon be available.

Drexel University researchers have helped develop a handheld device called the InfraScanner, designed to be used by paramedics or other trained people outside a hospital. It has been approved for use in Europe; the manufacturer is seeking approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The device does not render a diagnosis, but it is useful for a quick screen, using near-infrared light to gauge whether there are pools of blood in the brain, said Banu Onaral, director of Drexel's School of Biomedical Engineering. The speed is critical; if surgery is needed, doctors like to do it within the so-called golden hour of the injury.

"You want to know who needs immediate attention," Onaral said. "You have an hour."

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