Evaluation of the patient included laboratory studies. On presentation, N.L.’s white blood cell count was 708,000 mm³ with 34% segmented neutrophils, 1% blasts, 19% metamyelocytes, 13% myelocytes, and 6% promyelocytes. His hematocrit was 20, and his platelet count was 141,000. Other laboratory values were lactate dehydrogenase 768, uric acid 9.0, phosphorus 5.0, blood urea nitrogen 21, and creatinine 1.6. A bone marrow biopsy showed 95% cellularity, consistent with chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) in chronic phase. A computed tomography scan of the head revealed multiple acute superior and inferior infarcts.

The patient course was complicated by the development of painful priapism, which persisted after unsuccessful treatment with aspiration of the shaft of the penis and injection with phenylephrine. Leukapheresis and oral hydroxyurea were used to decrease the circulating white cells, but the priapism persisted. Induction chemotherapy was initiated with high-dose cytosine arabinoside and imatinib mesylate (Gleevec®, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, East Hanover, NJ), but the priapism remained. N.L. then received localized radiation therapy of 1,200 cGy in four fractionated doses to the penis, which ultimately resolved the priapism.

High-flow priapism results from increased arterial inflow into the cavernosal sinusoids, which overwhelms venous outflow. Clinical presentation is painless erection; irreversible cellular damage and fibrosis are rare. High-flow priapism often is the result of penile or perineum trauma and is not an emergency because treatment is elective (Sadeghi-Nejad et al., 2004).

Hyperleukocytosis causes priapism in patients with leukemia. Hyperleukocytosis can occur as a result of mechanical pressure on the abdominal veins by splenomegaly, causing venous congestion of the corpora cavernosa, sludging of leukemic cells in the corpora cavernosa and dorsal veins of the penis, infarction of the sacral nerves with leukemic cells, or infarction of the central venous system with leukemic cells (Chang et al., 2003).

Signs and Symptoms

Signs and symptoms vary based on whether the patient is experiencing low-flow or high-flow priapism. Obtaining a