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Case Report

Intercostal Nerve Schwannoma as a Rare Cause of Refractory Mid Back Pain

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ABSTRACT

Background: Schwannoma is the most common neurogenic tumor of the posterior mediastinum. Though commonly become asymptomatic, back pain with intercostal neuralgia mimicking post herpetic neuralgia is rare presentation and infrequently found in the available literature.

Case description: Here, we report a 22-year-old female without any history of trauma, surgery or infection presented with midback pain with radiation towards the right 10th intercostal space. Although clinical evaluation simulates the features of post herpetic neuralgia, she was mildly responsive to traditional conservative treatment. Later on, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) was performed to rule out the neoplastic cause which ultimately revealed Schwannoma of the right 10th intercostal nerve. Patient symptomatically get well after complete removal of tumor. Beside this, we also briefly review the clinical presentation, neuroimaging features, different surgical options and outcome from the pertinent literature.

Conclusion: This report emphasizes early radiological evaluation of dull aching resting pain to avoid unnecessary medications to prolong duration.

Keywords: Schwannoma; Mid back pain; Post Herpetic Neuralgia; Peripheral nerves.

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* Main subject and any subcategories have been classified according to the research topic.
INTRODUCTION

A majority of posterior mediastinal masses are neurogenic in origin with schwannomas constituting 75% of benign nerve sheath tumors which is slow growing tumor that remains asymptomatic in most of the cases [1-3].

Without any extension into the spinal canal, refractory back pain and intercostal neuralgia including pain, tenderness, paresthesia, and hypoesthesia are one of the rarest presentations described in the available literature [4-5].

Other presentation is persistent and progressive chest pain [5].

Case description

Here, we report a 22-year-old female without any history of trauma, surgery or infection presented with midback pain with radiation towards the right 10th intercostal space.

Although clinical evaluation simulates the features of post herpetic neuralgia, she was mildly responsive to traditional conservative treatment. Later on, magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] was performed to rule out the neoplastic cause which ultimately revealed Schwannoma of the right 10th intercostal nerve. Patient symptomatically get well after complete removal of tumor. Beside this, we also briefly review the clinical presentation, neuroimaging features, different surgical options and outcome from the pertinent literature.

History and physical examination: A 22 years old female from rural Bangladesh with no antecedent history of trauma, infection and surgery, presented with features of constant dull aching pain in the mid back region that referred towards the right 10th intercostal space for one year. Clinically, she was diagnosed as a case of post-herpetic neuralgia, but she was refractory to several analgesics and anti-depressant medications. Beside this, the intensity of the pain hampered her day-to-day activities for six months. Therefore, she was evaluated radiologically and according to the findings, she was referred to our center for further evaluation and definitive management. After clinical evaluation, she was positive for Tinel sign during percussion of the 10th intercostal space. Other neurological and systemic examination findings were normal.

Neuroimaging findings: Contrast-enhanced high resolution computed tomography [CT] scan of the chest showing a homogenous soft tissue mass in the right paravertebral space at the level of the 10th intercostal space without calcification, having moderate contrast enhancement. No extension was is seen into the spinal canal [Figure: 1A, B]. On magnetic resonance imaging [MRI], the lesion was hypointense on T1WI, hyperintense on T2WI with moderate heterogeneous contrast enhancement [Figure: 2A, B].

Surgical procedure: An open posterior approach was used to expose the right side of the spine, from the spinous processes of D9 to D11 with right 10th intercostal space done. A D10 hemilaminectomy with facetectomy and costotransversectomy was done. The proximal 4 cm of the tenth rib was resected and the partial shaving of the superior border of the eleventh rib was done to expose the tumor [Figure: 3A, B]. The entire tumor capsule was meticulously dissected from the surrounding structures. Tumor was completely excised after ligating the proximal and distal attachment to the intercostal nerve root. There was no per-operative injury to the pleura or dura. Considering unilateral approach into a single intercostal space and...
additional support by the rib cage, fixation and fusion was not done. Closure performed in layers maintaining the anatomical plane, leaving a subfascial drain in situ.

**Postoperative period:** The postoperative period was uneventful. Patient achieved complete relief from pain on 6th post-operative day. There was no new neurological deficit observed. The biopsy report was consistent with Schwannoma [Figure: 4 and Figure: 5A, B, C, and D].

DISCUSSION

Schwannomas arise from the Schwann cells of the neural sheath \[3\]. This tumor commonly located in the costovertebral sulcus in the paravertebral region in posterior mediastinum \[6\].

Although they presented as benign single lesion, atypical presentations, like-ancient schwannoma \[6\], cystic schwannoma \[7-8\], melanotic schwannoma \[9\], multiple schwannoma \[10\] following a single intercostal nerve and familial Schwannomatosis have been
reported in the literature. Schwannomas are usually diagnosed in the 3rd and 4th decade of life with equal distribution to both sexes [5].

Schwannomas are often asymptomatic and incidentally detected during imaging [6, 11]. However, after attaining a considerable size, patients may present with pain, tingling and numbness sensation along the distribution of the involved nerve [2-4]. Often these symptoms clinically mimic post-herpetic neuralgia and patients undergo long term treatment with different analgesics and antidepressant medications [4]. Beside this, the mass effect can be evident by compressing of adjacent mediastinal structures, such as lung, trachea, bronchi, heart, great vessels and patient may present with respiratory, cardiovascular of gastrointestinal symptoms [1,5,7,12-14].

This pattern of symptoms often biased the clinician about the definitive diagnosis. Very rarely, hemothorax [12], bloody pleural effusion [14], lung collapse [1], massive pleural effusion [7] and pericardial effusion [5] has been reported as an associated presentation.

Plain X-ray is one of the diagnostic tools for routine evaluation but mostly inconclusive if the tumor becomes insignificant. However, associated pleural and pericardial effusion, lung collapse can be diagnosed from X-ray which warrant the clinician for further evaluation of the etiology [15]. In case of dumbbell tumor with intraspinal extension, enlargement of the neural foramina, scalloping of posterior vertebral bodies can be seen [16]. More recently, ultrasonography [US] considered a fast and noninvasive approach to evaluate nerves which provide valuable information about the site and characteristics of peripheral nerve sheath tumor [4]. However, CT scan with intravenous contrast is the most valuable test for any mediastinal lesions to determine the location, relationship with surrounding structures. Beside this, it is the gold standard investigation to detect intralesional calcification and hemorrhage. Often this investigation can predict the lesion [3,15].

In our reported case, the lesion demonstrates well defined-margins, homogenous soft tissue mass, devoid of intralesional hemorrhage that goes mostly in favor of benign lesions. Though magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] is not routinely performed for mediastinal masses [15], it is advised in dumbbell lesions to see the extent of spinal canal extension as well as spinal cord compression [3]. Signal intensity varies due to the presence of cystic and hemorrhagic areas of the lesion [5, 17]. Usually, schwannoma becomes iso to hypointense in T1WI, hyperintense in T2WI with homogeneous contrast enhancement [6]. Rarely, this tumor becomes hyperintense in T1WI, due to the presence of melanin [3].

Heterogeneous contrast uptake is due to the presence of necrosis, cyst formation, calcification and intra-tumoral hemorrhage [1,5,9,15,17]. A definitive diagnosis is only possible after histopathological examination. Schwannoma and solitary fibrous tumor are both considered a differential diagnosis of spindle cell lesions [18].

Although they have different patterns, definitive diagnosis is challenging if not considering immunohistochemistry [14]. After staining with hematoxylin and eosin, areas of dense spindle cells [Antoni A] and hypocellular stromal areas [Antoni B] became visible. Immunohistochemically, this tumor shows strong positivity to proteins, including S-100, vimentin and CD56, and negativity to desmin, smooth muscle myosin [SMA], CD34 and CD117. In both histological patterns of Schwannomas, the S-100 protein positivity is essential to establish the diagnosis. In our patient, the pathological specimen showed positivity to S-100 and PAS, negativity to vimentin and Pan-CK, hence definitive diagnosis was made.

Early surgical resection should be considered to avoid possibility of malignancy [19]. Moreover, surgery helps to establish the definitive diagnosis. In case of small tumors without intraspinal extension, VATS is the procedure of choice [17,20-23]. Nowadays, VATS is regarded as a safe and reliable minimal access alternative to thoracotomy for managing posterior neurogenic tumor. This approach permits good exposure of the tumor, surrounding mediastinal structures, minimize tissue trauma, improved cosmetic appearance and a shorter hospital stay. Alternatively, thoracotomy can be considered if adequate facilities are not available, a large tumor (>6 cm), complex relationships with surrounding neuro-vascular
structures, suspicious of malignancy and located at the costophrenic angle or thoracic apex. Before the surgical procedure, preoperative angiography helps identify the feeding arteries supplying both the tumor and spinal cord. Embolization helps in reducing tumor vascularity and operative blood loss which adds in safer resection [24]. Recently, Zhu et al. [25] introduced newer technique for the resection of lower posterior mediastinal tumors. To avoid the complications of VATS, they resected a benign posterior mediastinal schwannoma with retroperitoneo-scropy by trans-diaphragmatic approach.

In case of large tumors with intraspinal extension, various approaches have been recommended including a single-stage posterior approach by laminectomy [26], hemilaminectomy with partial costotransversectomy [27-28], costotransversectomy with extension to a posterolateral thoracotomy [19] and combined posterior and transthoracic approach performed either in one or two stages [21]. Advantages of a single-stage posterolateral approach includes the necessity for single incision, known procedure to neurosurgeons, and avoiding a chest tube [19]. Though our reported tumor was < 6 cm, located in the paravertebral space, possibility of its benign nature and no relationship with spinal cord, we went for hemi laminectomy with costotransversectomy due to lack of facilities for VATS and better familiarity of the surgical steps for a neurosurgeon. The necessity for instrumentation following single level costotransversectomy still a matter of debate [22]. However, considering the single level manipulation and additional support provided by the rib cage, we did not go for instrumentation. The complications such as bleeding, post-surgical infection or pleural injury are reported from 13% to 38% [27].

Though relatively higher chance of complications we had minimum perioperative hemorrhage with no pleural injury and post-operative infection. Untreated schwannomas usually continue to grow and become symptomatic by its mass effect on the nearby structures [3,17]. Rarely, they may show malignant transformation. Predictors of malignancy include rapid tumor growth and loss of neurologic function. In malignant schwannomas, radiotherapy may be required in addition to surgical treatment [3].

In our case, the lesion was surgically excised without any complications and the patient did not experience disease recurrence after 6 months of follow-up.

Conclusion: Intercostal nerve schwannoma should be considered as one of the differential diagnoses for intractable back pain and full diagnostic work up including neuroimaging is recommended because early surgical intervention is the only key for a favorable outcome.

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None

REFERENCES


