Mediastinitis, pseudo-aneurysm formation, aortic bleed, and death from endoscopic botulinum toxin injection

Endoscopic botulinum toxin injection is considered a safe and viable option for the management of achalasia [1, 2]. Although esophageal perforation and mediastinitis are well-documented complications of this treatment, pseudo-aneurysm formation of the thoracic aorta following inter-sphincteric injection is exceedingly rare [3]. We report the first published fatality from a thoracic aorta pseudo-aneurysm bleed following inter-sphincteric botulinum toxin injection. Endoscopists should be vigilant of this potentially fatal complication.

An 89-year-old woman with a background of previous myocardial infarction and a permanent pacemaker for complete heart block complained of severe left scapular pain and pleuritic right chest pain 8 days after an endoscopic botulinum toxin injection. The toxin had been injected into the four quadrants of the lower esophageal sphincter using a 5mm needle (25 units into each quadrant). She had undergone 3-monthly endoscopic botulinum toxin injections for the previous 8 years.

A chest radiograph showed no acute abnormalities. A computed tomography (CT) pulmonary angiogram revealed inflammatory changes around the esophagus suggesting mediastinitis without gas bubbles to prove perforation. There was also a small 7-mm thoracic aorta pseudo-aneurysm (found only in retrospect) (Video 1). She was started on intravenous meropenem. Discussions with a cardiothoracic tertiary center confirmed the decision of conservative management and agreed with the choice of antibiotic.

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The patient then underwent esophagogastroduodenoscopy, which showed an extraluminal swelling that was probably a hematoma [Fig. 1]. She rapidly deteriorated and suffered a pulseless electrical activity cardiac arrest. After return of spontaneous circulation, a contrast CT aortic angiogram revealed a 22-mm pseudo-aneurysm of the descending aorta at the level of the left atrium, with extensive hematoma along the entire length of the esophagus and compression of the left atrium causing inflow obstruction to the heart [Fig. 2, Video 2]. The patient was unsuitable for surgical intervention. After discussion with the family, the decision was made to provide palliative treatment, and the patient died soon after.

Endoscopy_UCTN_Code_CPL_1AH_2AJ

Competing interests: None

Mark Z. Y. Tan1, Jennifer Whitgift2, Hugh Warren2
1 Critical Care Unit, Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester, United Kingdom
2 General Surgery Department, Queen Elizabeth Hospital King’s Lynn, King’s Lynn, United Kingdom

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DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.1055/s-0042-107074
Endoscopy 2016; 48: E186–E187
© Georg Thieme Verlag KG Stuttgart · New York
ISSN 0013-726X

Corresponding author
Mark Z. Y. Tan, MBBS, BSc, MRCS
Critical Care Unit
Central Manchester Universities
NHS Foundation Trust
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9WL
United Kingdom
Fax: +44-161-1234578
mark.tan@cmft.nhs.uk