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Case Report

Simultaneous Papillary Carcinoma in Thyroglossal Duct Cyst and Thyroid

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Received 8 November 2016; Accepted 10 January 2017; Published 8 February 2017

Academic Editor: Thomas Grüning

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Thyroglossal duct cyst (TDC) is a cystic expansion of a remnant of the thyroglossal duct tract. Carcinomas in the TDC are extremely rare and are usually an incidental finding after the Sistrunk procedure. In this report, an unusual case of a 36-year-old woman with concurrent papillary thyroid carcinoma arising in the TDC and on the thyroid gland is presented, followed by a discussion of the controversies surrounding the possible origins of a papillary carcinoma in the TDC, as well as the current management options.

1. Background

Thyroglossal duct cyst (TDC) is the most common congenital, benign, midline neck mass, accounting for 7% of midline neck swellings in adults [1]. A TDC arises as a cystic expansion of a remnant of the thyroglossal duct tract and is the most frequent congenital anomaly of the neck [2].

Associated carcinoma is extremely rare, occurring in about 1% of TDC cases [3], with fewer than 300 cases reported since the first description by Brentano in 1911 [4]. The clinical presentation of a TDC carcinoma (TDCCa) is often asymptomatic and very similar to its benign counterpart. Thus, it is difficult to identify the TDCCa on clinical examination, as well as on ultrasound, scintigraphy, or even at fine needle aspiration biopsy (FNAB) and the diagnosis of the malignancy is generally incidental after surgery [5].

The majority of carcinomas are small (0.2 cm to 1.5 cm) and confined to the cyst, papillary thyroid being the most common histological type [6, 7]. The average patients’ age is 40 years old and it is more frequent in females [8]. The finding of a carcinoma in a TDC after adequate excision of the cyst, usually by means of the Sistrunk procedure (SP), is a surprise for both the patient and the physician [5].

It is still debated whether TDCCa originates from the thyroid gland, from the TDC itself (de novo theory) or from both [9–12]. Although the differentiation may be difficult,
Figure 1: Sonography shows an image suggestive of thyroglossal duct cyst containing debris and an eccentric small hyperechoic solid area.

this distinction can play a crucial role in treatment decisions regarding the inclusion of thyroidectomy as part of the treatment strategy versus TDC total resection exclusively [15].

2. Case Presentation

A 36-year-old female patient presented with a slow-growing, painless, midline neck mass. She reported no previous radiation exposure and no signs or symptoms of thyroid abnormalities, hoarseness, breathing difficulty, or dysphagia. Her medical records were reviewed and her medical history was otherwise unremarkable. Physical examination revealed a smooth, well-circumscribed mass along the midline of the neck, overlying the thyrohyoid membrane, mobile with deglutition and protrusion of the tongue. There were no palpable lymph nodes.

3. Investigation

Thyroid function tests were normal. The neck ultrasound revealed a pattern suggestive of a thyroglossal duct cyst: a single, midline, suprahyoid cyst containing debris and an eccentric small hyperechoic solid area. This structure measured 1.6 cm³ with absence of flow on Doppler-sonography (Figure 1). The midline neck location and the close relationship between the lesion and the hyoid bone were considered the key to the differential diagnosis of the TDC, which includes branchial cleft cysts and lymph nodes [14]. Because the frequency of thyroglossal cyst carcinoma is very low, in a large percentage of cases the clinicians seldom consider an oncologic diagnosis and therefore do not perform a preoperative fine needle aspiration biopsy, albeit its low sensitivity [15].

After a fully informed written consent, complete excision of thyroglossal duct with central thyroidectomy was performed (standard Sistrunk procedure). The surgical aspect was that of a thyroglossal duct cyst. The lesion was dissected up to the hyoid bone and then to the base of the tongue. No abnormal findings were observed intraoperatively and there were no intercurrences or complications.

Due to the characteristics observed on the ultrasound and the location of the lesion, it was assumed that it was a thyroglossal cyst. Gross examination showed a 3.0 cm cyst, filled with a gelatinous green material, with a bone fragment attached to it. The histopathological report revealed a cystic lesion and a tumor characterized by the proliferation of columnar cells in a single layer, mostly arranged in papillae, but also in follicles, supported by a richly vascularized connective tissue. The cells had ovoid, ground glass nuclei (“Orphan Annie” eye), sometimes with grooves and pseudoinclusions (Figures 2(a)–2(h)). The tumor measured 1.4 centimeter. There was minimal infiltration of the adjacent fibroadipose tissue. This histology was compatible with papillary carcinoma in the TDC and it was staged as pT3c N0 M0 [16].

The case was then presented at a multidisciplinary meeting, when all the clinical and radiological data were reviewed.

4. Treatment

A thyroid and cervical lymph node sonography was performed with no abnormalities observed. However, considering the possibility of a concomitant and occult papillary carcinoma in the thyroid, fully informed written consent had been obtained from the patient and total thyroidectomy (TT) with prophylactic bilateral central neck dissection (excision of levels VI and VII lymph nodes) has been performed, once it is the optimal surgical treatment for thyroid carcinoma. No dissected lymph node was macroscopically suggestive of metastasis, as observed intraoperatively.

Considering the American Thyroid Association risk stratification (intermediate risk) [7, 17], it would be necessary to perform RIA therapy. Additionally, the possibility of this tumor being a metastasis from a thyroid cancer supported the rationale of TT.

5. Outcome and Follow-Up

The postthyroidectomy histopathological report revealed a 0.4 cm nonencapsulated papillary thyroid microcarcinoma (mPTC), follicular variant. The neoplastic mass displayed follicular architecture and was composed of cells with ground glass nuclei, nuclear grooves, and pseudoinclusions. No extrathyroidal involvement and vascular or neural invasion were observed. There were no metastasis in the 14 lymph nodes resected, and the surgical margins were free. This absence reinforces the TDCCa diagnosis and makes less likely the differential diagnosis of an occult PTC undergoing conspicuously cystic transformation. The thyroid tumor was staged as pT1a pN0 Mx.

The patient had negative thyroglobulin and antithyroglobulin after surgery. Thyroid remnant ablation was achieved by the administration of 30 mCi of radioactive iodine (RAI-131) and posteriorly a whole-body scintigraphy showed zero uptake of the substance. It was followed by TSH suppression (0.1–0.5 mU/L) and the patient remains disease-free after 9 months of follow-up.

6. Discussion

There is no consensus on the optimal treatment of TDCCa mainly because of the lack of data from larger studies.
Figure 2: Thyroglossal duct cyst carcinoma. (a) and (b) Low power view of the cyst containing the papillary carcinoma (HE, 40x). (c) The papillae were sometimes edematous (HE, 40x). (d) The tumor had papillae, but also some follicles (HE, 100x). (e) Nuclei with pseudoinclusions (arrow) and ground glass appearance (stars) (HE, 400x). (f) Nuclear pseudoinclusion (HE, 400x). (g) Nuclear pseudoinclusion (arrow) (HE, 1000x). (h) Nuclear groove (arrow) (HE, 1000x).
Prognosis of TDC papillary thyroid carcinoma seems to be similar to that of papillary carcinoma of the thyroid gland, as well as the long-term follow-up, although the reported follow-up time is short (median time of 12 y) and the number of patients is small. Mortality is low with only a few reported disease-related deaths [24, 25].

We have presented a case of a papillary thyroid carcinoma arising in a thyroglossal duct cyst, a rare condition with few cases published in the literature. There are many controversies about the tumor’s origin and the extension of surgery needed, which makes the definition of many aspects related to its management and follow-up difficult. Some characteristics which point to higher recurrence rates can guide treatment. The selection of patients which are likely to have worst prognosis and, consequently, will need a more aggressive treatment is of great importance and an individualized approach is the best option to improve patient outcome.

Additional Points

(i) Thyroglossal duct cyst carcinoma is an extremely rare condition and usually an incidental finding. (ii) Surgery is the mainstay management for thyroglossal cyst carcinoma. However, the optimal surgical strategy remains controversial.

Disclosure

All the designated authors have met all four criteria for authorship defined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the valuable contribution of the Thyroid Study Group (Belo Horizonte, Brazil).

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