

NEW METHOD DIFFUSE ALVEOLAR HEMORRHAGE SECONDARY TO FAT EMBOLISM AFTER LONG BONE FRACTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Fat embolism syndrome (FES) is a known complication of long bone fractures. While hypoxemia is a common presenting symptom of FES, diffuse alveolar hemorrhage (DAH) is a rare complication of the condition with similar imaging characteristics on chest radiograph. This case describes a young, healthy male who developed hypoxemic respiratory failure and hemoptysis from diffuse alveolar hemorrhage secondary to fat embolism after a femoral fracture.

Case presentation A previously healthy 18 year old male presented to the Emergency Room after a motorcycle collision. Initial vital signs were notable for normal temperature, heart rate 98, blood pressure 124/69, oxygen saturation 100% on room air. Imaging showed a right femoral fracture (Fig. 1). Initial CXR was unremarkable (Fig. 2). One day after admission, he developed tachycardia and new hypoxia with a 6L O₂ requirement. CXR that day showed new infiltrates (Fig. 3). CT angiography of the chest was negative for pulmonary embolism but notable for extensive ground glass opacities throughout the lung parenchyma with patchy consolidations and areas of crazy paving (Fig. 4). Two days after admission, he underwent right femoral intramedullary nailing. His oxygenation improved; however, later he developed scant bright red hemoptysis. Vital signs were notable for normal temperature, pulse 108, blood pressure 101/56, oxygen saturation 94% on 2L nasal cannula. On physical exam, he was found to be in no acute distress. Pulmonary exam was notable for rhonchi in the bases. No rashes or synovitis were identified. His right thigh was dressed but exam distal to the dressing was unremarkable. Laboratory tests revealed normal chemistries, a normal white blood cell count, hemoglobin of 11.2, and platelets 119. Subsequent CXR showed worsening of his infiltrates. Bronchoscopy with bronchoalveolar lavage was performed, with progressively bloody aliquots (Fig. 5). BAL cultures were negative for bacterial and fungal pathogens. Connective tissue serologies were negative. Cytology from the BAL was notable for abundant lipid-laden macrophages by Oil-red-O stain (see Fig. 6). He was started on methylprednisolone and albumin with significant improvement in his radiographic findings.



Discussion FES occurs as a complication of trauma and orthopedic injuries, but it can also be seen in atraumatic conditions such as bone marrow transplantation, liver injury, and administration of exogenous fat [1]. The clinical incidence is 1–3% with single long bone fractures [2,3]. Intramedullary nailing of long bones is among the most common surgical procedures that lead to FES [3]. The classic triad of symptoms includes hypoxemia, petechial rash, and neurologic dysfunction. Average latency between insult and onset of symptoms was 4 hours–15 days in a review of 100 cases [4]. Up to 75% of patients with FES present with respiratory failure to varying degrees [2]. FES is primarily a diagnosis of exclusion. Multiple criteria exist to aid in diagnosis (Table 1) [4–6]. Typical imaging findings on CT chest include bilateral, patchy, well-demarcated ground glass opacities in a non-dependent distribution. Less common findings include crazy paving, lobular consolidation, and nodular septal thickening. These findings are similar to what is seen in diffuse alveolar hemorrhage [7]. The radiographic differential for FES-DAH includes lung contusion, pulmonary edema, aspiration, and DAH from other causes. Fat droplets within cells on bronchoalveolar lavage can be helpful, but is a non-specific finding [7]. DAH is a rare complication of FES. There are approximately 11 reported cases in the literature, which are largely associated with traumatic orthopedic injuries [2]. The exact mechanism by which FES causes DAH is unclear; one theory is that lipoprotein lipase acts on capillary fat, resulting in free fatty acids that induce chemokine-derived cell infiltration leading to damage of the alveolar-capillary membrane [8]. Treatment is largely supportive. Albumin administration has been shown to be helpful, presumably because of its ability to bind free fatty acids [1,2]. Steroid use has also been reported [5,9]. Despite its rarity, physicians should consider FES-DAH as a cause of hemoptysis after long bone fracture, especially as it may have implications for anticoagulation protocols in the post-operative period [10]. Fortunately, prognosis is generally good. Our patient met criteria Lindeque’s criteria for FES even prior to his intramedullary nailing; he may have met the other criteria as well if arterial blood gas data had been available. After initiation of steroids and albumin, he had rapid improvement in his chest radiograph and was discharged on room air. He had no pulmonary complaints at his orthopedic follow up appointment 6 weeks later.



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