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Acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur in children treated with drilling

Lars G Danielsson and Henrik Düppe

ABSTRACT – We re-examined 11 children (mean age 6.5 years) who had been treated with surgical drilling and intravenous (i.v.) antibiotics in high doses for acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur. The mean follow-up time was 3.9 (2.9–6.4) years.

9 children who had been treated with early surgical drilling and i.v. antibiotics were all symptom-free and had normal radiographs at follow-up. The other 2 children had radiographic changes (metaphyseal rarefaction) already when referred to us. They had been treated with antibiotics alone before referral until the infection had spread to the hip joint. At follow-up, the clinical and radiographical findings were abnormal, 1 had a severely deformed hip.

In our opinion, treatment with i.v. antibiotics alone may not prevent extension of the infectious process to the hip joint in some cases, even when the medication is given in high doses. Therefore, we believe that the addition of early surgical drilling is justified to prevent this feared complication.

The diagnosis of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis in the neck of the femur in children is difficult, especially because the neck is covered by soft tissue. This may make it hard to detect the localized tenderness typical of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis. The intracapsular location and thin periosteum favor penetration of pus into the joint, with a high risk of severely injuring it.

The role of surgery in the treatment of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis has always been controversial. Some authors consider surgery to be essential (Mollan and Piggot 1977, Andersson et al. 1980, Scott et al. 1990), whereas others believe that early bone decompression is unnecessary and point out that this treatment is based on analysis of patients in whom antibiotic therapy was inadequate by today’s standards (LaMont et al. 1987, Vaughan et al. 1987, Peltola et al. 1997). In the special case of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the femoral neck, however, even those who are more conservative tend to recommend surgical decompression (Vaughan et al. 1987).

We retrospectively reviewed the results of treatment of a selected group of children with acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the femoral neck. 9 of 11 children had been treated with early drilling of the neck of the femur.

Patients and methods

We reviewed the medical records of patients with acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur, who had received treatment in the Department of Orthopedics of Malmö University Hospital during 1993–1999. To be included, we required the patient to have one or both of the following criteria: (a) aspiration of pus or a positive culture after intramedullary drilling of the femoral neck; (b) a histologic diagnosis of osteomyelitis. During the study no operated patient had a negative culture and/or normal histology. 11 children (8 boys) met our criteria and were included in the study (8 right-, 3 left-sided). Their average age was 6.5 (1–12) years and mean follow-up 3.9 (2.9–6.4) years.

At the time of referral, the children were treated with open drilling from the lateral subtrochanteric region, centrally in the neck of the femur to about
0.5–1 cm from the physis. We used a drill bit with a diameter of 5 mm and its location was checked by means of an image intensifier. A bone biopsy was taken from the neck of the femur. Gentamicin-poly(methylmethacrylate) (Septopal) beads with a diameter of 3 mm were introduced into the drill hole for local treatment, but also to facilitate drainage of the infected area. The beads were routinely removed after one week. All children were treated with antibiotics. In some cases the treatment had been started before surgery. After surgery, the antibiotics were administered parenterally for 5–14 days, and thereafter orally for 5–12 weeks.

At the follow-up examination, we measured acetabular and center-edge (CE) angles, acetabular head index, the size of the femoral head and the width of the femoral neck and compared the sides. The size of the femoral head was calculated by multiplying the maximal width by the maximal perpendicular height (Danielsson 2000).

Findings and outcome

A history of a recent upper respiratory infection or otitis media was found in 7 patients, an infected mosquito bite in 1, but 3 children had had no recent infection.

All children presented with pain in the hip and thigh and were limping or unwilling to put weight on the affected leg. They had tenderness in the groin and restricted hip motion.

When admitted to hospital, they had a temperature of ≥ 38.5°C. The white blood count was ≥ 1.0 × 10^10/L in 8 patients and ≥ 1.3 × 10^10/L in 4. In 9 patients we took blood smears, all of which showed a shift to the left. In the 10 patients examined, C-reactive protein was increased (> 9 mg/L) with a mean of 120 (13–236) mg/L.

Conventional radiographs were taken on admission to hospital and at the follow-up. The initial ones were normal in all except 2 patients (cases 10 and 11), in whom a metaphyseal rarefaction was seen. Both of them had had symptoms for 10 and 21 days, respectively, but the others had had symptoms for 1–8 days. 8 children were examined with ultrasound on admission, 1 had an effusion in the hip joint and 2 showed signs of a swollen joint capsule. A technetium bone scan was positive in 4 of the 5 cases investigated.

In 7 patients, blood was taken for cultures, 4 of which showed growth of Staphylococcus aureus, the rest were negative. 5 joints were aspirated and 2 of the cultures were positive. Both of these children (cases 10 and 11) had been treated with antibiotics before referral and the osteomyelitis had spread to the joint. An arthrotomy was done and the joint irrigated to remove the pus. The cultures showed Salmonella in case 10 and Staphylococcus aureus in case 11.

10 were treated by drilling after admission to our clinic. In case 11, metaphyseal rarefaction was not
Table. Observations

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A Case no.

B Sex
- M male
- F female

C Side
- 1 Right
- 2 Left

D Age at diagnosis year, month

E Follow-up time year, month

F Initial history

G Temperature °C

H White blood count 10^9/L

I Neutrophilia

J CRP mg/L

K ESR mm/h

L Clinical signs
- 1 Refusal to bear weight
- 2 Limping
- 3 Tenderness in the groin
- 4 Restricted range of motion

M Initial radiographs
- 1 Normal
- 2 Metaphyseal rarefaction

N Blood culture
- 1 Not done
- 2 Negative
- 3 Staph. aureus

O Ultrasound
- 1 Not done
- 2 Normal
- 3 Joint capsule swollen
- 4 Effusion

P Bone scan
- 1 Not done
- 2 Normal
- 3 Slightly positive, neck
- 4 Positive, head
- 5 Positive, head and neck

Q Aspiration of hip joint
- 1 Not done
- 2 Culture negative
- 3 Salmonella in pus
- 4 Staph. aureus in pus

R Arthrotomy
- 1 Not done
- 2 Pus Salmonella
- 3 Pus Staph. aureus

S Drilling
- 1 No pus
- 2 Pus
- 3 Fluid with increased pressure
- 4 Septopall beads 1 week
- 5 Septopall beads 1 week
- 6 Culture negative
- 7 Salmonella
- 8 Staph. aureus

T Microscopy
- 1 Not done
- 2 Specimen lost
- 3 Osteomyelitis

U Antibiotics before surgery, see next page

V Antibiotics after surgery, see next page

X Postoperative history
- 1 Temperature normal after 1 day
- 2 2 days
- 3 3 days
- 4 5 days
- 5 9 days
- 6 2 weeks
- 7 4 weeks

Y Radiography last examination R/L
- 1 Normal
- 2 Acetabular angle 12°/15°, CE angle 26°/19°, acetabulum head index 88°/76°, size head 525/765, width neck 26/30
- 3 Acetabular angle 14°/20°, CE angle 31°/-3°, acetabulum head index 97/51, size head 406/460, width neck 22/33

Z Clinical findings last examination
- 1 Normal
- 2 Range of motion hip: Normal, circumferance L thigh –1.5 cm, L calf –1 cm, leg length ASIS-med. mall. –1 cm
- 3 Range of motion hip: flexion 0-100°, abduction 20°, rotation 25°, circumferance L thigh –2 cm, L calf –1 cm, leg length ASIS–med. mall. –1 cm
detected and the hip was initially treated as a septic arthritis with arthrotomy, irrigation, drainage and intravenous antibiotics. The neck was drilled first 1 week later. Septopal beads were introduced into the drill hole in 8 cases (Figure 1), 1 (case 6) on reoperation after 1 week because of rise in temperature. On drilling, we found pus or seropurulent fluid in 6 cases. Cultures from the drill holes showed Staphylococcus aureus in 3 cases and salmonella in 1, but on microscopic examination, osteomyelitis was present in all 10 patients.

On reexamination, 9 patients were clinically and radiographically normal (Figure 1). The 2 patients (cases 10 and 11) in whom osteomyelitis had spread into the joint, were clinically and radiographically abnormal (Table, Figures 2 and 3).

**Discussion**

Early diagnosis of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur is difficult. Signs and symptoms vary considerably. Limping, refusal to bear weight, hip pain, local tenderness and a reduction in the range of motion are found in several other conditions affecting the hip, some of which are commoner than acute hematogenous osteomyelitis. Normal laboratory findings and normal plain radiographs do not exclude acute hematogenous osteomyelitis.

In a survey of the literature, Morrissy (1996) summarized the percentage of normal laboratory findings in acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur: leukocytes 75, differential
The dangers of closed management of acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the femoral neck are illustrated by 2 of our cases (10 and 11) who were treated with oral or oral and i.v. antibiotics before surgery. Radiographic changes with a metaphyseal rarefaction were found and extension of the disease into the joint. Surgical debridement, including arthrotomy and drilling of the femoral neck with introduction of Septopal beads into the drill hole combined with continued i.v. antibiotic treatment, resulted in normalization of the temperature and laboratory findings. Both of these cases, however, had abnormal clinical findings and radiographs at follow-up unlike all our other patients who were treated with early surgical drilling, and were clinically and radiographically normal when re-examined.

Early drilling lowers the intra-osseous pressure, thereby arresting the progression of the infection/pressure/necrosis chain of events. With this minor surgical procedure we can take adequate bone biopsy cultures. It also prevents spread of the infection into the joint and, together with adequate antibiotic treatment, will result in a normal hip. We therefore believe that drilling is warranted in some cases in whom intravenous antibiotics might have cured the acute hematogenous osteomyelitis, rather than cases to run the risk of a perforation into the joint with a great likelihood of destruction of the joint. If osteomyelitis has spread to the hip joint, we believe that an arthrotomy should be done together with drilling of the femoral neck.

In one of our cases, in whom drilling was performed, the child’s body temperature did not normalize until the drill hole was re-explored and Septopal beads introduced. This would suggest that Septopal beads, apart from their local antibiot-
otic effect, may also help drain the drill hole and thereby maintain a beneficial reduction in intraosseous pressure in the femoral neck.

In conclusion, we believe that acute hematogenous osteomyelitis of the neck of the femur is a medical emergency that needs to be treated aggressively with surgical drilling and adequate antibiotic therapy to avoid permanent damage to the hip.

No funds have been received to support this study.


