Professor JD Parkes for allowing us to study their patients.

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Case report: dysphagia and sleep apnoea associated with cervical osteophytes due to diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis (DISH)

Diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis (DISH) may be an under recognised contributory factor to both dysphagia and obstructive sleep apnoea.

A seventy-two year old man presented with a 12 month history of intermittent painless dysphagia. He had been aware of the need to be careful not to swallow, as eating and coughing after swallowing was a daily occurrence. Liquids were more troublesome than solids. He had not lost any weight.

In 1989 he had been diagnosed as having obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome. Overnight impedance pneumography revealed more than 40 episodes of apnoea per hour and simultaneous oximetry showed a corresponding fall in oxygen saturation to 80%. Treatment with nocturnal continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) resulted in improved sleep quality and daytime wakefulness. There was a history of ischaemic heart disease and atrial fibrillation.

On examination he was 170 cm tall, weighed 87 kg, and his neck circumference was 46 cm. He was in controlled atrial fibrillation. There were no neurological signs but the tongue was large and the oropharynx appeared small. Cervical spine movements were limited in all directions.

In a timed test of swallowing he coughed violently after swallowing the first bolus. After a pause he was able to drink 120 ml in 50 seconds (2-4 ml·s⁻¹; normal >10 ml·s⁻¹). Over a two week period his swallowing speed fluctuated between 6 ml·s⁻¹ and 20 ml·s⁻¹; a double blind edrophonium test had no effect on swallowing speed.

Videofluoroscopy examination showed partial hold up of the bolus of contrast in the mid-cervical region. Lateral cervical spine radiographs showed a bridging mass of exuberant new bone formation anteriorly extending from C2 to C7, with a dividing pseudoaureature at the C3/C4 level (figure). A bony canal stenosis was also present from the C2 level downwards. Radiographs of the thoracolumbar spine showed areas of new bone formation bridging the vertebral bodies anteriorly. Despite the extent of the new bone formation, the intervertebral disc spaces were relatively well preserved. Radiographs of the pelvis showed irregular projections of bone from the iliac crests and the lateral margins of the ileum. The radiographic features were typical of DISH. An MRI scan of the brain stem and a CT scan of the brain were both normal. A 75 g glucose tolerance test with capillary blood suggested diabetes mellitus with a fasting value of 7-1 mmol/l and a 120 minute value of 11-2 mmol/l.

The patient received advice from the speech therapist and was able to reduce the frequency of coughing by taking double swallows for each bolus and slowing down his eating. He did not wish to be considered for any type of surgical intervention and continues on CPAP at home. Follow up for three years has revealed no other disorder.

In this case there is good radiographic evidence to suggest that the limitation of neck movement and the large anterior cervical osteophytosis were due to diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis (DISH). Forester’s original description of the condition was confined to the spine but many extraspinal manifestations have now been described. The condition is common, occurring in 6%-12% of a necropsy population, and impaired glucose tolerance is often a feature.

Although the patient had other features that predisposed him to develop the sleep apnoea syndrome including a large tongue and neck circumference, the C2/C3 level is a common site of obstruction in this condition. It seems highly likely that the bony mass contributed to occlusion of the oropharynx during sleep and videofluoroscopy suggests that it contributed significantly to the dysphagia; barium swallow examination, indirect laryngoscopy, and neurological investigation revealed no other cause for the dysphagia.

Dysphagia is a recognised symptom of cervical spine involvement in patients with DISH. Obstructive sleep apnoea is an association not described before although cases of stridor due to impingement of the osteophyte on the laryngeal vestibule have been reported.

The case shows how a lateral cervical spine radiograph may be helpful in the diagnosis of patients with dysphagia and/or sleep apnoea without neurological signs. In view of the frequency of anterior cervical osteophytes in the older population it is imperative that other causes be excluded; oesophageal perforation after endoscopy in patients with large cervical osteophytes has been reported and barium examination of the oesophagus may be preferable.

We are grateful to Mr Michael Saunders, Chief Medical Technical Officer, Lung Function Laboratory, Llandough Hospital, for his assistance.

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Horologiagnosia: an impairment of the ability to tell the time

We report a 57-year-old male patient who had a right posterior stroke. A CT scan indicated extensive hypodensity within the territory of the right posterior cerebral artery. There were also lacunes in the basal ganglia, thalamus and corpus striatum bilaterally, as well as small scattered lesions, predominantly within the peripheral areas of white matter of the posterior frontal and parietal lobes, consistent with ischaemic changes due to small vessel disease. On admission to hospital he presented with decreased sensation and muscle weakness on the left side of his body, left homonymous hemianopia and left-sided visuospatial neglect. Neurological assessments during the first three weeks after his admission to the hospital showed well preserved language, verbal reasoning, and verbal memory skills (average range or above). On a relatively easy picture recognition memory test he also performed satisfactorily. Left-sided visuospatial neglect was evident in his performance on line bisection, cancellation, and search tasks. He easily identified real objects and line drawings of objects or
photographs of certain famous faces. His performance on the fragmented letters test of visual perception was, however, impaired. On the cube analysis test of visual-spatial analysis his performance suggested that he was able to integrate stimuli (cubes) into spatial (three dimensional) schemas but he obtained a low score apparently due to an impaired ability to identify the cube positions. He was unable to draw a cube (without a model), making only slight mislocations of certain lines depicting depth.

From the time of his admission to the hospital and continued with a profound difficulty in telling the time from a clock (or a watch), even when the clock showed a simple “on the hour” time. We investigated this impairment in two experimental sessions, two weeks and four weeks after his admission. In each session the following four conditions were used, involving time telling or clock setting for eight different times on the “hour” times, chosen to represent equally the numbers on the left and right hand side of the clock. Each of eight “on the hour” times was presented twice in a random order. (1) The patient was shown the clock face (diameter 12.5 cm) indicating an “on the hour” time. He was asked first to name the time, then to report the position of the clock hands and, finally, to tell the time depicted on the clock face. His performance was scored correct if he gave the appropriate answer before or after identifying the positions of the clock hands; his scores in the two sessions were 0/16 and 0/16 (correct). (2) He was shown a drawn clock face minus the hands on which he was required to insert the hands to depict a verbally given on the hour time; he scored 16/16 (correct) in both sessions. (3) The positions of the hands for an on the hour time were described verbally to the patient who was then required to say what that time was; his scores in the two sessions were 4/16 and 6/16 (correct). (4) He was given the time verbally and was then asked to say in which positions the hands should be; his scores were: 16/16 and 15/16 (correct). The results from conditions (2) and (4) indicate a dissociation between his virtually errorless performance in conditions (2) and (4) where the response involved clock setting and his very poor performance in condition (1) where involved time telling from the clock face. His deficit in condition (1) occurred despite consistently accurate and unhesitating identification of the positions of the hands. When he was shown a clock face and asked to name the time, he seemed rather bewildered and reluctant to respond to the question. With encouragement he would refer to the “12” to which the long hand was pointing as the hour and the number to which the short hand was pointing as referring to the number of minutes to, or past 12 o’clock. For example, he would refer to “eight o’clock” as “eight minutes to 12” or “eight minutes past 12” and to “four o’clock” as “four minutes to 12” or “four minutes past 12”. In condition (3), in which he was asked to tell the time from a verbal description of the positions of the hands of a clock face and intact ability to set the time on demand, has not previously been reported. We would like to suggest that this deficit be termed as “horologagnosia” (from the Greek meaning an impairment of the ability to tell the time).

We thank Dr S W Clarke, consultant physician, for permission to investigate the patient. We also thank Dr A H Anderton, consultant neuro-radiologist, for radiological advice.

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*J Neural Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1994 57: 384-385
doi: 10.1136/jnnp.57.3.384-a

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