

Eosinophilic Granuloma of the Cervical Spine

A Case Report and Review of the Literature

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Dickinson LD, Farhat SM. Eosinophilic granuloma of the cervical spine. A case report and review of the literature. *Surg Neurol* 1991;35:57-63.

This is a report of a case of eosinophilic granuloma involving the second cervical vertebra in a 33-year-old woman. There have been 32 case reports in the literature describing eosinophilic granuloma presenting as cervical spine disease. Due to its intimate relation to the central nervous system, the opportunity for neurological sequelae and neurosurgical intervention is common in cervical eosinophilic granuloma. In this report a brief history of eosinophilic granuloma is reviewed and case histories from the literature with cervical spine involvement are summarized. The therapeutic options are described and a recommended protocol for management is outlined.

KEY WORDS: Cervical spine; Eosinophilic granuloma

Eosinophilic granuloma of bone is a granulomatous process causing focal osteolytic lesions, characterized by histiocyte proliferation and eosinophilic infiltration. It is one of a triad of disorders collectively termed histiocytosis X. The etiology is unknown. In this report we describe a case of a solitary eosinophilic granuloma involving the second cervical vertebra in an adult.

Case Report

A 33-year-old woman presented complaining of an 8-week history of progressive neck and occipital region pain. The discomfort was provoked by neck flexion or rotation. Chiropractic manipulations were nonpalliative. A soft collar provided her with mild symptom relief. Examination revealed tenderness over the upper cervical spinous processes and limited cervical range of motion. Torticollis was present with rotation of the head to the

right. The neurological examination was normal. Roentgenograms of the cervical spine were reportedly normal. The patient was admitted to the hospital when leukocytosis was observed on laboratory examination.

Computed tomography (CT) scan of the cervical spine (Figure 1) revealed an expansile soft-tissue lesion in the right side of the body, odontoid process, and right pedicle of C-2. A CT-guided needle biopsy of the C-2 vertebral body was performed. The specimen revealed inflammatory tissue, but was reported as nondiagnostic. A follow-up magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) study was performed, which confirmed a soft-tissue mass in the medullary cavity of C-2 (Figure 2). A skeletal survey revealed no other bone lesions. A liver/spleen scan was normal. A chest x-ray film suggested increased interstitial markings, but pulmonary function tests were normal.

The patient underwent posterior cervical exploration with biopsy and curettage of the right pedicle and body lesion. A C-1 to C-3 fusion was then achieved using 20-gauge wire and iliac bone graft. The biopsy specimen revealed eosinophilic granuloma. The patient was maintained in halo vest traction for 3 months. She received radiation therapy to the cervical spine. The patient reported improvement in her neck pain at the time of discharge, and at follow up 4-months later she was symptom-free. A CT scan showed resolution of the C-2 body lesion, no vertebral body collapse, and fusion of C-1 through C-3.

Discussion

Eosinophilic granuloma is a rare, focal, granulomatous process of bone that has a strong childhood predominance, but has been described in adults. The first case report by Finzi [11] involved a skull lesion in a child. Lichtenstein and Jaffe [20] presented a detailed histologic description in 1940. The basic lesion was described as an infiltration of the medullary cavity of bone by an immense proliferation of histiocytes. These large phagocytic cells form vast sheets of compact aggregates in

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Received April 16, 1990; accepted August 1, 1990.

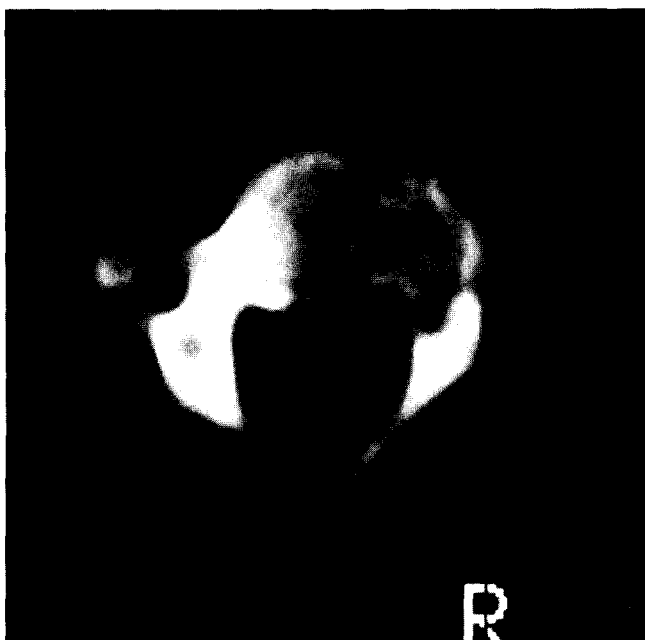


Figure 1. Computed tomography scan through the C-2 vertebra showing expansile mass in the right pedicle and body. Superior images (not presented) showed involvement of the odontoid process.

which mitotic figures are rare. The picture is one of a reactive rather than neoplastic proliferation. Eosinophilic leukocyte aggregates are present to a variable degree, and they are often associated with areas of necrosis. A subpopulation of histiocytes often present are foam cells, vacuolated phagocytes containing sudanophilic material thought to be secondary to the phagocytosis of necrotic debris. Multinucleated giant cells are also common [20,22,26,27].

Otani and Ehrlich [28] pointed out the histologic similarity of the lesion to Hand-Schüller-Christian disease, and Farber [10] hypothesized that eosinophilic granuloma of bone represented a localized form of this chronic, disseminated, granulomatous syndrome and the acute systemic granulomatous syndrome, Letterer-Siwe disease. Believing that these disorders were related manifestations of a single nosologic entity, and in an attempt to descriptively categorize them, Lichtenstein [19] coined the title histiocytosis X. It has been debated that the degree of eosinophilic infiltrate and the number of foam cells are characteristics of the subgroups of the histiocytosis, but no correlation to aggressiveness or prognostic significance has been proven [22,26,39]. Extraskelatal lesions in lymph nodes, skin, oral cavity, anogenital region, lungs, liver, and spleen are hallmarks of the disseminated varieties of the disease [19,22].

Eosinophilic granuloma involving the spine was first

recognized by Compere et al [8] in 1954. They reported four children with clinical and radiographic manifestations of Calvé's disease [4] that had histopathologic evidence of eosinophilic granuloma upon open biopsy of the involved thoracic vertebra. They proposed that eosinophilic granuloma was the histopathologic identity of Calvé's disease. Granulomas in the vertebra cause areas of bone resorption in the medullary cavity, replacing the space with soft, yellow-brown tissue. The lesion has a tendency to be expansile and can erode the cortical bone. This structural weakening can cause partial or total collapse of the vertebra. Perforation of the cortex by the granuloma results in expansion of the lesion in the paravertebral soft tissues. Collapse and extracortical expansion of eosinophilic granuloma are the two processes that can cause compromise to nervous system tissue. As these lesions age, there is a tendency toward fibrosis with eosinophil and histiocyte diminution. Healed lesions become sclerotic on radiographs [7,22] or can entirely resolve [9,22,23]. Several authors have reported reconstitution of part or all of the vertebral height in patients who suffered from vertebral body collapse [3,16,18,25,36].

Eosinophilic granuloma of the cervical spine was first reported by Macnab [22], who described a biopsy-proven lesion of C-2 without collapse of the vertebral body. Twenty-three reports describing 31 case studies of eosinophilic granuloma presenting as cervical involvement without systemic disease were found after an extensive review of the literature. The cases are summarized in chronologic order of publication in Table 1. No cases of disseminated eosinophilic granuloma were found that initially presented as cervical disease. Two reports of patients with previously diagnosed isolated eosinophilic granuloma of bone who subsequently developed cervical lesions were excluded from this report [25,36].

The 33-year-old patient described in this report is one of only four cases of adult cervical eosinophilic granuloma. Interestingly, all four were females. Eighty-two percent of cases involved children between 2 and 19 years of age. There was no sex preference in this population.

The most common presenting complaint was neck pain (87%). Eleven patients (37%) had associated arm pain. Torticollis (30%) and stiffness (17%) were also common complaints. Ten patients (33%) presented with evidence of radiculopathy in one upper extremity. Three patients (9%) presented with evidence of myelopathy.

In most cases the cervical lesion was the only lesion reported; however, the majority of studies did not mention the outcome of a skeletal review, such as bone scan or x-ray survey. It would be inaccurate to assume that other bone involvement is infrequent, as the five cases



Figure 2. Magnetic resonance images of the cervical region after nondiagnostic biopsy attempt. Images from left to right are T1-weighted, proton density, and T2-weighted images, respectively.

in which other skeletal lesions were found had no symptoms referable to the other lesions. A bone survey is necessary to discriminate the extent of the patient's disease.

The body of the vertebra was involved most often, but there were nine reports of isolated posterior element involvement, and three reports documented lesions in both. Computed tomography findings were described in four cases, all of which documented posterior element involvement, suggesting that newer imaging techniques have increased the sensitivity of identifying posterior element involvement. The current report was the first to illustrate the MRI characteristics of the osteolytic lesion.

Unlike thoracic eosinophilic granuloma, in which total collapse of the involved vertebra at presentation is common, patients with cervical eosinophilic granuloma usually present with osteolytic lesions without collapse. Cervical lesions may produce greater symptoms earlier in the disease, as previously hypothesized [33], or it is possible that the natural history of cervical lesions less often evolves to collapse. This is predictable from a structural standpoint, as the weight-bearing load responsible for the force of compression is less in the cervical region.

The patient reported here had an osteolytic lesion of C-2. This was the most frequently involved vertebra. Of the 39 cervical vertebra involved on initial presentation in the 33 patients, nine involved C-2. Four C-2 lesions were associated with subluxation or C-1/C-2 dislocation. There were no reports of collapse among the C-2 lesions.

There is no classic presentation or radiographic finding that would assure the physician of the diagnosis of cervical spine eosinophilic granuloma. The differential diagnosis of a lytic vertebral lesion, with or without collapse, would include osteoblastoma, aneurysmal bone cyst, metastatic disease, osteomyelitis, and Ewing's sar-

coma [1,12,30,38]. Biopsy is essential to rule out the more serious and treatable pathologies. Needle biopsies have proved to be difficult in this region, and the diagnostic yield in this review was poor. Only one out of four needle biopsy specimens were diagnostic. The other three cases went on to open procedures, which confirmed the diagnosis of eosinophilic granuloma.

Radiographic evidence of vertebral collapse and/or extracortical expansion of the granuloma was present in all patients with radicular complaints. In all the cases reporting patient follow up, radicular symptoms and signs resolved with treatment.

The three patients presenting with signs of myelopathy had osteolytic lesions without vertebral body collapse. There was myelographic evidence for extramedullary masses in all three cases. A 10-year-old child that initially presented with hemiparesis progressed to quadriplegia before undergoing surgical decompression and radiation therapy with resolution of the deficit [31]. A second child also had resolution of myelopathy with surgical and radiation therapy [9]; however, the one adult case yielded a persistent quadriplegia despite surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy [33]. This was the only persistent neurologic deficit in the 33 case reports.

All authors reported improvement in patient complaints after initiating therapy. Significant improvement in pain was achieved with immobilization. The type of immobilization ranged from soft collar to halter traction. Radiation therapy was instituted in 17 of the 29 cases reporting treatment. Doses ranged from 450 to 4000 rads, with one report describing the use of 60 Gy of cobalt teletherapy [16]. Three patients received chemotherapy.

As one would suspect after reviewing the variety of radiographic findings and vertebral levels involved, the surgical procedures performed were varied. Twenty-six open procedures were reported. There were 10 posterior operations, 14 anterior operations, and two reports

Table 1. *Clinical Summaries from Literature Review*

| Case no. | Age | Symptoms | Neurologic exam | Radiographic findings | Procedure | Treatment | Outcome | Reference |
|----------|-------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 2 yr | Neck stiffness, torticollis | Normal | C-2 lytic body, C-23 subluxation | Biopsy & curettage | Minerva jacket | AS, resolution (4 mo) | Macnab [22] |
| 2 | 2 yr | Arm weakness | R UE paresis | C-5 lytic posterior elements | Laminectomy | Radiation, collar | New lytic lesions T-3, T-5, skull, femur, phalanx | Davidson and Shillito [9] |
| 3 | 7 yr | Neck pain, stiffness | Normal | C-2 lytic body, prevertebral soft-tissue shadow | Anterior biopsy | Radiation, traction, minerva jacket | AS, resolution (5 mo) | [9] |
| 4 | 17 yr | Neck pain, torticollis | L UE hyperreflexia, Hoffman's sign | C-1 lytic lateral process, prevertebral soft-tissue shadow | Posterior fusion | Radiation, minerva | AS (NR) | [9] |
| 5 | 3 mo | Neck pain | Normal | C-3 lytic body | Needle biopsy | Radiation, traction, collar | AS (NR) | [9] |
| 6 | 8 mo | Neck pain, torticollis | Normal | C-1 lytic posterior elements | Needle biopsy (skull lesion) | Radiation, chemotherapy | AS (3 yr) | [9] |
| 7 | 11 yr | Neck & arm pain | R triceps weakness | C-5 partial collapse | Anterior C-5 corpectomy, C-46 fusion | Radiation, minerva | AS (10 mo) | Lindenbaum and Gettes [21] |
| 8 | 16 yr | Neck & arm pain | Normal | C-3 vertebra plana, C-23 subluxation | Anterior C-24 fusion | Minerva cast | New lytic lesions C-4, C-5 (5 mo), AS (7 mo) | Verbiest [38] |
| 9 | 7 yr | Neck pain, torticollis | Normal | C-4 vertebra plana | Anterior C-4 curettage, bone graft | Radiation, minerva | AS, partial reconstitution of vertebral height (4 yr) | Bonneville et al [3] |
| 10 | 9 yr | NR | L UE paresis, paresthesia | C-4 partial collapse | Anterior biopsy | Traction, collar | C-4 vertebra plana, AS (3 yr) | Chaca and Khong [6] |
| 11 | 12 yr | NR | Normal | C-2 lytic body & posterior elements | None | Traction, collar | New lytic C-3 lesion, AS (15 mo) | [6] |
| 12 | 3 yr | Neck stiffness, torticollis | Hyperreflexia | C-2, C-3, & C-4 lytic bodies, C-12 dislocation, C-34 subluxation | Open biopsy | Traction, minerva jacket | AS, resolution (4 mo) | Marar and Balachandrar [23] |
| 13 | 4 yr | Neck pain, torticollis | NR | C-2 lytic area with fracture, C-12 dislocation | None | Traction, minerva jacket | AS, resolution (18 mo) | [23] |
| 14 | 18 yr | Neck pain | Normal | C-2 lytic arch, C-23 subluxation, C-4 partial collapse | Posterior biopsy | Radiation, collar | AS (4 yr) | Scarfi and Sassi [34] |
| 15 | 10 yr | Neck pain | Quadripareisis | C-6 lytic spinous process, prevertebral soft-tissue shadow | C-6 laminectomy | Radiation, corticosteroid | AS (NR) | Reed et al [31] |

Table 1 (continued)

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|-------|------------------------|------------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 16 | 11 yr | Neck pain | Normal | C-3 partial collapse, C-34 subluxation | None | Traction | C-7 partial collapse (4 mo), C-6 partial collapse (2 yr), AS (9 yr) | Poulson and Thommesen [29] |
| 17 | 13 yr | Neck & arm pain | L wrist extensor weakness | C-2 & C-3 lytic pedicles, extramedullary mass | C-24 laminectomy | Collar | Swan neck deformity | Sherk et al [36] |
| 18 | 9 yr | Neck pain, torticollis | L triceps, wrist extensor weakness | C-6 vertebra plana | Anterior biopsy | Collar | AS, partial reconstitution of vertebral height (6 mo) | [36] |
| 19 | 15 yr | Neck & arm pain | R UE radiculopathy | C-5 partial collapse | Anterior C-46 fusion | Chest cast | AS (6 mo) | Rumyantsev [32] |
| 20 | 4 yr | Neck & arm pain | R UE radiculopathy | C-5 lytic body | Anterior biopsy | Radiation, halo vest | AS (2 yr) | Green et al [14] |
| 21 | 58 yr | Neck & arm pain | L UE radiculopathy | C-5 partial collapse, prevertebral soft-tissue shadow | Anterior C-5 corpectomy, bone graft | NR | AS (6 mo) | Casson et al [5] |
| 22 | 5 yr | Neck pain, torticollis | Normal | C-4 lytic arch & spinous process | Posterior curettage, bone graft | Halo vest | AS (7 yr) | Biehl and Mittelmeier [2] |
| 23 | 5 yr | Neck & arm pain | Normal | C-3 partial collapse | C-3 corpectomy & fusion | Radiation, collar | AS (4 mo) | Gaudara et al [13] |
| 24 | 12 yr | Neck pain, stiffness | Normal | C-4 partial collapse | Anterior curettage, acrylic graft | Radiation, collar | As (9 mo) | [13] |
| 25 | 5 yr | NR | NR | C-6 vertebra plana | Anterior C-56 fusion | Radiation | AS, reconstitution of vertebral height (3 yr) | Hamel et al [16] |
| 26 | 17 yr | Neck & arm pain | Normal | C-4 partial collapse | Anterior C-35 acrylic fusion | Radiation, chemotherapy | AS (NR) | Sanchez et al [33] |
| 27 | 55 yr | Neck pain | Quadripareisis | C-6 & C-7 lytic bodies, extramedullary mass | Anterior decompression, metal/acrylic fixation | Radiation, chemotherapy | Persistent quadripareisis | [33] |
| 28 | 4 yr | Neck & arm pain | R UE weakness | C-4 vertebra plana | None | NR | NR | Charnoff [7] |
| 29 | 10 yr | Torticollis | Normal | C-2 lytic arch | Occiput-C-2 fusion | Halo | NR | Hardy et al [17] |
| 30 | 4 yr | Neck pain | Normal | C-4 lytic body & posterior elements | Biopsy | NR | NR | Silberstein et al [37] |
| 31 | 31 yr | Neck & arm pain | R triceps weakness | C-5 & C-6 lytic pedicles | Posterior biopsy & curettage | NR | AS (NR) | Martin et al [24] |
| 32 | 5 yr | Neck & arm pain | Normal | C-5 lytic posterior elements | Posterior fusion | Radiation | AS (1 yr) | Baber et al [1] |
| 33 | 33 yr | Neck pain | Normal | C-2 lytic body, odontoid & pedicle | Posterior C-13 fusion | Radiation, halo vest | AS (6 mo) | Present report (1990) |

Abbreviations: AS, resolution of symptoms; L, left; NR, not reported; R, right; UE, upper extremity.

that did not specify the approach. Operative descriptions of the anterior approach included biopsy, curettage, subtotal corpectomy, and corpectomy with fusion. Posterior operative descriptions include biopsy, curettage, laminectomy, and fusion. All patients reported to have neurologic deficits on examination underwent surgical procedures. There was one postoperative complication involving a swan neck deformity following multilevel laminectomy [36].

Although the arrest of vertebral collapse following radiation therapy has been reported [8], there is no clear evidence that treatment affects the natural history of cervical lesions with respect to collapse. In the majority of patients there was no progression to collapse in the involved vertebra.

New bone lesions occurred in four of the 29 cases reporting outcome. New lesions occurred in all treatment groups, irrespective of radiation therapy or surgical curettage; however, two of the four patients that did not receive radiation or curettage developed new lesions. Local therapy to active granulomas may not affect the development of new lesions.

Eosinophilic granuloma appears to be a self-limiting disease and the necessity for aggressive therapy has been debated. Granulomas have been reported to respond rapidly to radiation, and thoracolumbar lesions with neurological signs have been managed with radiation only [15]. Authors have recommended that surgical intervention be reserved for cases of cord compression [14,35]. With the advent of CT and MRI, one can now easily determine the existence of extraosseous expansion of the granuloma and the threat to nerve roots and spinal cord. Magnetic resonance imaging should prove to be exceptionally useful in the evaluation of these lesions. Early surgical intervention in cases presenting with physical or radiographic evidence of impending cord or radicular compression is recommended, before the onset of a possible catastrophic event. Although the bone lesions in eosinophilic granuloma are self-limiting, central nervous system injury from the sequelae of expanding granuloma or vertebral collapse may be irreversible.

In conclusion, the management of cervical eosinophilic granuloma should include detailed imaging, skeletal survey, and tissue diagnosis. Immobilization of the spine will palliate symptoms. In cases with evidence for instability or impending neurologic compromise, surgical intervention is recommended. There is no clear evidence that radiation therapy is of benefit.

We wish to thank Dr. Russell Rothrock for referring this patient to our service.

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