Bowel mesentery (meso-appendix) microcystic/reticular schwannoma: Case report and literature review

Shao-Xian Tang, Yi-Hua Sun, Xian-Rong Zhou, Jian Wang

Shao-Xian Tang, Jian Wang, Department of Pathology, Shanghai Cancer Center, Fudan University, Shanghai 200032, China
Shao-Xian Tang, Jian Wang, Department of Oncology, Shanghai Medical College, Fudan University, Shanghai 200032, China
Yi-Hua Sun, Xian-Rong Zhou, Department of Pathology, Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital, Fudan University, Shanghai 200011, China

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Correspondence to: Jian Wang, MD, PhD, Department of Pathology, Shanghai Cancer Center, Fudan University, No. 270, Dong An Road, Shanghai 200032, China. jwang@shca.org.cn
Telephone: +86-21-64176007 Fax: +86-21-64176007
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Abstract

Microcystic/reticular schwannoma is a recently described variant of schwannoma with a predilection for the gastrointestinal tract. Due to overlapping features with other tumors, unawareness of this tumor type may lead to diagnostic and therapeutic pitfalls. We here report a case of microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising in the meso-appendix of a 43-year-old woman. The tumor was incidentally discovered by computed tomography scan for unrelated reasons. A laparoscopic operation was performed shortly after admission. Histological examination revealed a circumscribed tumor with a microcystic and cribriform architecture. Immunohistochemically, the tumor cells were diffusely positive for S100 protein, glial fibrillary acid protein and protein gene product 9.5, which were consistent with a peripheral nerve sheath tumor. The patient remains well with no signs of recurrence at a 10-mo follow-up. To our knowledge, this is the first case of microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising in the meso-appendix. Albeit very rare, microcystic/reticular schwannoma should be included in the differential diagnosis of appendiceal tumors.

Key words: Laparoscopy; Schwannoma; Appendiceal neoplasms; Immunohistochemistry; Differential diagnosis; Gastrointestinal tract

Core tip: Microcystic/reticular schwannoma is a recently described variant of schwannoma with a predilection for the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The striking reticular growth pattern and myxoid background may cause confusion with several other tumors commonly seen in the GI tract, in particular a gastrointestinal stromal tumor with prominent myxoid change and a signet ring cell carcinoma, especially on small biopsies. Herein we report for the first time a microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising primarily in the meso-appendix to highlight its existence and enhance pathologist's and clinician's awareness of this under-recognized variant of schwannoma so as to avoid misdiagnosis and mistreatment.

INTRODUCTION

Schwannoma usually arises in the subcutaneous tissue of the distal extremities or the head and neck region of adult patients with no sex predilection. Occasionally, the tumor may also involve a wide variety of anatomic
There was no clinical manifestation of neurofibromatosis type 1 (NF1) or type 2 (NF2). With a suspicion of a gastrointestinal stromal tumor (GIST) or a leiomyoma, the patient was admitted for scheduled surgery. During laparoscopic operation, a solid well-circumscribed mass was found in the distal end of the meso-appendix, measuring approximately 4 cm in diameter. The patient recovered uneventfully after surgery and is now well with no evidence of recurrence at a 10-mo follow-up.

Pathological findings
The submitted specimen consisted of white to gray fragmentary tissues measuring 4.0 cm × 4.0 cm × 1.9 cm in volume. It had a homogeneous gelatinous texture, showing no features of necrosis, hemorrhage or cystic degeneration. At scanning magnification, the tumor was well circumscribed and surrounded by a thin fibrous capsule (Figure 2A). It was composed of relatively alternating fibrillary and myoid areas (Figure 2B). There was transition between these two areas. Tumor cells were spindle-shaped with eosinophilic cytoplasm and ovoid or tapered nuclei harboring small inconspicuous nucleoli. They had generally bland appearance without nuclear pleomorphism or degenerative atypia. Mitotic figure was scarce with less than 3/50 HPF. In fibrillary areas, the tumor cells were generally arranged in irregular fascicles with no palisading or Verocay body formation, whereas in myoid areas, they were arranged in anastomosing or intersecting strands creating a striking lace-like or microcystic growth pattern (Figures 2C and D). In focal areas, remarkable perivascular lymphocytic aggregates were present.

Immunohistochemistry was performed on paraaffin-embedded sections using the standard EnVision method. The tumor cells showed diffuse and strong nuclear and cytoplasmic staining of S100 protein (Figure 3A). They were also positive for glial fibrillary acid protein (GFAP) and protein gene product 9.5 (PGP9.5) (Figure 3B). Focal staining was also found with CD117, MIB-1 showed low proliferative activity with index less than 1%. A few CD34 positive cells were observed among the stromal cells, indicating the presence of fibroblast or perineurial cells within the tumor. Tumor cells were all negative for CD57, DOG1, desmin, alpha smooth muscle actin, and protein gene product 9.5 (PGP9.5) (Figure 3B). There was transdifferentiation between these two areas. Tumor cells were spindle-shaped with eosinophilic cytoplasm and ovoid or tapered nuclei harboring small inconspicuous nucleoli. They had generally bland appearance without nuclear pleomorphism or degenerative atypia. Mitotic figure was scarce with less than 3/50 HPF. In fibrillary areas, the tumor cells were generally arranged in irregular fascicles with no palisading or Verocay body formation, whereas in myoid areas, they were arranged in anastomosing or intersecting strands creating a striking lace-like or microcystic growth pattern (Figures 2C and D). In focal areas, remarkable perivascular lymphocytic aggregates were present.

We did sequencing analysis of exons 9, 11, 13, and 17 of c-KIT gene to exclude the possibility of GIST. Polymerase chain reaction assays were carried out using oligonucleotide primer pairs as previously described. Direct sequencing was performed on the ABI Prism 310 DNA sequencer. The result demonstrated that the tumor did not harbor c-KIT gene mutation.

DISCUSSION
Microcystic/reticular schwannoma is a rare variant of schwannoma. Including the current case, only 22 cases have been reported in the literature. Due to its rarity, this tumor type has remained under-recognized. As
there are overlapping features with a wide variety of neoplasms, this tumor type may be misdiagnosed and potentially lead to mistreatment of the patients. Therefore, enhanced awareness of its characteristic features is imperative for pathologists to avoid diagnostic pitfalls. To enhance the recognition, we present here an additional case of microcystic/reticular schwannoma and undertake a brief review of the literature.

Taking the current case into account, there are 13 cases of microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising primarily in the gastrointestinal tract, accounting more than a half of all cases. The overall median and average ages of patients with gastrointestinal microcystic/reticular schwannoma at diagnosis were 68 years and 66 years, respectively (range, 32-93 years). There was a predilection for female patients, with a male/female ratio of 1:3.3 (Table 1). Clinically, the majority of patients presented with an asymptomatic mass discovered incidentally by imaging examinations during routine check-up or at operation for other unrelated reasons. A few patients complained of indigestion, bowel habit change or epigastric pain\[13,16\]. Occasionally, the tumor appeared as an intestinal polypoid lesion at colonoscopy\[12,14\]. To date, none has clinical evidence of NF1 or NF2. The tumors ranged in size from 0.4 to 4.0 cm (median, 1.3 cm; mean, 1.5 cm). With regard to the site, 4 cases occurred in the colon, 3 cases in the small intestine, 2 cases in the cecum, 2 cases in the stomach, and 1 case each in the rectum and meso-appendix.

Except for the 4 tumors showing focal infiltration
between smooth muscle fibers or extending into the mu-
cosa[12-14], the other gastrointestinal microcystic/reticular
 schwannomas were all well circumscribed. On histology, microcystic/reticular schwannoma differs from a clas-
cic schwannoma in many ways. The former lacks the di-
agnostic features that are typically noted in a classic schwannoma, namely alternating areas of Antoni A and
Antoni B, presence of palisading or Verocay bodies, ag-
ggregates of foamy histiocytes, and hyalinized blood ves-
sels. The hallmark of microcystic/reticular schwannoma
is the presence of a striking reticular and microcystic
architecture, a feature not observed in any other variants
of schwannoma.

Regardless of the preferential location in the gastro-
intestinal tract, microcystic/reticular schwannoma is dif-
f erent from another variant of so-called gastrointestinal
 schwannoma[9]. Gastrointestinal schwannoma is relatively
more common than microcystic/reticular schwannoma.
This type of schwannoma tends to occur in the stom-
auch, although intestines can be occasionally involved.
Histologically, it is composed of spindled Schwann cells
displaying frequently a microtrabecular or microfascicular
pattern and characterized by a peritumoral lymphocytic
architectural, a feature not observed in any other variants
of schwannoma.

Besides variants of schwannoma, there are other types of
benign peripheral nerve sheath tumor occurring in the
gastrointestinal tract which may cause confusion among
them. These tumors include perineurioma and hybrid
 schwannoma/perineurioma. Perineurioma is composed of
bland spindle cells with long bipolar cytoplasmic pro-
cesses embedded in fine collagenous stroma which some-
times appears myxoid[25]. The typical feature of “pseudo-
onion bulb” arrangement of tumor cells around a central
axon will help arrive at a correct diagnosis. However, the
reticular variant of perineurioma may present diagnostic
dilemma. This unusual morphologic variant occurs pre-
ferentially in the soft tissue with no case of gastrointestinal
 origin documented[23]. Immunostaining with a panel
of antibodies including EMA, claudin-1, S100 protein
and GFAP will facilitate the differential diagnosis. Hybrid
 schwannoma/perineurioma is a benign tumor consisting
of intimately mixed components of plump spindled
Schwann cells and slender perineurial cells. This novel
variant of peripheral nerve sheath tumor may also occur
in the gastrointestinal tract[8]. However, tumor cells are
frequently arranged in a storiform or fascicular pattern
and the stroma rarely undergoes myxoid change. Double
immunostaining of S100 protein and EMA can clearly
highlight the two components.

Occasionally, GIST may have myxoid change. Al-
though the majority of GIST arise in stomach and in-
estines, involvement of appendix is not uncommon[34].
Indeed, it has been acclaimed that GIST represents the
most common type of appendiceal mesenchymal
tumors[29]. As the treatment varies greatly, a distinction
between GIST and microcystic/reticular schwannoma
is warranted. Appendiceal GISTs are usually incidental
findings. Some cases may masquerade as appendicitis.
Microscopically, they are indolent tumors composed of
spindle cells with prominent extracellular collagen glob-
ules, known as skineoid fibers. Immunohistochemically,
appendiceal GISTs are ubiquitously positive for CD117

Table 1 Summary of patients with gastrointestinal microcystic/reticular schwannoma

| Ref.       | Sex/age (yr) | Location      | Size (cm) | Symptoms       | Gross appearance                           | Outcome (mo)          |
|------------|--------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Liegli et al[22] | F/73         | Rectum        | 0.85      | Asymptomatic   | Circumscribed, not encapsulated            | Died at 36           |
| Liegli et al[22] | F/72         | Stomach       | 2.0       | Asymptomatic   | Circumscribed, not encapsulated            | ANED at 24           |
| Liegli et al[22] | M/68         | Cecum         | 0.4       | Asymptomatic   | Circumscribed with focal infiltration     | ANED at 24           |
| Liegli et al[22] | F/93         | Jejunum       | 1.6       | Asymptomatic   | Circumscribed, not encapsulated            | ANED at 7            |
| Liegli et al[22] | M/78         | Small intestine| 0.8      | Asymptomatic   | Circumscribed with focal infiltration     | “Recent case”         |
| Lee et al[23]   | F/32         | Ascending colon| 1.4      | Bowel habit change | Circumscribed with focal infiltration | UA                    |
| Agaimy et al[24] | F/67         | Cecum         | 1.0       | A polyp at colonoscopy | Circumscribed with focal infiltration | ANED at 12           |
| Agaimy et al[24] | F/67         | Mid-jejunum   | 2.2       | Incidental finding | UA | ANED at 2   |
| Kienemund et al[25] | F/70       | Sigmoid colon | 0.7       |                  | Circumscribed, not encapsulated            | UA                    |
| Kienemund et al[25] | F/70       | Sigmoid colon | 1.3       | Incidental finding | UA | ANED at 60  |
| Chetty et al[26] | F/63         | Stomach       | 1.9       | Epigastric pain | UA | ANED at 24  |
| Trivedi et al[27] | M/61         | Sigmoid colon | 0.7       | Incidental finding | Circumscribed, not encapsulated | ANED at 10       |
| Our case       | F/43         | Meso-appendix | 4.0       | Incidental finding | Circumscribed and encapsulated | ANED at 10       |

1Died of metastatic colon carcinoma; ANED: Alive with no evidence of disease; UA: Unavailable.
and DOG1, whereas the staining of S100 protein is consistently negative. It is worthy to note that focal immunoreactivity of CD117 can be observed in a minority of microcystic/reticular schwannoma. However, the absence of KIT or PDGFR alpha gene mutation denies the diagnosis of GIST.

As abovementioned, most cases of microcystic/reticular schwannoma were well circumscribed. However, a few tumors showed focal infiltration between the smooth muscle fibers of the muscularis mucosa, between the colonic crypts, or extended into the mucosa\cite{12-14}. The epithelioid morphology, signet ring cell appearance of the tumor cells in some cases together with a myoid background may cause confusion with poorly differentiated adenocarcinoma or signet ring cell carcinoma\cite{12,18}. Of note, the so-called signet ring cell gastric schwannoma described by Tozbikian et al\cite{10} in 2008, in our opinion, represents a morphologic spectrum of microcystic/reticular schwannoma. Erroneous diagnosis of a benign microcystic/reticular schwannoma as a malignant signet ring cell carcinoma will lead to inappropriate treatment of the patients. The absence of nuclear atypia and negativity for epithelial markers allow the differentiation of microcystic/reticular schwannomas from carcinomas.

In summary, we reported for the first time a microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising primarily in the vermiform appendix. Although very rare, microcystic/reticular schwannoma represents a unique and distinctive morphological variant of schwannoma with a benign clinical course. Enhanced awareness of its characteristic features will facilitate the differential diagnosis from a wide variety of neoplasm with overlapping features.

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**COMMENTS**

**Clinical diagnosis**

The patient was incidentally found to have a pelvic mass by computed tomography (CT) scan during a check-up for mild abdominal pain.

**Differential diagnosis**

The characteristic features in immunohistochemistry may facilitate the differentiation of microcystic/reticular schwannoma from a variety of tumors with overlapping features.

**Laboratory diagnosis**

Immunohistochemically, the tumor cells showed diffuse and strong nuclear and cytoplasmic staining of S100 protein and gliarial fibrillary acid protein (GFAP), compatible with a peripheral nerve sheath tumor.

**Imaging diagnosis**

CT scan revealed an isodense mass in the right lower quadrant which was suspected to be a gastrointestinal stromal tumor (GIST) or a leiomyoma.

**Pathological diagnosis**

The well-circumscribed tumor was composed of relatively alternating fibrillary and myoid areas, creating a distinctive lacelike and microcystic growth pattern.

**Treatment**

A laparoscopic surgery, the solid mass of the meso-appendix was excised and no adjuvant treatment was applied after surgery.

**Related reports**

Thirteen cases of gastrointestinal microcystic/reticular schwannoma have been reported, most of which are located in the wall of the gastroenterologic tract. This is a first case of a microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising primarily in the vermiform appendix.

**Term explanation**

Although termed as a schwannoma, the tumor lacks the distinctive features that are typically noted in a classic schwannoma, such as alternating areas of Antoni A and Antoni B, presence of palisading or Verocay bodies, aggregates of foamy histiocytes, and hyalinized blood vessels. The hallmark of this rare variant is the presence of a striking reticular and microcystic architecture which may cause confusion with other neoplasms.

**Experiences and lessons**

This case was initially considered to be a GIST. However, the strong immunostaining of S100 protein and GFAP suggested a peripheral nerve sheath tumor. The striking microcystic/reticular arrangement of the tumor cells helped to recognize the lesion as a special variant of schwannoma which was recently described.

**Peer review**

This article represents the first report of a microcystic/reticular schwannoma arising primarily in the vermiform appendix. Increased awareness of this special variant of schwannoma may help to avoid diagnostic pitfalls. More case reports are needed to further expand the clinical spectrum of the disease.
Tang SX et al. Microcystic/reticular schwannoma of the appendix

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