Tracheal Injury during Endoscopic Transoral Vestibular Approach Thyroidectomy: A Case Report

Zhu Yuhang,1* Li Tingting,2* Xiong Liulin,1 Li Tao Lang,3 Zhu Zhaoqiong1

1Department of Anesthesiology, Affiliated Hospital of Zunyi Medical University, Zaiyi, Guizhou China; 2Institute of Neurological Disease, Department of Anesthesiology, West China Hospital, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China; 3Department of Thyroid and Breast Surgery, Affiliated Hospital of Zunyi Medical University, Zaiyi, Guizhou, China

ABSTRACT

This report describes the intraoperative course of endoscopic thyroidectomy by oral vestibular approach in a female patient. This operation is new, and its perioperative management is not yet mature. In this case, the surgery resulted in trachea injury that could not be detected easily. As a result, the patient suddenly developed acute dyspnea and circulatory disorder. This procedure requires caution in surgical execution and anesthesia management.

INTRODUCTION

Endoscopic thyroidectomy using the oral vestibular approach (ETOVA) is popular with patients for its good appearance, lacking an incision in the neck. However, this type of surgery is still in the early stages of application, the operation is not fully developed, and it requires continuous injection of CO2. These factors prompt new requirements for anesthesia management. Our hospital handled a patient with tracheal injury during surgery, as reported below.

CASE REPORT

A female patient, age 55 years, weight 52 kg, American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) level II, was admitted for “right thyroid lump for a month.” A lump ~2 × 1 cm in size was palpable in the thyroid region of the right neck on physical examination. It was tough, involved no tenderness, had a clear boundary, and moved up and down with swallowing. Other examination results were unremarkable. The diagnosis was right thyroid lump. The planned surgery was ETOVA.

The patient entered the operating room after sufficient preoperative preparation. Heart rate (HR) was 87 bpm, blood pressure (BP) was 125/72 mmHg, oxygen saturation (SPO2) was 98%, and respiratory rate was 15/min (Figure 1a). The right upper limb had an open venous channel, and oxygen was given at a flow rate of 2 L/min through the mask. After anesthesia induction, using the visual laryngoscope, a 6.5-internal-diameter recurrent laryngeal nerve endotracheal catheter was adjusted to place at the left corner of the mouth. Vital signs and end-tidal carbon dioxide partial pressure (EtCO2) were continuously monitored during the operation. Mechanical ventilation parameters were tidal volume, 6 mL/kg; respiratory frequency, 12/min; and suction/respiration...
Informed consent was obtained from the patient, and the disclosure of this clinical case was approved by the Ethics Committee of Zunyi Medical University. This case strictly adheres to the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and the International Ethical Guidelines for Human Biomedical Research.

**DISCUSSION**

This case reports a sudden airway crisis during endoscopic thyroidectomy. Intraoperative exploration revealed that it was likely caused by damage of endotracheal tube and gas tube wall caused by overly deep puncture of the surgical needle. This injury quickly caused a severe ventilation crisis. If this kind of injury were ignored, it would put the patient in jeopardy. This case report provides a warning for clinical surgery, experience for anesthesia management, and ideas for crisis management.

ETOVA has the advantages of maintaining preoperative appearance, with no scar on the body surface, and quick healing. Therefore, this minimally invasive procedure may become a mainstream thyroidectomy in the future [Ngo 2020; Camenzuli 2018]. However, the operation space of this surgery is narrow, and the anatomic position of thyroid gland is close to the trachea, carotid sheath, and other vital structures. What is more, this kind of operation—performed on the neck of the patient with the oral vestibule approach—uses the same approach as conventional anesthesia airway management. Thus, overly deep puncture with the needle during the operation may cause an airway wall injury, leading to a severe respiratory crisis during the perioperative period (Figure 1e).

It is worth noting that the perioperative distance between the upper edge of the endotracheal tube cuff and the lower edge of the glottis is 1.9 to 4.1 cm [Chen 2018]. In other words, the endotracheal tube cuff and thyroid gland are located in a similar horizontal plane of the spine. Therefore, this kind of surgery may cause not only damage of the endotracheal tube cuff, but also of the airway. Compared with open surgery, the airway injury caused by needle puncture is concealed in endoscopic surgery, which is not conducive to timely detection and rescue treatment. In this case, the size of the wound was found to be 0.3 cm, larger than the diameter of the needle itself. If not found and handled in time, a series of serious complications would have occurred. All the above considerations prompt strict requirements for the endoscope operator's technique and anesthesiology management.

In addition, compared with open surgery, endoscope surgery often requires constant infusion of CO₂ at a certain pressure to maintain the operating space. Many studies have shown that CO₂ during minimally invasive surgery can enter blood vessels and other tissues, leading to severe complications such as hypercapnia [Wang 2019], vasospasm [Rubino 2000], and embolization [Hou 2020; Li 2020]. These complications can lead to serious hemodynamic changes, greatly reducing the perioperative rescue time window and increasing the risk of serious adverse perioperative events. When increased EtCO₂ occurs during ETOVA surgery, it is necessary to find the cause quickly.

In summary, strict surgical procedures and anesthesia management are critical for perioperative airway management,
especially for endoscopic neck surgery. This case shows that the poor operation of a surgical puncture needle during ETOVA may result in damage to the endotracheal catheter and the trachea. It is suggested that clinicians pay attention to the challenges inherent in the development of new techniques, such as minimally invasive surgery, to ensure the safety of patients during surgery.

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