ABSTRACT

Introduction: Repair of large paraesophageal hernias by itself is associated with high failure rates in the morbidly obese. A surgical approach addressing both giant paraesophageal hernia and morbid obesity has, to our knowledge, not been explored in the surgical literature.

Methods: A retrospective review of a bariatric surgery database identified patients who underwent simultaneous repair of large type 3 paraesophageal hernias with primary crus closure and Roux-en-Y gastric bypass (RYGB). Operative time, intraoperative and 30-day morbidity, weight loss, resolution of comorbid conditions and use of antireflux medication were outcome measures. Integrity of crural closure was studied with a barium swallow.

Results: Three patients with a mean body mass index of 46kg/m² and mean age of 46 years underwent repair of a large paraesophageal hernia, primary crus closure, and RYGB. Mean operative time was 241 minutes and length of stay was 4 days. There was no intraoperative or 30-day morbidity. One patient required endoscopic balloon dilation of the gastrojejunostomy. At 12 months, all patients were asymptomatic with excellent weight loss and resolution of comorbidities. Contrast studies showed no recurrence of the hiatal hernia.

Conclusion: Simultaneous laparoscopic repair of large paraesophageal hernias in the morbidly obese is safe and effective.

Key Words: Hiatal hernia, Morbid obesity, Paraesophageal hernia, Roux-en-Y gastric bypass.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 5% of the United States adult population, or more than 15 million Americans, are morbidly obese—the highest prevalence of obesity worldwide—and the problem appears to be accelerating rapidly according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,1 with more than 120,000 bariatric procedures performed annually in the United States.2 At the same time, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), as defined by heartburn or regurgitation symptoms at least 2 times to 3 times per week, is one of the most commonly encountered gastrointestinal disorders, currently affecting >75 million Americans.3

Epidemiologic data suggest that obesity is a significant independent risk factor for GERD,4 and the prevalence of both has increased in Western populations over the last 40 years, further corroborating this association.5 Not surprisingly, the prevalence of GERD is considerably higher in obese individuals compared to their nonobese counterparts,5,6 with 39% to 61% of morbidly obese patients undergoing evaluation for bariatric surgery reporting chronic reflux symptoms.5,6–8 Heartburn worsens linearly with BMI,5 and obesity appears to not only predispose one to reflux, but also is a significant independent risk factor for development of hiatal hernia in itself,9 with hiatal herniation present in up to half of all morbidly obese individuals.10–12 Hiatal hernia repair with fundoplication is the standard surgical treatment for paraesophageal hernias (PEH). Higher recurrence rates have been reported in obese patients, and it would be desirable to address obesity in the same setting.

In this case series, we report the results of 3 morbidly obese females with giant PEH who underwent successful primary repair of their hernias combined with a laparoscopic RYGB. The safety and feasibility of this combined procedure is explored.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

After obtaining institutional review board approval, we conducted a retrospective review of all patients who underwent bariatric surgery from August 2002 to August 2008. Patients who underwent simultaneous laparoscopic...
Roux-en-Y gastric bypass with repair of large type 3 paraesophageal hernias, in which the majority of the stomach was intrathoracic, were identified (Figures 1 and 2). Demographics of these patients are described in Table 1. In all 3 patients, the diagnosis of PEH was established by endoscopy and barium swallow studies for evaluation of dysphagia and heartburn. Two patients were referred to the esophageal service for repair of the PEH. However, given their obesity and medical problems, a decision was made to proceed with evaluation for bariatric surgery and offer a combined repair of the large PEH and laparoscopic gastric bypass. The third patient was referred to the bariatric service for consideration of weight loss surgery. There was no evidence of impaired gastric motility on the barium swallows of any of our patients, and the possibility of formal gastric emptying studies and gastrostomy tube placement in the gastric remnant was not considered. We also expected that formation of the gastrojejunostomy would keep the pouch reduced in the abdominal cavity. All patients were evaluated and followed in the esophageal surgery program for symptom recurrence using a standardized questionnaire. A barium swallow was obtained after the first postoperative year to document the integrity of the hiatal repair (Figure 3). This is part of the esophageal program’s routine annual follow-up for all patients who have undergone hiatal hernia repair.

![Figure 1. CT scan demonstrating large intrathoracic stomach due to paraesophageal hernia type III.](image)

![Figure 2. Chest x-ray demonstrating intrathoracic stomach.](image)

| Patient Characteristics | Case #1 | Case #2 | Case #3 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Age (years)             | 39      | 58      | 52      |
| Sex                     | F       | F       | F       |
| Height (m)              | 1.66    | 1.57    | 1.6     |
| Weight (kg)             | 129.1   | 128.8   | 130     |
| IBW                     | 57.8    | 49.7    | 52.4    |
| Excess Body Weight (kg) | 71.3    | 79.1    | 77.6    |
| BMI                     | 46.8    | 52.3    | 50      |
| OR time (min)           | 295     | 237     | 192     |
| ASA                     | III     | III     | III     |
| Estimated Blood Loss (mL)| 50    | 50      | 100     |
| Roux Limb Length (cm)   | 150     | 75      | 150     |
| Hospital Length of Stay | 5       | 5       | 2       |
| Most Recent Follow-up   | 1 year  | 1.5 years | 1.5 years |
| Weight Loss at 1 yr (kg)| 38.7   | 28.5    | 37.2    |
| Weight loss as Excess Body Weight (%) | 54.3 | 36 | 47.9 |
| BMI at 1 yr             | 32.8    | 40.7    | 36.2    |
| Weight Loss at Most Recent Followup (kg) | 38.7 | 31.7 | 33.2 |
| Reflux Free             | Yes     | Yes     | Yes     |
| Off Antireflux Medications | Yes | Yes | Yes |

The operative steps for a successful intrathoracic stomach reduction and hiatal hernia repair, followed by a laparoscopic RYGB, are as follows: pneumoperitoneum is ob-
tained with a Veress needle inserted in the left upper quadrant. A 5-mm camera port is then inserted by using an optical trocar in a supraumbilical position, slightly to the left of midline. Additional 5-mm and 12-mm ports are inserted in each subcostal area. A Nathanson liver retractor is used for retracting the left lobe of the liver laterally to allow adequate access to the diaphragmatic crura. A complete dissection of the hernia sac allows reduction of the intrathoracic stomach back into the peritoneal cavity. The diaphragmatic crura are next reapproximated primarily with braided 1-0 suture in a figure-of-8 configuration. The omentum is subsequently divided lengthwise, and a biliary limb is created by dividing the proximal small bowel approximately 50 cm distal to the ligament of Treitz. An end-to-side anastomosis is created 150 cm distal to the first bowel division to create the Roux limb. A gastrotomy is then made, and the gastric anvil is introduced. The gastric pouch is sized to approximately 30 mL, and the stomach is divided. An ante-colic ante-gastric end-to-side gastrojejunostomy is made between the gastric pouch and the proximal Roux limb by using a size 21 EEA. Intraoperative endoscopy is then used to confirm a satisfactory airtight gastrojejunostomy. A Penrose drain is left adjacent to the divided stomach, and the mesenteric defect is closed with a running nonabsorbable suture. Hemostasis is ensured in the entire operative field, the abdomen is irrigated, and the ports are finally removed.

RESULTS

All 3 patients had uneventful procedures with a total operating time ranging between 192 minutes to 295 minutes (Table 1), and estimated blood loss of <100 mL. All patients had unremarkable postoperative recoveries and were discharged home 2 days to 5 days after surgery. At the most recent follow-up (12 to 18 months), our subjects had lost from 36 kg to 47.9 kg, which represented 36% to 54.3% of their excess body weight, and all were reflux symptom-free and off antireflux medications (Table 1). These findings support our belief that a combination of a laparoscopic bariatric with an antireflux procedure can be safely performed in experienced hands with carefully selected patients.

DISCUSSION

Morbid obesity is an independent risk factor for GERD, and the prevalence of both has been rising in the United States over the past few decades. Even though a direct pathophysiologic link between obesity and GERD has not been clearly demonstrated, multiple obesity-related physiologic derangements appear to promote reflux: central obesity leads to increased intragastric pressure, thus predisposing to reflux; obese individuals are also found to have a decreased lower esophageal sphincter (LES), more frequent LES relaxation intervals, and esophageal motility disorders. In addition, visceral fat is metabolically active and produces a variety of cytokines, including IL-6 and TNF, which might affect esophagogastric motor activity and worsen reflux symptomatology.

Hiatal herniation has also been demonstrated to be extremely common in this population, with a prevalence of 20% to 52.6%. The mechanisms that predispose obese individuals to reflux may also make them susceptible to hiatal herniation. Further corroboration of these findings were provided by Pandolfino et al, who demonstrated that the morphology of the pressure tracings along the gastroesophageal junction (GEJ) were altered in a manner supporting the formation of a hiatal hernia. They also reported that the intragastric pressure and the GEJ pressure gradient, both risk factors for hiatal herniation, correlated strongly with increasing BMI.

Figure 3. Postoperative barium swallow at one-year following hiatal hernia repair and Roux-en-Y gastric bypass.
the RYGB is a successful operation for gastroesophageal reflux and sliding hiatal hernias.\textsuperscript{20,21} The gastric bypass offers a combined restrictive and malabsorptive approach to weight loss, while a long Roux limb offers the added benefit of preventing acid and bile reflux to the gastric pouch.\textsuperscript{22} At the same time, weight loss in itself helps reduce intraabdominal pressures typically associated with excess body weight, hence ameliorating a significant risk factor for development, or in this case recurrence, of hiatal herniation. The smaller gastric pouch creates a much smaller “storage area,” leading to much less gastric content being able to regurgitate into the esophagus, and the stapling to a jejunal loop, in combination with the crural reapproximation, offers an anchoring mechanism for preventing new or recurring transhiatal herniation.\textsuperscript{8,23}

Several recent reports of gastric banding concurrent with hiatal hernia repair are encouraging,\textsuperscript{24,25} even in patients with paraesophageal hernias.\textsuperscript{25} Hiatal defect repairs in band patients are often performed preferably by anterior crural closure to avoid posterior dissection. Extensive posterior dissection is thought to be responsible for a higher rate of band slippage. However in the instance of giant paraesophageal hernias, reduction of the stomach is not possible until the sac has been completely dissected, often requiring extensive posterior dissection. Though gastric banding surgery is technically simpler than RYGB, the concern of band slippage remains a possibility. In addition, the higher weight loss afforded with the laparoscopic RYGB may lower the abdominal pressure more than the band and decrease chances of the breakdown of the hiatal hernia repair. Prevention of acid and bile reflux due to the bypass offers additional advantages over the laparoscopic band. For these reasons, we recommend selecting the gastric bypass in the context of a giant paraesophageal hernia.

Similar to sliding hiatal hernias in the obese, paraesophageal hernias recur quite frequently (12% to 42%), when repaired by crural closure alone.\textsuperscript{26,27} The cause of this high failure rate is multifactorial, including large hernia defects, closure under tension, constant movement of the repair with respiration, or coughing, or both together, and morbid obesity. Therefore, extrapolating from the inguinal and ventral hernia literature, many authors have advocated the use of mesh in hiatal hernia repairs. Synthetic materials have been tested extensively with promising results.\textsuperscript{28,29} However, mesh erosion into the esophagus or stomach, ulceration, stricture, and dysphagia have all been described,\textsuperscript{29} and recurrence of paraesophageal hernias is not eliminated. In our case series, we avoided the use of a permanent prosthetic mesh in a field potentially contaminated from performing bowel anastomoses, as this may have increased the risk of mesh infection. The use of biologic meshes for crural reinforcement has shown good initial results in preliminary studies,\textsuperscript{30} and we would consider using them if the diaphragmatic crural fascia is severely attenuated or torn intraoperatively.

**CONCLUSION**

A combined approach of treating morbid obesity and giant paraesophageal hernia repair is feasible and safe. We advocate RYGB as the optimal bariatric procedure and primary suture closure of crura.

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