Development of Bronchopleural Fistula Complicated by Empyema Fifteen Years After Right Lower Lobe Lobectomy: A Case Report

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Conflict of interest:
None declared

Patient: Male, 55-year-old
Final Diagnosis: Bronchopleural fistula • empyema
Symptoms: Back pain • productive cough • shortness of breath
Medication: —
Clinical Procedure: Bronchoscopy • chest wall resection • laparotomy • omentectomy • thoracentesis • thoracotomy
Specialty: Microbiology and Virology • Pulmonology • Surgery

Objective: Unusual clinical course

Background: Bronchopleural fistula formation is a rare complication of lobectomy surgery, with a frequency reported ranging from 0.5% to 1%. A post-lobectomy bronchopleural fistula usually presents within 14 days of surgery. To our knowledge, it is extremely rare for a bronchopleural fistula to develop many years after an operation.

Case Report: We present the case of a 55-year-old male smoker with history of a right lower lobe lobectomy 15 years prior who presented to the Emergency Department with complaints of worsening back pain, shortness of breath, and cough productive of sputum. He was found to have a right bronchopleural fistula with right-sided empyema. He was taken to the operating room a few days after initial admission for right thoracoscopic chest exploration, right chest debridement, right chest wall resection, and window procedure with creation of pleurocutaneous fistula. Ultimately, he required a right completion pneumonectomy and buttress of bronchial stump with transdiaphragmatic omental flap.

Conclusions: We diagnosed a rare case of post-lobectomy bronchopleural fistula complicated by an empyema that demonstrates bronchopleural fistulas can appear 15 years postoperatively and present with subacute clinical signs and symptoms.

MeSH Keywords: Bronchial Fistula • Empyema • Postoperative Complications

Full-text PDF: https://www.amjcaserep.com/abstract/index/idArt/924245

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Background

Bronchopleural fistula formation is a rare complication of lobectomy surgery, with a frequency reported ranging from 0.5% to 1% [1]. A post-lobectomy bronchopleural fistula usually presents within 14 days of surgery. Generally, a fistula is suspected when the patient develops acute symptoms of dyspnea, chest pain, hemodynamic instability, and subcutaneous emphysema recently after surgery [2]. To our knowledge, it is rare for a bronchopleural fistula to develop many years after an operation. We describe a case of a bronchopleural fistula complicated by an empyema that developed approximately 15 years after a right lower lobe lobectomy.

Case Report

A 55-year-old male smoker with a history of recurrent lung abscesses status post right lower lobe lobectomy 15 years prior presented to our hospital 3 days after an approximately 11-hour drive with complaints of worsening back pain, shortness of breath, and cough productive of sputum. The pain was predominantly over the right lower back, dull and achy in nature, worsened by activity, and relieved with bed rest. There was no trauma, radiation, or associated tingling/numbness.

He endorsed some degree of shortness of breath at baseline, but it had increased substantially over the 3 days prior to admission and limited his exertion after walking 20 feet. He had a cough productive of white phlegm but no blood. He endorsed night sweats over the prior 1–2 months and a 4.54 kg (10-pound) weight loss within the prior 2 weeks. He denied fevers or chills.

In the Emergency Department, he was afebrile but hypotensive with mean arterial pressures (MAPs) between 50 to 60 mmHg. He was saturating 92% to 95% on room air. Laboratory tests were notable for a leukocytosis of 20,300/mm$^3$ (neutrophils 80%), pH 6.8, and lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) >200 U/L. An intra-thoracic pigtail was placed and later upsized to a 24-French chest tube. Cultures from the fluid grew methicillin-sensitive Staphylococcus aureus (MSSA) and antibiotics were changed to ampicillin/sulbactam. He had a persistent air leak in the collection chamber. A bronchoscopy with barium fluoroscopy was performed and demonstrated a bronchopleural fistula into the right main stem bronchus.

A few days after initial admission, he was taken to the operating room for right thoracoscopic chest exploration. Approximately 0.5 L of frank pus was aspirated from the chest cavity when it was first entered. In addition, inspection of the chest cavity revealed frankly necrotic tissue on the chest wall with multiple adhesions which would have precluded packing. There was no viable lung noted, though there was a limited view of the chest cavity given the extent of necrotic debris. Ultimately, a window procedure with creation of pleurocutaneous fistula was performed.

Over the following weeks, due to persistent air leaks, a video thoracoscopic exploration was performed and revealed necrosis of the entire right lung with a Swiss cheese-like consistency and air leaks throughout its entire surface. At this point, it was clear that the lung was a chronic nidus for infection and would ultimately lead to the patient’s demise, with the only option being a completion pneumonectomy. Consequently, he underwent a right thoraco-sternotomy, right extra-pleural completion pneumonectomy, partial parietal pleurectomy, laparotomy with jejunostomy tube placement to support nutrition, and harvest of pedicled omental flap to buttress bronchial stump with transdiaphragmatic omental flap. Unfortunately, during the post-operative period and rehabilitation phase, the patient developed recurrent chest wall infections and has been hospitalized multiple times requiring repeated debridements and continued use of the irrigating vac.

Discussion

The most common occurrence of bronchopleural fistula is as a postoperative complication after a pneumonectomy or lobectomy [1]. By removing the entire lung or a lobe a conduit may be created between the end of the bronchus and the pleural space. This connection can be surgically repaired via multiple techniques including mechanical closure with staples or manual closure with sutures [3]. Rarely, this closure fails to heal and creates a fistula. This exposes the clean pleural space to the normal flora of the bronchus, which can lead to an empyema or aspiration pneumonia with significant morbidity [4]. Factors that increase the risk of fistula formation post-pneumonectomy or lobectomy include right-side surgery, neoadjuvant...
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complete blood count (CBC), pH, total protein, LDH, glu
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This patient's presentation in the delayed postoperative period
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fistula, in which case an open window tho
surgical or bronchoscopic repair include repeat surgery, an
Alternative bronchoscopic method, or an open window thora
94.6% of patients' chests definitively closed within 8 days [18].
showed clinical success and safety with this technique, with
fistula is subsequently repaired with muscle flap or omen
COPD, low nutritional status, poor wound healing, previous ipsilateral thoracotomy, residual tumor at the bronchial stump, extensive lymph node dissection, age greater than 60 years, and prolonged postoperative mechanical ven-
tilation [4–8]. This patient’s history was significant for right-
sided surgery, smoking exposure, and COPD, which put him
at a higher risk of developing this complication. However, the
current literature describes that postoperative bronchopleural fistulas occur most frequently within 8 to 12 days after sur-
gery and almost always within 14 days [2]. This patient's pre-
tation 15 years after his surgery is quite unusual and likely
secondary to a rarer etiology.

Rarer causes of bronchopleural fistula documented in the lit-
ure include complications of chemotherapy or radiother-
apy for lung cancer treatment, pulmonary infection (bacterial, tuberculosis, or fungal), or inflammatory reactions in the lung parenchyma that extend into the pleura [9,10]. This patient de-
ied any history of chemotherapy or radiation therapy. The fluid
flow drained from this patient's pleura grew MSSA, consist-
tent with a bacterial infection that we suspect either necro-
tized the bronchus to create a bronchopleural fistula or was
introduced into the pleura secondary to a bronchopleural fis-
tula that was already formed.

There is a wide range of clinical presentations for a broncho-
pleural fistula, depending on the etiology. Patients develop-
ing a bronchopleural fistula within 2 weeks of resection sur-
gery typically present with acute symptoms of dyspnea, chest
pain, hemodynamic instability, and subcutaneous emphy-
sema. Conversely, patients who develop a bronchopleural fis-
tula greater than 2 weeks postoperatively or secondary to an
infectious process usually present with subacute symptoms of
fever, malaise, muscle wasting, and productive cough [2].

This patient's presentation in the delayed postoperative period
(15 years postoperatively) with productive cough, leukocyto-
sis, and new air fluid levels on imaging suggests an infectious
process likely lead to the development of a bronchopleural fis-
tula. The most common microbes responsible for pleural infec-
tions are viridans streptococci (25%) and Staphylococcus au-
reus (18%) [11]. Pleural fluid analysis yielding cultures growing
MSSA, which is consistent with our suspicion that an initial in-
fected etiology resulted in a fistula.

The initial management of any bronchopleural fistula, early
or delayed, is drainage of any pleural air or fluid with a chest
tube [12]. Pleural fluid should be sent to the laboratory for
complete blood count (CBC), pH, total protein, LDH, glu-
cose, cytology, triglycerides, Gram stain, and culture. Patients
should be started on broad-spectrum antibiotics to cover for
Gram-positive, Gram-negative, and anaerobic microorganisms
until bacterial sensitivities are available [9]. Patients who pres-
ent with delayed post-lobectomy bronchopleural fistula or
those who develop a fistula secondary to infectious pleuropulmonary disease are managed initially with medical treat-
ment. This includes dependent drainage, reduction of the pleu-
space, antibiotic treatment, nutritional supplementation, and,
if needed, ventilator management [13]. Closure of the
fistula is then performed with either airway stents, coils, oc-
clusive agents, or Amplatz devices [14,15]. Patients should
then be monitored for clinical signs of fistula recurrence, air
in the chest tube, and imaging of pleural space to ensure clo-
sure of the defect [12]. The options for patients who fail initial
surgical or bronchoscopic repair include repeat surgery, an
alternative bronchoscopic method, or an open window thora-
costomy with either Eloesser flap or a Claggett window [16].
More recently, an accelerated treatment of a post-lobectomy
or post-pneumectomy empyema that avoids an open chest
window has gained popularity. First described in a case series
in 2001, the procedure entails repeated open debridements,
a negative pressure continuous suction wound therapy of the
temporally closed chest cavity filled with povidone-iodine-
soaked dressings, and systemic antimicrobial therapy [17].
Once the chest cavity is macroscopically clean, the pleural
space is filled with antibiotic solution and the bronchopleu-
ralf fistula is subsequently repaired with muscle flap or omen-
tum. A study of 75 patients undergoing accelerated therapy
showed clinical success and safety with this technique, with
94.6% of patients' chests definitively closed within 8 days [18].
Nonetheless, experts agree that this procedure should not be
attempted in cases with chronic empyema or complicated by
a bronchopleural fistula, in which case an open window tho-
racostomy procedure is recommended [18–22].

During surgery, our patient’s chest was entered with a video
thoracoscope and revealed approximately 0.5 L of pus with
clear evidence of necrotic chest wall tissue and no viable lung
tissue. Given these findings, closure of the bronchopleural fis-
tula was deemed insufficient. Due to the possible chronicity
of the empyema and the clear presence of a bronchopleural fis-
tula, the surgeon felt that an open window thoracostomy
with a Claggett window was necessary to ensure a clean chest
 cavity and decreased risk of recurrence.

**Conclusions**

We diagnosed a rare case of post-lobectomy bronchopleural
fistula complicated by an empyema that demonstrates bron-
chopleural fistulas can appear 15 years postoperatively and
present with subacute clinical signs and symptoms.
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