Hemiepiphysiodesis Using a Transphyseal Screw at the Medial Malleolus for the Treatment of Ankle Valgus Deformity

Rhett Macneille, MD¹, Joshua Chen, BA², Lee Segal, MD³, and William Hennrikus, MD²

Abstract

Background: The purpose of this study is to report outcomes of transphyseal screw hemi-epiphysiodesis at the medial malleolus for the treatment of valgus ankle deformity.

Methods: An institutional review board–approved retrospective review was done of 24 patient charts. Lateral distal tibial angle (LDTA) was measured preoperatively and at final follow-up.

Results: The average change in LDTA was 8.3 degrees (SD 4.9 degrees; range 0-19 degrees). The average rate of correction was 0.4 degrees per month (SD 0.3; range 0-1.4).

Conclusion: Medial malleolar transphyseal screw hemiepiphysiodesis is a simple, effective, and safe treatment for valgus ankle deformity in skeletally immature children.

Level of Evidence: Level IV, case series.

Keywords: hemiepiphysiodesis, transphyseal screw, ankle valgus

Introduction

Ankle valgus is a coronal plane deformity most commonly seen in pediatric patients with a congenital or acquired pathology of the lower limb. A wide variety of pathologies have been linked in the literature to ankle valgus deformity. These can be categorized by type including neurogenic, genetic, other congenital, and traumatic. Ankle valgus can occur independently or in combination with hindfoot valgus. This must be carefully distinguished using weightbearing radiographs to determine appropriate treatment.

There are 3 radiographic indicators for ankle valgus described in the literature: a persistent high fibular station (described by the Malholtra classification), a persistent wedging of the secondary ossification center of the distal tibial epiphysis, and a persistent valgus tibiotalar axis. These can be categorized by type including neurogenic, genetic, other congenital, and traumatic.

Initial conservative treatment can start with bracing and/or orthoses, commonly used by patients with neuromuscular disorders. However, ankle valgus will sometimes progress with growth, eventually leading to shoe and brace wear, pain, difficulty ambulating, and osteoarthritis.

Surgery is an option for patients with severe persistent/progressive deformity. The purpose of this study is to report outcomes of transphyseal screw hemiepiphysiodesis at the medial malleolus for the treatment of valgus ankle deformity.

Materials and Methods

The current study was approved by the medical school IRB. Patients were identified from a single pediatric hospital by searching the hospital’s billing database. A total of 30 patients were identified over an 8-year period that had undergone an ankle transphyseal screw hemiepiphysiodesis.

1Department of Orthopedic Surgery, Loma Linda School of Medicine, Loma Linda, CA, USA
2Department of Orthopedics, Penn State College of Medicine, Hershey, PA, USA
3Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education Chicago, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Joshua Chen, BA, College of Medicine, Pennsylvania State University, 500 University Drive, PO Box 850, Hershey, PA 17033-0850, USA.
Email: Jchen8@pennstatehealth.psu.edu
procedure. A retrospective review of those 30 patients was done. Inclusion criteria for patients who underwent transphyseal screw hemiepiphysiodesis at the medial malleolus included patients with valgus ankle deformity, patients aged 6-13 years who were skeletally immature at time of surgery, and patients with at least 2 years of follow-up. Normal ankle alignment was defined as an ankle with a lateral distal tibial angle (LDTA) of 89 ± 3 degrees. Ankle valgus deformity was therefore defined as an ankle with an LDTA of less than 86 degrees. Exclusion criteria included patients aged >13 years, inadequate records, follow-up <2 years, and patients undergoing additional surgery that would have the potential to affect growth at the distal tibial physis (Figure 1).

Eight patients were excluded from the study results owing to not meeting the inclusion criteria. Of the 22 remaining patients, the following information was obtained: underlying diagnosis, age at surgery, gender, LDTA preoperatively, LDTA angle at 1-year follow-up, LDTA at skeletal maturity or final follow-up, fibular station preoperatively based on the Malholtra classification (Figure 2), fibular station at skeletal maturity or final follow-up, type of screw used, complications, and length of follow-up. All 22 patients were able to ambulate. Average rate of correction was calculated over a 1-year period following surgery using the change in LDTA from the preoperative radiograph to the radiograph at 1 year of follow-up.

Radiographs in the weightbearing position were used to follow correction of ankle valgus deformity. Correction of up to 5 degrees of varus (LDTA of 94 degrees) was tolerated in patients to account for potential rebound deformity after screw removal or coexisting subtalar valgus. Appropriate correction was defined as an LDTA of 86-94 degrees. Undercorrection was defined as an LDTA of <86 degrees. Overcorrection was defined as >94 degrees.

Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the demographic data and rate of correction.

Surgical Technique

An approximately 1-cm incision is made over the distal tip of the medial malleolus. The tibialis posterior tendon sheath was identified before insertion of the screw. Under fluoroscopy, a guidewire is inserted through the medial malleolus across the epiphysis and into the metaphysis of the tibia in a technique described by Davids et al.5 In the anteroposterior view, the wire was placed perpendicular and in the medial quarter of the physis. In the sagittal plane, the guidewire was placed so it crosses through the middle third of the physis.15 A cannulated drill set is then used to insert a partially threaded 4-mm cancellous screw over the guidewire to obtain physeal compression. A partially threaded screw is used to increase compression of the physis. Then the guidewire is removed. Fluoroscopy is used to confirm appropriate screw placement on both anteroposterior and lateral views. The wound is irrigated with sterile saline and closed with two 4-0 PDS simple sutures.
Results

A total of 22 patients and 34 ankles were included in the current study. Eleven were male and 11 were female. Underlying diagnoses included 9 with spina bifida, 5 with multiple hereditary exostoses (MHE), 4 with clubfoot, 1 with a prior tibial fracture with tibiofibular synostosis, 1 with multiple epiphyseal dysplasia, 1 with a congenital peroneal nerve palsy, and 1 with Ewing sarcoma (Table 1). The average length of follow-up in this study was 7.2 years with a range of 2-13 years.

The average age at surgery was 10.3 years (range 6.3-12.9). Preoperative planning included the child’s age and growth potential of the distal tibial physis for the amount of desired correction.1 The average preoperative LDTA was 79.2 degrees (SD 4.6, range 65-86). The average final LDTA was 88.1 degrees (SD 6.1, range 74-105). The average change in LDTA was 8.9 degrees (SD 4.9, range 0-19) (Figure 3). The average rate of correction was 0.4 degrees per month (SD 0.3, range 0-1.4). Fibular station was noted to improve (to a Malholtra classification of lesser value) in 4 ankles in 4 different patients (Figure 4). Some degree of correction was observed in all 34 ankles. In 20 ankles, the surgery corrected the joint to neutral. Ten ankles were undercorrected, and 4 ankles were overcorrected. The

Table 1. Study Data and Results.

| Patient Number/Laterality | Age at Surgery Gender | Underlying Pathology | Pre-LDTA | Post-LDTA | Pre-FS | Post-FS |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|-----------|--------|---------|
| 1L                        | 9.8                   | Male Clubfoot        | 85       | 89        | I      | I       |
| 2L                        | 11.8                  | Male Spina bifida    | 80       | 87        | I      | I       |
| 2R                        | 11.8                  | Male Spina bifida    | 75       | 91        | II     | I       |
| 3R                        | 8.4                   | Male Spina bifida    | 80       | 85        | 0      | 0       |
| 4L                        | 11.9                  | Male Clubfoot        | 80       | 91        | 0      | 0       |
| 4R                        | 11.9                  | Male Clubfoot        | 83       | 85        | 0      | 0       |
| 5L                        | 7.8                   | Female Spina bifida  | 82       | 93        | I      | I       |
| 5R                        | 7.8                   | Female Spina bifida  | 83       | 93        | I      | I       |
| 6L                        | 11.7                  | Male Multiple hereditary exostoses | 65 | 79 | II | I |
| 6R                        | 11.7                  | Male Multiple hereditary exostoses | 71 | 87 | II | II |
| 7L                        | 12.7                  | Male Spina bifida    | 78       | 87        | I      | II      |
| 8R                        | 12.9                  | Male Multiple hereditary exostoses | 80 | 83 | I | I |
| 9L                        | 9.5                   | Male Spina bifida    | 78       | 83        | I      | I       |
| 9R                        | 9.5                   | Male Spina bifida    | 76       | 80        | I      | I       |
| 10L                       | 12.6                  | Female Tibial fracture with tibiofibular synostosis | 84 | 89 | I | I |
| 11L                       | 11.9                  | Female Multiple epiphyseal dysplasia | 74 | 87 | 0 | 0 |
| 11R                       | 11.9                  | Female Multiple epiphyseal dysplasia | 77 | 85 | 0 | 0 |
| 12R                       | 11.2                  | Female Multiple hereditary exostoses | 84 | 89 | II | II |
| 13L                       | 9.6                   | Male Spina bifida    | 80       | 88        | I      | 0       |
| 13R                       | 9.6                   | Male Spina bifida    | 75       | 80        | I      | I       |
| 14L                       | 6.3                   | Female Spina bifida  | 70       | 74        | I      | I       |
| 14R                       | 6.3                   | Female Spina bifida  | 77       | 86        | II     | II      |
| 15L                       | 9.8                   | Male Clubfoot        | 76       | 82        | 0      | 0       |
| 15R                       | 9.8                   | Male Clubfoot        | 80       | 87        | 0      | 0       |
| 16L                       | 9.2                   | Female Multiple hereditary exostoses | 76 | 86 | I | I |
| 17L                       | 9.2                   | Female Spina bifida  | 85       | 97        | I      | I       |
| 17R                       | 9.2                   | Female Spina bifida  | 83       | 92        | I      | I       |
| 18R                       | 8.3                   | Female Congenital peroneal nerve palsy | 84 | 93 | III | III |
| 19R                       | 10.9                  | Female Ewing sarcoma | 80 | 95 | III | II |
| 20L                       | 9.4                   | Female Clubfoot      | 84       | 101       | 0      | 0       |
| 20R                       | 9.4                   | Female Clubfoot      | 85       | 105       | 0      | 0       |
| 21L                       | 10.6                  | Male Spina bifida    | 75       | 90        | I      | 0       |
| 21R                       | 10.6                  | Male Spina bifida    | 81       | 88        | I      | I       |
| 22L                       | 11.4                  | Female Multiple hereditary exostoses | 84 | 89 | II | II |
| Mean                      | 10.2                  |                      | 79.1     | 88.1      |        |         |

Abbreviation: LDTA, Lateral Distal Tibial Angle.
Figure 3. Change in lateral distal tibial angle (LDTA).

Figure 4. Change in fibular station.
average age of the 10 undercorrected ankles was 11.5 years and the average age of the 4 overcorrected was 9.8 years. All the 4 overcorrected ankles had an LDTA of about 100 degrees. The underlying diagnoses of these 4 ankles were clubfoot, Ewing sarcoma, and spina bifida. Two ankles in 1 patient were lost to follow-up for 2 years and presented with overcorrection.

The transphyseal screws were removed in 19 ankles of 12 patients. The average time to screw removal was 81 weeks, with a range of 30-214 weeks. Of the 19 screws removed, 2 screws were removed because of a reason other than the LDTA reaching a neutral position. One screw was removed owing to irritation related to the hardware, and another was removed owing to loosening of the screw. The other 17 screws were removed in patients who reached a neutral position (94 degrees LDTA) with growth remaining. During operative removal of the screws, 5 were documented to have bony overgrowth over the head of the screw. All 5 were successfully removed. Four screws were bent on attempted removal. Three were successfully removed. One screw broke, and part of the screw was left deep in the bone.

After screw removal, 10 ankles resumed growth at the medial tibial physis. Rebound toward valgus was seen in each of those 10 ankles of 5 degrees. The diagnosis of these 10 rebound ankles was as follows: 2 clubfoot, 4 spina bifida, 2 MHE, and 2 MED. Five ankles had a rebound less than 5 degrees, and 5 ankles had a rebound greater than 5 degrees, with the greatest being 15 degrees. This patient with 15 degrees was offered an osteotomy, but the patient declined. There were no instances of permanent growth arrest at the distal tibial physis secondary to the transphyseal screw. Four ankles in 3 patients had been overcorrected by about 6 degrees. No corrective osteotomies were performed.

There was 1 complication of an operative site infection in a patient who had also undergone a tendon transfer. The infection was located at the separate incision site of the transfer and resolved uneventfully with antibiotics. There were no other complications such as hardware infection, neurovascular injury, compartment syndrome, or joint injury.

Phemister pioneered hemiepiphysiodesis in 1933 with a permanent technique using a bone graft across the physis. Haas discovered reversible growth restriction by accident in 1945 while using tensioned loop wires across growth plates in animals, and he subsequently performed the first successful reversible growth restriction surgery in humans. Blount and Clarke used staples across the physis for growth restriction in 1949 and later developed the “Blount staple” in 1953. In 1997, Stevens and Belle reported the use of transphyseal screws and in 2007 Stevens et al reported the use of tension band plates.

Historically, in neuromuscular patients, fibular Achilles tenodesis has been used successfully to treat ankle valgus deformity. However, this surgery is more complex and is done in younger patients because of slower deformity correction. If ankle valgus is left untreated, it can lead to difficulty with ambulation because of loss of range of motion, changes in gait, and arthritis. Most recently, a transphyseal screw has been used across the medial malleolus for temporary hemiepiphysiodesis. This is our technique of choice because it is quick, simple, and has low risk of complications. However, the downside is that when one applies a rigid restraint across a physis, the implant can bend, break, or migrate, making it difficult to remove the hardware. Westberry et al showed that complications for screw removal increased when screws had been placed for longer lengths of time and if patients were younger. These complications led to increased exposure, longer operations, and need for additional equipment. This may result in a need for corrective osteotomy in patients who fail to return for a timely follow-up.

Our data support that a transphyseal medial malleolar screw can be an effective method of temporary hemiepiphysiodesis for the treatment of valgus ankle deformity (Figure 5). In 20 of 34 cases (60%), a neutral ankle was achieved. In the remaining 14 cases, partial correction near neutral was achieved. The rate of overall correction was higher in the 5 MHE patients and was also noted to peak around 10-11 years of age (Figures 6 and 7). The slowest
rate of correction was in the spina bifida patients (Figure 6). Rupprecht et al in a study with 79 patients (125 ankles) showed that LDTA normalized to 89 degrees (range 73-97) after screw placement with an average rate of correction of 0.65 degrees. They also reported the highest rate of correction in patients with clubfoot and lowest in meningomyelecele. Chang et al reported that patients with cerebral palsy had the fastest correction rate, and spina bifida was the slowest rate of correction with MHE in between. In our study, the average correction for patients with spina bifida was 8.3 degrees compared with 13.4 as seen by Bayhan et al. Fibular station was not significantly affected using this method.

The advantages of the transphyseal screw technique include less metal prominence at the medial malleolus, decreased risk of skin irritation, and faster time to deformity correction. This method can be advantageous in patients wearing braces. Only 1 patient in the current study had screw removal due to irritation from the screw head.

Limitations of the study include a small sample size, the retrospective nature of the study, lack of randomization, lack of bone age use, and lack of a comparison group.

Conclusions

Medial malleolar transphyseal screw hemiepiphysiodesis is a simple, effective, and safe treatment for valgus ankle deformity in skeletally immature children.

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Ethical Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Penn State Hershey IRB (003811).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Joshua Chen, BA, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5614-8069

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