Damage control laparotomy in a paediatric trauma patient in a regional hospital

Jonathan Wiener a,⁎, Mariya Abdulla b

a James Cook University, Australia
b Acme Pariyaram Kerala, India

A R T I C L E   I N F O
Article history:
Received 24 June 2020
Received in revised form 5 September 2020
Accepted 5 September 2020
Available online 11 September 2020

Keywords:
General surgery
Paediatric
Emergency
Trauma
Laparotomy
Regional

A B S T R A C T

INTRODUCTION: Trauma is a major cause of death in children [1]. It has far-reaching impacts on a child’s development and function, and is a major contributing factor to disability in the young. Pediatric patients in trauma demonstrate different clinical signs and have different resuscitation requirements, often masking symptoms and compensating well before rapidly deteriorating.

CASE PRESENTATION: The authors present a case of a 13-year-old patient with major trauma receiving surgical management in an adult regional hospital. The patient was involved in a high-speed head on motorcar collision. This report emphasizes the importance of early mobilisation of a trauma team and appropriate surgical stabilisation of a child in an adult regional centre without access to specialised pediatric surgeons.

DISCUSSION: Approximately 600 individuals aged 19 or less are fatally injured in Australia each year. Management of pediatric trauma requires early mobilization of a trauma team, to ensure high levels of expertise are available. However, managing these patients with specialized pediatric surgery teams is not always possible. As such, peripheral hospitals need to have trained general surgeons who can manage the deteriorating pediatric patient.

CONCLUSION: All peripheral hospitals with access to emergency operating should have general surgeons willing and able to manage pediatric trauma, with the confidence for a low threshold for laparotomy.

⁎ Corresponding author at: 4 Knott Court, Whitfield, Cairns, 4870, Australia.
E-mail address: jonowiener@gmail.com (J. Wiener).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jscr.2020.09.050
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22 mmHg, the supraceliac aorta was cross-clamped to increase proximal perfusion. The bleeding vein was then identified as the superior mesenteric vein with two injuries just inferior to the confluence of the splenic vein. Distal and proximal control of the vein were achieved and a primary repair with 6-0 prolene sutures was performed.

Slow removal of the supraceliac aorta clamps began 21 min after cross-clamping. Small bleeding vessels in the hilum of the spleen were clipped with Liga clips. Once vascular control was achieved, the remaining duodenum was mobilized and explored. Throughout the operation the patient was acidic at pH 7.1, hypothermic with a temperature of 36°C, and persistently hypotensive systolic blood pressure of 70 mmHg. He remained too unstable for repair and removal of his ischaemic duodenum. As such, devitalized tissue was used to close the abdomen to prevent contamination. A surgical drain was placed in-situ with a VAC dressing.

A post-operative computed tomography (CT) pan scan revealed the extent of his injuries. CT head and CT angiogram of the neck were normal. CT chest showed a large left pleural effusion, with multiple bilateral pulmonary contusions and an associated small right pneumothorax. There was an extensive laceration to the liver involving segments 6 and segment 7, however, there was no arterial blush to indicate a significant active bleed. There was a contusion of the spleen at the lower pole, in association with a subcapsular hematoma. Both kidneys showed extensive irregular contusions. Post-operatively the patient went to the intensive care unit for stabilization and monitoring. He was then transferred to a tertiary pediatric centre for ongoing management by a specialist team. He underwent planned re-look laparotomy two days later, and a beta-dine test of the duodenal repair showed a small defect that was closed with 4-0 PDS sutures and an omental patch. The inferior pole of the spleen was ischaemic and required partial splenectomy. There was a left sided diaphragmatic defect with a 10 cm intercostal defect that was also repaired and closed. No other bleeding or injuries were identified. Ultimately, the patient was able to be discharged home where he could begin rehabilitation and make a full recovery (Figs. 1–3).

3. Discussion

Approximately 600 individuals aged 19 or less are fatally injured in Australia each year. In addition, around 95,000 young people are hospitalised annually as a result of an injury [2]. Motor vehicle accidents are a common cause of serious injury in children [1]. Traumatic injury is a major cause of disability in children and insufficient evaluation and early management of these patients results in inadequate treatment and long-term poor outcomes. All peripheral hospitals managing trauma patients are expected to rapidly and expertly assess injury severity and initiate early management in pediatric patients, in order to prevent early deaths and delayed complications [1]. Major trauma patients often receive their initial resuscitation and stabilisation at an adult trauma centre before transfer to a pediatric trauma centre [2]. There have been several studies that have evaluated the outcomes of pediatric patients who receive treatment in pediatric versus non-pediatric centres, with this population group showing improved overall outcomes when treated in pediatric trauma centres.

Pediatric trauma management should include a multidisciplinary approach. Consideration should be given to the anatomical, physiological, and psychological differences between children and adults. These pose significant implications in the initial assessment and management of pediatric trauma patients [3]. Mitchell et al. did a comparative analysis of trends in pediatric patients in New South Wales; they found that children who received their definitive care at an adult tertiary centre had between three to six times higher odds of not surviving their injuries [2]. They emphasised that outcomes in this population group would likely be improved with enhanced psychological support, multidisciplinary team and specialized allied health input [2].

The above patient was retrieved and taken to a peripheral hospital in Far North Queensland, Australia. The hospital has 531 beds and a 24-h on call surgical consultant, with most surgical and medical specialties available. It manages a disproportionately large cohort of adult trauma patients due to its vast geographical catchment area and its rurality, several hours away from the closest tertiary hospital and trauma centre. The lack of pediatric trauma services in this hospital poses a variety of issues when urgent trauma care is required, as immediate transfer to other centres is not always possible due to patient acuity or access to transport. More so, the
The general approach to managing trauma remains the same, with securing a patient’s airway, while assessing their breathing and circulation. However, pediatric patients in trauma demonstrate different clinical signs and have different resuscitation requirements, often masking symptoms and compensating well before rapidly deteriorating. The threshold for imaging and surgery in a pediatric patient is also different to adult patients. Therefore, peripheral hospitals need consultant general surgeons who are confident in the operative and non-operative management of pediatric trauma. With adequate skillset, surgeons are able to safely stabilise pediatric patients when transfer is unsafe or unavailable, and will feel confident in their threshold for laparotomy and damage-control surgery.

This case was reported in line with the SCARE guideline and presents a life-threatening pediatric trauma with derangement out of proportion to clinical findings, and the early decision for laparotomy was life-saving [4]. This demonstrates how smaller peripheral hospitals need to be equipped and trained to manage the deteriorating pediatric trauma patient as a next-best option to tertiary care. From a practical perspective, all peripheral sites with access to emergency operating should have surgeons willing and able to manage pediatric trauma, with the confidence for a low threshold for laparotomy.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors report no declarations of interest.

Sources of funding
No funding.

Ethical approval
Ethics approval was not required.

Consent
Verbal consent was obtained from the patient’s next of kin for the presentation of this case, including the use of radiology images and photographs.

Author contribution
Jonathan Wiener – main writer.
Mariya Abdulla – editor.

Registration of research studies
NA.

Guarantor
Jonathan Wiener.

Provenance and peer review
Not commissioned, externally peer-reviewed.

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