Laparoscopic Assisted Vaginal Hysterectomy, Setting Up a Service at a Peripheral Teaching Hospital

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The establishment of a laparoscopically assisted hysterectomy program at Box Hill Hospital is described. The first eight cases have been reviewed and recommendations are made to other gynaecology units who wish to establish a minimally invasive gynaecological surgery unit.

Keywords: Laparoscopic assisted vaginal hysterectomy, training

INTRODUCTION

The use of laparoscopy has been widespread in gynaecology during the past two decades. It has become evident that complex gynaecological procedures including hysterectomy can be performed using laparoscopic techniques [1]. By avoiding major abdominal incisions, hospital and associated costs are decreased and post operative pain and morbidity are reduced [2].

In 1989 Reich and DeCaprio reported on the first laparoscopic hysterectomy [1]. Since that time it has been performed at a number of centres around the world and several reports have been published [3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11].

Laparoscopic hysterectomy is becoming an acceptable alternative to abdominal hysterectomy when vaginal hysterectomy is considered difficult or inappropriate [8,10,11]. However as it is a new technique it will have to be learnt by gynaecologists who wish to use it. The Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has recommended guidelines for training clinicians in advanced laparoscopic techniques. This paper discusses the feasibility of such a training program in a small teaching hospital.

METHODS

Box Hill Hospital is a teaching hospital of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. It has an active and progressive department of obstetrics and gynaecology. The gynaecologists within this group saw the evolvement of advanced laparoscopic surgery and

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were keen to commence an endoscopy service. Four of the surgeons, including the authors, attended courses and operated under supervision to develop skills in advanced laparoscopy and the number of procedures endoscopically steadily increased. This culminated in a desire to perform laparoscopic hysterectomy. The three surgeons had performed this procedure elsewhere but not at this hospital. The department was keen to provide this service but wanted to do it safely and to establish ongoing training service for the other gynaecologists in the unit who were interested in learning this new technique.

A working party was established between the medical staff and the operating theatre nursing staff to discuss laparoscopic hysterectomy. The nursing staff were already skilled in laparoscopic cholecystectomy as performed by the general surgeons. A thorough review was made of laparoscopic instruments that were already available and a list was drawn up of the instruments that would be required for laparoscopic hysterectomy. Two senior operating suite nurses were allocated to the gynaecological laparoscopic team. With respect to safety and training it was decided that these two sisters would always scrub for these cases. If other nursing sisters were keen to become involved they would have to scrub with one of the two senior sisters appointed to the service.

The Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology based their training guidelines on the Royal Australian College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the Australian Gynaecological Endoscopy Society guidelines for training in advanced operative laparoscopy [12]. Initially it was felt safer to have two of the three experienced operative laparoscopists performing the laparoscopic hysterectomies with other gynaecologists being in theatre to observe and ask questions. Once everybody felt comfortable with this new technique, in particular, the senior sisters involved with the case, other gynaecologists from the department would be involved at a preceptorship level initially assisting and then acting as the chief surgeon. Under no circumstances was an inexperienced surgeon to perform the procedure on their own until the preceptors and the department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology were happy with their skills. The department felt that each surgeon should perform 5 procedures as the assistant prior to being the principal surgeon. At this point the preceptor would assist.

Of the eight women in this initial study (Table I), seven had menorrhagia, two with fibroids, and the eighth patient had CIN III. In none of these women was vaginal hysterectomy possible. The patients were aged from thirty six to forty eight (mean forty four years). The procedure was performed with the patients in Trendelenburg position. The ureter was routinely displayed by dissection. The infundibulo-pelvic and broad ligaments were taken with ENDO GIA thirty laparoscopic stapling device (Auto Suture Company, Adelaide, Australia). The uterine vessels were also taken laparoscopically either with bipolar diathermy or staples. The procedure was then completed vaginally. All pedicles were checked laparoscopically for haemostasis at the end of the procedure. The peritoneal cavity was irrigated with normal saline. The

| Age | Indications for LAVH       | Procedure time (including anaesthesia) | Hospital stay | Complications       |
|-----|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 36  | Menorrhagia               | 120 min                                | 3 days        | Nil                 |
| 44  | Menorrhagia               | 105 min                                | 2 days        | Nil                 |
| 45  | Menorrhagia               | 95 min                                 | 3 days        | Nil                 |
| 45  | CIN III                   | 180 min                                | 4 days        | Post Op Fever       |
| 44  | Menorrhagia/fibroids      | 150 min                                | 3 days        | Nil                 |
| 43  | Menorrhagia/fibroids      | 120 min                                | 3 days        | Nil                 |
| 47  | Menorrhagia               | 90 min                                 | 2 days        | Nil                 |
| 48  | Mild Endometriosis/       | 110 min                                | 3 days        | Nil                 |
|     | menorrhagia               |                                        |               |                     |
incisions were all sutured with 2.0 nylon. Neither a
catheter nor a pack were inserted.

RESULTS

The operating time, from induction of anaesthetic to
the end of the procedure, for these patients ranged
from ninety minutes to one hundred and eighty min-
utes (mean one hundred and twenty minutes). The
time in hospital ranged from two to four days (mean of
2.87). The only complication was that of post opera-
tive fever which responded to antibiotics. A further
statement about the significance of any complications
cannot be made because of the small number of cases
described here.

DISCUSSION

Laparoscopic hysterectomy has and will continue to
gain increasing attention from the gynaecological
community. It is not only the gynaecologists who are
becoming aware of this procedure but the media has
publicised the advantages of minimally invasive
surgery to a responsive consumer market. This has
encouraged more and more gynaecologists to per-
form laparoscopic hysterectomy. Advanced laparo-
scopic surgery has also given peri-operative nurses
an opportunity to expand their role. The use of a televi-
sion monitor makes the procedure visible to all in
the theatre. Procedures which were once difficult to
view can be seen clearly, enhancing the understand-
ing of the anatomy and the surgical techniques. As
Garry et al.[7,13] believed that adequate training
must be obtained by both the gynaecologist intent on
performing laparoscopic hysterectomies and the the-
atre nurses who will be assisting them, the nurses
who were involved in our unit were an integral part of
our team. They took on new responsibilities such as
actually assisting the surgeon, monitoring how the
procedure was progressing, assuring the safety at all
times during the procedure, preparing and checking
equipment, being prepared and continually alert for a
wide range of possible incidents such as equipment
failure, breakages of fragile instruments and the abil-
ity to quickly troubleshoot as required. An experi-
enced theatre nurse is essential to allow the procedure
to run quickly and smoothly.

The gynaecologists must have a thorough knowl-
dge of pelvic anatomy, and be familiar with available
laparoscopic equipment and have an understanding of
electro surgery and know each instrument’s use and
limitations. They should already be proficient in per-
forming laparoscopic procedures on the tubes and
ovaries. Finally a preceptorship with the surgeon expe-
rienced with laparoscopic hysterectomy is the most
efficient and safe way to learn this new technique.

We are trying to incorporate all these principles into
setting up a laparoscopic service at our hospital. In
particular, each surgeon must train under a preceptor
until the preceptor is happy to recommend that the sur-
geon can operate without supervision. This allows
laparoscopic hysterectomy to be performed safely and
to slowly be implemented into the clinical service of
the hospital. The surgeon is fed back information
regarding their progress by the preceptor and the
chairman of the department.

We will stress to every hospital wishing to com-
mence advanced laparoscopic surgery of all types and,
in particular, laparoscopic hysterectomy that careful
planning, discussion and co-operation with our nurs-
ing colleagues is essential. Each hospital should
implement a training, accreditation, and quality assur-
ance program so that they are satisfied their surgeons
are performing this procedure safely and with an
acceptable complication rate. Following these princi-
plies will enable all hospitals with interested gynaecol-
gists to establish such a service.

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