INTRODUCTION

Saphenous neuralgia (SN) is a rare clinical syndrome characterized by a tingling sensation, pain, or a burning sensation in the medial calf resulting from entrapment of the saphenous nerve. The saphenous nerve is a purely sensory nerve, so no associated motor or reflex problems are present in patients with SN. In many patients with SN, satisfactory pain relief is expected from conservative treatments, such as medications or nerve blocks. However, the effects of nerve blocking are generally temporary, and a small group of patients show medically intractable pain. More aggressive treatment tools have been considered for such patients, including neurolysis and neurectomy of the saphenous nerve. However, surgical procedures are invasive and risk further complications.

In this case, we treated a patient with medically intractable SN by pulsed radiofrequency (PRF) and found that it was an effective and low-risk alternative treatment.

CASE REPORT

A 65-year-old male presented with severe pain and a tingling sensation in the right medial knee, calf, and ankle. He walked with a limp due to pain but not weakness. The patient had experienced severely disabling conditions for over 1 month. The pain and tingling sensation occurred every 5-10 minutes and lasted more than 5 minutes per episode. A neurological examination was normal, except for severe pain and tingling sensation in the right medial knee, calf, and ankle.

Lumbar magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed no acute lesions, and a diagnosis of saphenous neuralgia was made by a nerve conduction study. He received temporary pain relief with saphenous nerve blocks twice in a one-week interval. Pulsed radiofrequency neuromodulation reduced pain to 10% of the maximal pain intensity. At 6 months after the procedure, the pain intensity was not aggravated even without medication. Pulsed radiofrequency neuromodulation of the saphenous nerve may offer an effective and minimally invasive treatment for patients with saphenous neuralgia who are refractory to conservative management.

Key Words: Neuromodulation · Pulsed radiofrequency · Saphenous neuralgia.
superficial saphenous vein. These blocks provided temporary pain relief that lasted about 3 days. After the positive results of the diagnostic nerve blocks, the patient was scheduled for PRF neuromodulation of the saphenous nerve.

We performed fluoroscopically guided selective saphenous nerve PRF using a model NT1000 radiofrequency generator (NeuroTherm, Middleton, MA, USA). In the operating room, the patient was supine, with the right leg positioned with hip external rotation, hip abduction, and knee flexion. We drew a hypothetical line for the saphenous nerve (complete nerve, infrapatellar branch, and sartorial branch) and the trajectory for the cannula on his leg (Fig. 1). The target site was prepped with betadine and aseptically draped, and the right knee joint and epicondyle were identified under C-arm fluoroscopy. Disposable 20-gauge, 10-cm radiofrequency cannulas (Model S-1505; NeuroTherm) with a 5-mm active tip were inserted at the level of the adductor’s canal and below the epicondyle. The introducer needles were withdrawn, and a Model RFDE-15 disposable radiofrequency electrode (NeuroTherm) was advanced (Fig. 2).

Selective stimulation of the sensory fibers (50 Hz) showed concordant pain between 0.3-0.5 V, which confirmed proper localization of the PRF electrode. Motor stimulation was negative. After stimulation, PRF neuromodulation was performed for 240 pulses. The maximal temperature was 42°C. After the procedure, the pain measured on a visual analog scale had decreased by 90% without medication. The pain relief was maintained for 6 months of follow-up without medication.

**DISCUSSION**

**General aspect of saphenous neuralgia**

Kopell and Thompson first described SN in 1960. Patients with saphenous mononeuropathy experience pain and sensory disturbances within the distribution of the saphenous nerve without motor symptoms. Patients also complain of progressive paresthesias or hypoesthesia. The etiology of SN can be categorized as idiopathic, traumatic, intrinsic, and iatrogenic causes. Patients complain of medial knee and/or leg pains that are worsened by prolonged activity.

More than half of patients with SN are successfully managed with conservative treatment, including medication and nerve block. When patients do not respond to conservative treatments, physicians consider surgical neurolysis or surgical neurectomy. In the present case, saphenous nerve blocks provided temporary pain relief, but symptoms recurred within 3 days. Thus, we recommended PRF neuromodulation for SN.
branches off the saphenous nerve to supply the prepatellar skin. The saphenous nerve continues down subcutaneously with the long saphenous vein along the medial tibial border. The nerve terminates distally into two branches that supply the ankle and medial foot\(^3\). The relative positioning of the saphenous nerve and the long saphenous vein during their course down the medial leg can vary from person to person\(^4\).

The entrapment site is most commonly at the adductor canal where the nerve changes course and travels through a fibrous band. This area can be palpated approximately 10 cm above the medial femoral condyle below the sartorius muscle\(^5\).

**Anatomical consideration for the target of the radiofrequency modulation**

Nerve blocks by injections deliver their effects through diffusion to the surrounding tissue, which indicates that relatively inaccurate targeting can be tolerated. However, when modulating the nerve with PRF, the practitioner should be aware of the exact anatomy because lesion creation should be more restricted and exact.

While the medial branch, dorsal root ganglion, and supraspinal nerve have confident bony landmarks for local injection and PRF neuromodulation, the saphenous nerve landmarks are relatively uncertain. Thus, it is difficult to accurately target the saphenous nerve due to its anatomical variations\(^6\). For this reason many articles and clinical experiences were often described by using ultrasound for saphenous nerve block. In this case, the nerve was found and targeted around the adductor canal and below the medial epicondyle by using fluoroscopy (Fig. 1).

**Mechanism and effect of pulsed radiofrequency**

Two types of radiofrequency lesioning are clinically used: conventional radiofrequency and PRF. PRF neuromodulation is nondestructive but can relieve pain by delivering an electrical field to the neural tissue\(^2\). While the effects of conventional radiofrequency thermal lesioning have a clear pathophysiological background in the destruction of nerve tissue and the subsequent blockade of pain transmission, the mechanism of PRF is still unknown. One theory to explain PRF suggests that a neuromodulatory effect occurs through changes in gene expression in pain processing neurons\(^2\). There are several advantages to using PRF for pain control. Firstly, PRF may provide long lasting pain relief with less side effects. Secondly, PRF can be repeated if the pain recurs since no tissue has been destroyed\(^2\). Thirdly, many published reports have revealed the efficacy of PRF for peripheral nerve lesions\(^2\). Thus, PRF is a promising treatment for patients with chronic pain refractory to conservative treatment.

**CONCLUSION**

We present the first known application of PRF neuromodulation for a case of SN. PRF neuromodulation of the saphenous nerve may offer an effective and low-risk treatment in patients with medically intractable SN or who are unwilling or unfit to undergo surgery. Further controlled prospective studies are necessary to evaluate the exact effects and long-term outcomes of this method.

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