Case Report

Tar Barreler’s Hump: An Unusual Presentation of a Posttraumatic Pseudolipoma

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Received 4 April 2012; Accepted 26 June 2012

Academic Editors: M. Leonardi and Y. Tsushima

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This is an interesting paper of a 4 cm posttraumatic pseudolipoma on the back of the neck of an adult man who has participated in “tar barrel rolling” since adolescence. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first case of a pseudolipoma to be reported in the literature in association with tar barreling.

1. Case Presentation

A 37-year-old healthy man known to have a “tar barreler’s hump” in his local community presented to his general practitioner because his hump had become acutely inflamed. The hump has been present for over fifteen years without causing any symptoms. He has participated in “tar barrel rolling”—a family tradition since adolescence. Examination of his back revealed a 4 cm nontender solid soft tissue mass at the posterior aspect of the lower neck in the interscapular region, there was mild erythema of the overlying skin (Figure 1). No other lumps were found.

Ultrasound examination (Toshiba Aplio XG, 7.5 MHz probe) revealed a hyperechoic mass in the subcutaneous tissues of the interscapular region (Figure 2). Due to the history of recent onset of pain, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) was performed for further assessment. MRI confirmed an unencapsulated subcutaneous mass that is isointense to surrounding fat on both T1-weighted (T1W1) and fat-suppressed sequences (Figure 3) consistent with a benign posttraumatic pseudolipoma (PTL). The patient declined referral to the plastic surgeon for further management. Subsequent followup by the referring general practitioner revealed complete resolution of the associated mild inflammation around the pseudolipoma following completion of a course of simple analgesia.

2. Discussion

“Tar barreling” is a world famous tradition native to Ottery St Mary, Devon, Southwest England. The tradition dates back to the 17th century, and it is performed annually on the 5th of November (Guy Fawkes Night). Barrels soaked in tar are set ablaze and carried on the back between the shoulders through the streets. Different categories exist for boys, women, and men depending on the size of the barrels. The event culminates at night with men carrying flaming barrels that weigh up to 30 kg. The festival attracts between 15–20,000 visitors annually.

In a few cases, generations of the same family carry these flaming tar barrels annually; men often start “barrel rolling” at a very young age similar to the case presented. Allegedly, there are a few participating residents in the community who have also developed humps at the back of the neck where these barrels are carried over the years. These humps are
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(a) Figure 1: 4 cm nontender midline soft tissue mass in the interscapular region in a 37-year-old male “tar barreler.”

(b)

Table 1: Summary table: posttraumatic pseudolipoma (PTL).

| Etiology                  | Sequelae of acute, chronic, or repetitive trauma. Various mechanisms of development are postulated |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Incidence                 | ~1%                                                                                               |
| Gender ratio              | F: M = 3.8: 1                                                                                     |
| Age                       | 18–64 years*                                                                                      |
| Risk factors              | Acute/chronic/repetitive trauma                                                                   |
| Treatment                 | Conservative                                                                                     |
|                           | Surgical excision                                                                                 |
| Prognosis                 | Unknown. Malignant transformation has never been reported                                          |
| Imaging                   | US—well-delineated hyperechoic subcutaneous mass, no posterior acoustic attenuation or enhancement |
|                           | CT—subcutaneous mass with Hounsfield attenuation of fat                                           |
|                           | MRI—homogenous unencapsulated mass isointense to fat on all sequences                             |
|                           | T1WI—hyperintense (similar to fat)                                                                |
|                           | Fat-suppressed sequence—hypointense (similar to fat)                                              |
|                           | Lack of a well-defined low signal intensity fibrous capsule                                       |
|                           | Lack of enhancement following administration of intravenous contrast                              |

* Based on a review of 124 cases of PTLs by Galea et al. [1].

Figure 2: Ultrasound examination (longitudinal view) demonstrates a large subcutaneous mass (bounded by white arrows) in the interscapular region with sonographic features consistent with a lipoid mass, that is, elliptical shape, heterogeneity, longest axis parallel to the skin surface, lack of posterior acoustic enhancement or attenuation, and presence of multiple echogenic lines perpendicular to the ultrasound beam.

Known in the local community as “tar barreler’s hump” and are regarded to be of no serious medical significance.

Although there is lack of histological analysis in our case as surgical management was declined, the appearance on ultrasound that is, well-delineated hyperechoic subcutaneous mass with linear echogenic lines perpendicular to the ultrasound, beam and absence of posterior acoustic enhancement or attenuation are typical sonographic appearance of a lipoma or lipoma-like lesion [2]. MRI appearances that is, isointensity to fat on T1-weighted and fat-suppressed sequences are also consistent with a lipid lesion [3]. However, the absence of a well-defined low signal intensity fibrous capsule on MRI along with the history of repetitive trauma is diagnostic of a posttraumatic pseudolipoma (PTL).

PTLs are benign soft tissue tumours that develop in various anatomical regions following acute, chronic or repetitive trauma. The exact pathobiological mechanism of development of PTL is unclear; however various theories via mechanical and inflammatory factors have been postulated. Mechanical factors such as herniation of fatty tissue following traumatic disruption of fascial layers or differentiation of
Table 2: Typical imaging features of PTL, lipoma, and liposarcoma.

|                | US                          | CT                                      | MRI                                      |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Posttraumatic  | Well-delineated hyperechoic | Well-delineated subcutaneous mass       | Homogenous unencapsulated mass           |
| pseudolipoma   | subcutaneous mass           | with Hounsfield attenuation of fat       | isointense to fat on all sequences       |
| (PTL)          | No posterior acoustic       | T1WI-hyperintense                        |                                          |
|                | attenuation or enhancement  | T2WI-hypointense                        |                                          |
| Lipoma         | Similar to PTL              | Similar to PTL                          | Signal intensity as PTL                  |
|                | Usually homogenous          | Contain large lipomatous and            |                                          |
|                | May contain thin            | prominent nonlipomatous components      |                                          |
|                | internal septa (<2 mm)      | such as thick internal septa (>2 mm)    |                                          |
|                | May appear as complex with  | and nonlipomatous components            |                                          |
|                | thick septa (>2 mm) and     |                                          |                                          |
|                | nonlipomatous components    |                                          |                                          |
| Liposarcoma     | Heterogeneous,              | Contains large lipomatous and           | Heterogeneous                            |
| (variable       | multilobulated usually      | prominent nonlipomatous components      | Contains large lipomatous and           |
| appearance      | well-defined fatty mass    | such as thick internal septa (>2 mm)    | prominent nonlipomatous components      |
| according to    |                            | and nodules                             | such as thick internal septa (>2 mm)    |
| histological    | Usually located in the      |                                          | and nodules                             |
| type            | deep soft tissues of the    |                                          |                                          |
| according to    | extremities particularly    |                                          |                                          |
| WHO             | thigh, head and neck,      |                                          |                                          |
| classification  | trunk, and retroperitoneum  |                                          |                                          |
|                | May contain focal nodules   |                                          | Moderate to marked enhancement of septa |
|                | Calcification or            |                                          | following administration of intravenous |
|                | metaplastic ossification    |                                          | gadolinium                               |
|                | may be seen                 |                                          |                                          |

Preadipocytes triggered by growth factors and inflammatory mediators such as cytokines released from the preceding haematoma are some of the postulated mechanisms [1, 4]. Table 1 summarises the clinical and imaging features of PTLs. Although benign, PTLs can enlarge rapidly or cause local symptoms that may warrant cross-sectional imaging as in our case to ensure benignity.

Imaging can be used to differentiate benign lipomatous tumours from liposarcomas [5–8]. The typical appearance of PTL, lipoma, and liposarcoma is summarised in Table 2.
PTLs are homogenous masses with signal intensity identical to surrounding fat on all pulse sequences; they lack a low signal intensity fibrous capsule typical of lipoma, and there is no postcontrast enhancement [1, 4]. Definitive management depends on their location, size, or associated symptoms and treatment options include surgical excision or liposuction.

We cannot speculate the natural progression of this lesion however malignant transformation into liposarcoma has never been reported as sequelae of PTLs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first case of PTL in association with tar barrelling to be reported in published the literature.

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