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Case report

Carotid stenting for irradiation-associated carotid stenosis 3 years after previous carotid endarterectomy

Extracranial carotid stenosis is a known complication of external irradiation to the head and neck region. We report on a patient with previous carotid endarterectomy for irradiation-associated carotid stenosis. This patient developed symptomatic carotid stenosis over the ipsilateral common carotid artery proximal to the previous endarterectomy site 3 years later, and was successfully treated with carotid angioplasty and stenting. This case illustrates the importance of Duplex scan surveillance after carotid endarterectomy for patients with irradiation-associated carotid stenosis. The complimentary role of carotid endarterectomy and carotid angioplasty for managing such a patient is highlighted.

Introduction

Extracranial carotid stenosis is a known complication of external irradiation to the head and neck region. An accelerated atherosclerotic plaque is often located in an atypical position and affects an extensive segment of the common carotid artery. This poses a special challenge to a vascular surgeon because the lesion may not be easily accessible and the plaque may be closely adherent, leading to difficulty in achieving an adequate cleavage plane for endarterectomy. Bypass or interposition graft may therefore be necessary. Moreover, many patients who have previously been irradiated have also undergone major oncological surgery (resections or neck dissections). These previously performed procedures raise concerns about the difficulty of the dissection and the wound closure. Endovascular therapy with carotid angioplasty and stenting may be a more suitable alternative under these circumstances. On the other hand, there have also been reports advocating the safety and efficacy of traditional carotid endarterectomy, even for previously irradiated patients.

This report is of a patient who has previously undergone radiotherapy for nasopharyngeal carcinoma and who developed carotid stenosis that was treated with standard carotid endarterectomy. Symptomatic carotid stenosis was detected 3 years later over the ipsilateral common carotid artery proximal to the previous endarterectomy site at the level of the thoracic inlet. This was successfully treated with carotid stenting.

Case report

A 60-year-old man with nasopharyngeal carcinoma and neck lymph node metastasis received therapeutic external irradiation 7 years prior to this report. A dose of 6100 cGy was given in 26 sessions during a period of 2 months to the...
nasopharyngeal space and the neck. Follow-up visits found no evidence of tumour recurrence. A significant left carotid stenosis was detected on surveillance Duplex scan 3 years later. Carotid angiogram showed a 90% stenosis of his left internal carotid artery just distal to the carotid bifurcation. Carotid endarterectomy was performed using general anaesthesia with cerebral protection using an inlay Jarvid shunt. There was no particular difficulty during the endarterectomy procedure and the arteriotomy was primarily closed. The patient recovered uneventfully with no perioperative or postoperative complications and had a regular Duplex scan every 6 months at postoperative follow-up visits. There was no evidence of recurrent stenosis until 40 months later, when Duplex scan showed a new stenosis of 80% over the left common carotid artery proximal to the previous endarterectomy site at the level of the thoracic inlet. While waiting for further investigation, the patient developed symptoms of ipsilateral transient ischaemic attacks, in the form of two episodes of transient right lower limb weakness. A repeat angiogram performed 1 month later confirmed an 80% stenosis over the proximal part of the left common carotid artery (Fig 1). The lesion was not present in the previous angiogram and the internal carotid artery over the previous endarterectomy site showed no evidence of restenosis. Carotid stenting was performed using local anaesthesia via a right transfemoral approach. An 8 mm x 41 mm Wallstent (Boston Scientific Corporation, Massachusetts, US) was deployed across the stenosis, followed by balloon dilatation with a 6 mm x 20 mm angioplasty balloon (Meditech; Boston Scientific Corporation, Massachusetts, US). The intra-operative angiogram showed a satisfactory result (Fig 2). The patient recovered uneventfully and was discharged after 2 days. There were no further neurological events and he remained well 12 months after the procedure with no evidence of restenosis on Duplex scan.

Discussion

Irradiation-induced extracranial carotid stenosis has become a well-defined entity since it was first reported by Heidenberg et al. In the past, most patients with head and neck malignancies died before the development of atherosclerotic complications. With the improvement in long-term survival resulting from the use of radiotherapy as part of multimodality treatment of head and neck tumours, the long-term adverse effects of irradiation, especially accelerated carotid stenosis, have become apparent. Studies have shown that the prevalence of significant carotid stenosis was higher in an irradiated patient population than in a comparable control group with no earlier radiation exposure. Carmody et al noted that 22% of the irradiated patients had significant carotid stenosis (≥70%), compared with 4% in the control group. Eighty percent of the patients with significant carotid stenosis in the irradiated group were symptomatic. It is also our experience that patients who have had radiation therapy have a high prevalence of significant extracranial carotid stenosis; 11.7% of the 240 patients who had received external irradiation to the head and neck region were found to have significant carotid stenosis (≥70%).

The damage induced by radiotherapy is believed to be a combination of direct vessel wall damage leading to intimal proliferation, necrosis of the media, periadventitial fibrosis, and accelerated atherosclerosis, and indirect effects as a result of radiation-induced obliteration of the adventitial vasa vasorum. There is always a concern that the plaque may be closely adherent, making it difficult to achieve an

Fig 1. Carotid angiograms
(a) Lateral view and (b) anteroposterior view showing the recurrent carotid stenosis (short arrow) over the left common carotid artery at the level of the thoracic inlet. The internal carotid artery over the previous endarterectomy site (long arrow) shows no evidence of restenosis.
adequate cleavage plane for endarterectomy, thus making
traditional carotid endarterectomy unsuitable for this group
of patients. Despite these difficulties, the safety and effi-
cacy of carotid endarterectomy for patients post-irradiation
have also been described. In the study by Kashyap et al.,
26 carotid operations were performed for 24 patients who
had previously undergone radiation therapy to the head and
neck region, including 20 standard carotid endarterectomy
procedures. No deaths or strokes occurred within 30 days
of the operations. No strokes were seen at follow-up be-
tween 1 and 156 months.

The patient in this study was also initially operated with
standard carotid endarterectomy with no major difficulty. It
is, however, interesting to note the new lesion of carotid
stenosis at another site proximal to the previous endarterec-
tomy after 3 years. This illustrates the unique characteristic
of the accelerated atherosclerosis associated with irradiation,
which can occur at atypical sites and in a short interval and
highlights the importance of postoperative surveillance for
post-irradiated patients who are prone to accelerated
atherosclerosis. Although Duplex scan is replacing angi-
ography as the routine preoperative investigation of choice
for patients with carotid stenosis, preoperative angiogram
should still be performed for post-irradiated patients in
order to delineate the possible unusual anatomic location
of irradiation-associated carotid stenosis and to allow the
surgeon to prepare an alternative approach if required.

With the increasing experience and interest in carotid
angioplasty and stenting, this treatment modality is increas-
ingly practised, although the safety and long-term benefits
remain to be proven. The procedure may be a suitable op-
tion for the treatment of patients at high risk such as those
who have had previous irradiation to the head and neck. For
the patient described in this report, the new stenosis was
over the common carotid artery at the level of the thoracic
inlet, which cannot be approached easily using traditional
open surgery. Endovascular intervention may be a better
option in this situation. Traditional carotid endarterectomy
and percutaneous carotid angioplasty and stenting are com-
plimentary treatments for carotid stenosis and their appli-
cability were well illustrated in this patient. While carotid
endarterectomy could be safely performed even for post-
irradiated patients, carotid angioplasty and stenting have a
role in the management of carotid stenosis, especially for
recurrent disease and when the lesion is inaccessible.

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