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Neuro Images

Figure. (A) Head CT showing prominent low-density signal caused by air in the intravascular space of the brain, with filling and dilatation of the right middle cerebral (arrowhead), posterior communicating (long arrow), and posterior cerebral (short arrows) arteries. Smaller low-density lesions within brain parenchyma, consistent with air bubbles, are also seen. (B) Photograph of fresh postmortem brain tissue showing bubbles and columns of air alternating with blood (arrows) in multiple vessels over the surface of the cerebrum.

Massive air embolism with left ventricular assist device

M.S.V. Elkind, MD, MS, S.S. Chin, MD, PhD, E.A. Rose, MD

A 65-year-old man had a left ventricular assist device (LVAD) placed 17 months before presentation. He had been feeling ill at dinner and retired to his bedroom. He was found unconscious 1 hour later and was brought to a local emergency room, where he vomited, became cyanotic, and was in coma. Head CT showed low density consistent

with air in the intravascular space of the brain, creating the appearance of a “pneumoarteriogram” (figure, A). He rapidly became hemodynamically unstable and died within 6 hours of symptom onset. Postmortem examination of the brain showed air bubbles and columns of air alternating with blood in multiple vessels over the surface of the brain (figure, B). Examination of the LVAD showed two tiny (<1 mm) holes in the diaphragm between the pump and blood chambers. The diagnosis was fatal massive air embolism.

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