
Massive air embolism with left ventricular assist device

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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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