Teaching NeuroImages: Pneumorrhachis and paraplegia after spinal anesthesia

Author(s):
Fátima Hierro, Medical Doctor1; Joana Nunes2; Luis Fontão, Medical Doctor3

Corresponding Author:
Fátima Hierro, fatimashierro@gmail.com

Affiliation Information for All Authors: 1. Neuroradiology Department, Hospital Pedro Hispano; 2. Imagiology Department, Centro Hospitalar de Vila Nova de Gaia/Espinho; 3. Neurology Department, Centro Hospitalar de entre Douro e Vouga

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Contributions:
Fátima Hierro: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content & comma; including medical writing for content; Major role in the acquisition of data; Study concept or design; Analysis or interpretation of data; Additional contributions (in addition to one or more of the above criteria)
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Pneumorrhachis and paraplegia after spinal anesthesia

A 71-year-old female presented with paraplegia, absent deep tendon reflexes and a T10 sensory level nine hours after knee replacement surgery performed under spinal anesthesia. MR of the spine revealed intra and extra dural gas, termed pneumorrhachis (Figure 1A). Air in the extra and intra dural spaces led to canal stenosis (Figure 1B) and root clumping (Figure 1C) respectively. The patient was immediately started on high flow oxygen and then transferred for treatment in a hyperbaric chamber. Neurological deficits resolved and a CT scan (Figure 1D) revealed redistribution of the gas.

Pneumorrhachis, a complication of spinal or combined spinal and epidural anesthesia, occurs when air is injected using the loss-of-resistance technique\(^1\) to identify the epidural space during catheter placement. A degenerative spine or previous spinal surgery can predispose to this complication.

Pneumorrhachis is asymptomatic in 90% of cases. The symptoms, when present, are neurologic deficits attributable to cord or root compression\(^2\). Treatment options include oxygen therapy or, in asymptomatic or mild cases, inpatient observation\(^1,2\).
References

Note: A translated version of this manuscript was provided to the patient, the objective of the publication was explained, and written informed consent was obtained via the “Consent-to-disclose” form.
MCQ

Pneumorrhachis is a recognized complication of spinal anesthesia. What is the typical clinical presentation associated with this complication?
- A decreased level of consciousness.
- The condition is usually asymptomatic.
- Permanent focal deficits.
- This complication is often fatal.
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Fátima Hierro, Joana Nunes and Luís Fontão

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