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Identification of Inadvertent Azygous Vein Cannulation Using Transthoracic Echocardiography During Venoarterial Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation Initiation

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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that optimal cannula positioning during initiation of venoarterial (VA) extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) is directly related to ECMO circuit function. Malpositioned cannulae can have deleterious effects on clinical outcomes, and inadvertent cannulation of the azygous vein during initiation of ECMO is a rare but potentially devastating complication that has been reported only a few times in the literature. Here we report a case of azygous vein cannulation in a neonate that was not identified on chest radiography but was recognized and corrected expeditiously with the use of transthoracic echocardiography.

CASE PRESENTATION

A full-term neonate was born without complications at an outside facility and subsequently became profoundly hypoxic within 30 min. At 20 hours of life, the infant was transferred to our facility for treatment of severe pulmonary hypertension and remained unresponsive to supplemental oxygen, inhaled nitric oxide, and high-frequency oscillatory ventilation, ultimately requiring VA ECMO support in the setting of impending cardiorespiratory collapse. A transverse right neck incision was made and, after adequate dissection and visualization of the vasculature, the neonate underwent cervical cannulation with placement of a 12-Fr venous Bio-Medicus (Medtronic, Minneapolis, MN) cannula in the right internal jugular vein and a 10-Fr arterial Bio-Medicus cannula in the right common carotid artery. An anteroposterior chest radiograph appeared to show the cannulae adequately positioned (Figure 1). ECMO flows were increased using a Sorin S5 (LivaNova, London, United Kingdom) roller head pump, but at 60 mL/kg/min of flow, the venous pressure became markedly negative, causing pump shutdown. Slight adjustments to the cannulae were made by the surgical team, and volume resuscitation was initiated with multiple 5% albumin boluses, but there was no improvement in the ability to achieve adequate circulatory support. With the surgical team still scrubbed, transthoracic echocardiography was emergently performed under sterile conditions to evaluate for complications. Several subcostal sweeps performed in the sagittal plane revealed that the venous cannula was directed posteriorly (Figure 2) rather than inferiorly along the expected course through the superior vena cava (SVC) into the right atrium. Although consideration was given to the possibility of vascular perforation because of the location of the cannula tip, two-dimensional and color Doppler imaging demonstrated venous blood flow along a vascular structure consistent with the azygous vein, within which the cannula appeared to travel (Figure 3). The surgical team was able to manipulate the cannula during image acquisition to confirm its location for the cardiology team (Video 1). With this confirmation, the cannula was partially withdrawn and readvanced smoothly through the SVC into the right atrium under echocardiographic guidance. Subsequent views showed the distal tip of the venous cannula in an appropriate position within the right atrium (Figures 4 and 5), with immediate improvement in venous return. The cannulae were then sutured in place as the patient began to show marked improvement in oxygenation and cardiac output.

DISCUSSION

Initiation of VA ECMO in a critically ill patient requires knowledge of the vascular anatomy and proper positioning of the venous and arterial cannulae to achieve adequate venous drainage and arterial blood flow. During cervical ECMO cannulation, the venous cannula is commonly advanced through the right internal jugular vein into the SVC until the distal tip rests within the right atrium, unobstructed by the atrial septum and separated from the hepatic veins in order to achieve optimal systemic venous drainage. The arterial cannula is ideally advanced through the right common carotid artery until the distal tip reaches the aortic arch. Once flow is initiated, clinical data obtained from the circuit and the patient are helpful in determining if there is adequate cardiopulmonary support. At our institution, as well as others, anteroposterior chest radiography is routinely performed to verify cannula position before suturing the cannula in place. Echocardiography is typically performed as well but is often delayed until after the cannulae are secured and the neck wound is closed, making repositioning of the cannulae more complicated.

Verification of cannula position has traditionally been accomplished using chest radiography. In 1998 Irish et al. reviewed the charts of 73 patients who had undergone cervical ECMO cannulation without confirmation of cannula placement by echocardiography and found that 18 of these patients (24.6%) ultimately required...
Inadvertent cannulation of the azygous vein is rare and presents a diagnostic challenge during cervical ECMO cannulation. It can be easily missed with standard radiographic imaging, potentially leading to delays in initiation of adequate support and clinical deterioration of the patient. Echocardiography is a noninvasive, widely available, useful modality that can be used immediately at the bedside to assess and direct cannula positioning in real time during initiation of VA ECMO support. Given that image guidance is now the standard of care during most invasive procedures, echocardiography should be used routinely to guide cervical ECMO cannulation.

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Figure 2 A subcostal sagittal view obtained during ECMO cannulation shows the venous cannula directed posteriorly into the azygous vein. The venous cannula tip (yellow arrow) can be seen directed posteriorly toward the spine. With appropriate positioning, the venous cannula should be seen coursing anteriorly into the SVC (asterisk), with the tip projecting into the right atrium (RA). Without evidence of venous blood flow into the cannula, the differential diagnosis for this positioning includes vascular perforation. In the accompanying image, the distal portion of the cannula is outlined in red.

Figure 3 A subcostal sagittal view with color Doppler shows evidence of blood flow (blue flow) near the tip of the cannula (yellow arrow) in the distal portion of the vessel. It remains apparent that the cannula is not descending through the SVC (asterisk) into the right atrium (RA), as would be expected. In the accompanying image, the distal portion of the cannula is outlined in red.

Figure 4 This subcostal sagittal view was obtained after the cannula was withdrawn from the azygous vein and readvanced into the SVC (asterisk). The venous cannula tip (yellow arrow) can be seen projecting into the lower right atrium (RA) through the SVC (asterisk), and the azygous vein is seen coursing along the anterior spine. The cannula was tied into position after significant improvement in ECMO flows. In the accompanying image, the distal portion of the cannula is outlined in red.
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REFERENCES


Figure 5 Color-compare imaging depicts a similar subcostal sagittal view that was obtained after repositioning of the tip of the venous cannula (yellow arrow) through the SVC (asterisk) into the right atrium (RA). The two-dimensional image is on the left with color overlaying the identical image on the right with the distal tip of the venous cannula outlined in red. Venous blood flow (blue flow away from the transducer) can be seen in the azygos vein, which is now unobstructed by the cannula. The infant had no clinical evidence of vascular perforation after successful repositioning of the cannula.