CASE REPORT – OPEN ACCESS

International Journal of Surgery Case Reports 22 (2016) 55–58

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Surgery Case Reports

journal homepage: www.casereports.com

Spontaneous pneumoperitoneum in pediatric patients: A case series

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 February 2016
Received in revised form 2 March 2016
Accepted 13 March 2016
Available online 19 March 2016

Keywords:
Pneumoperitoneum
Pediatric
Perforated viscus
Non-surgical management

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Pneumoperitoneum frequently results in emergent surgery because it typically indicates an abdominal viscus perforation. However, this may not always be the case. There have been few recent reports in the pediatric population that document cases of pneumoperitoneum which could be considered for non-surgical management.
PRESENTATION OF CASE: This case series presents three different instances of pediatric patients with radiographic evidence of pneumoperitoneum who were subsequently found to have no perforated viscus following surgical intervention.
CONCLUSION: We recommend that in the absence of peritoneal signs, fever, leukocytosis, significant abdominal pain, distension, or clinical deterioration, non-operative management be considered in pediatric patients with radiographic signs of pneumoperitoneum.

1. Introduction

Pneumoperitoneum, or air within the peritoneal cavity, frequently indicates a perforated abdominal viscus that requires emergent surgical intervention [1]. Pathology for adult patients can include perforation of stomach or duodenal ulcers, perforation of the small or large intestines secondary to inflammatory bowel disease, diverticular rupture, or cancer [2]. Once abdominal free air is found radiographically, it is important to determine if the patient requires an emergent surgery. However, not all cases of pneumoperitoneum indicate perforated abdominal viscus [3,4].

Given that surgery with exposure to general anesthesia can lead to an increase in morbidity and mortality for patients, it is important to shed light on cases of spontaneous pneumoperitoneum that might be better managed without surgical intervention. In the pediatric population, there have been few recent studies that document instances of spontaneous pneumoperitoneum that were managed non-surgically. In this case series we present three different pediatric patients who were found to have radiographic evidence of pneumoperitoneum and underwent emergent laparotomy in which no perforated viscus was found.

2. Case series

2.1. Case 1

An 11-year-old male presented to the emergency department with a one-day history of pain in his left shoulder, back, and abdomen. He had a past medical history significant for polymyositis and systemic juvenile idiopathic arthritis for which he was taking steroids, methotrexate, and mycophenolic acid. He also had a history of total anomalous pulmonary venous return, which was repaired surgically during infancy. One month prior to presentation, the patient's mother stated that he underwent a thoracoscopy with biopsy of lung parenchyma for chronic pneumonia. On examination, his abdomen was soft and non-distended, but diffusely tender. Bowel sounds were active in all four quadrants and no rebound tenderness or guarding was noted. The patient was afebrile in the emergency department with a white blood cell (WBC) count of 30.3 k/μL. An abdominal CT and chest X-ray performed in the emergency department showed air under the right and left hemidiaphragm (Fig. 1) with no identifiable source of the free air. The patient underwent an emergent exploratory laparotomy due to concern for a perforated peptic ulcer from chronic steroid use. Laparotomy was chosen due to surgeon preference. Air was noted to escape upon opening of the parietal peritoneum, however no free fluid was seen. The bowel, colon, retroperitoneal space, retrogastric space, stomach, and duodenum were all examined. There were no signs of an intraabdominal inflammatory process or visceral perforation. The patient tolerated the surgery well and remained stable and afebrile postoperatively. He was discharged home five days later, and had no post-operative complications.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijscr.2016.03.017

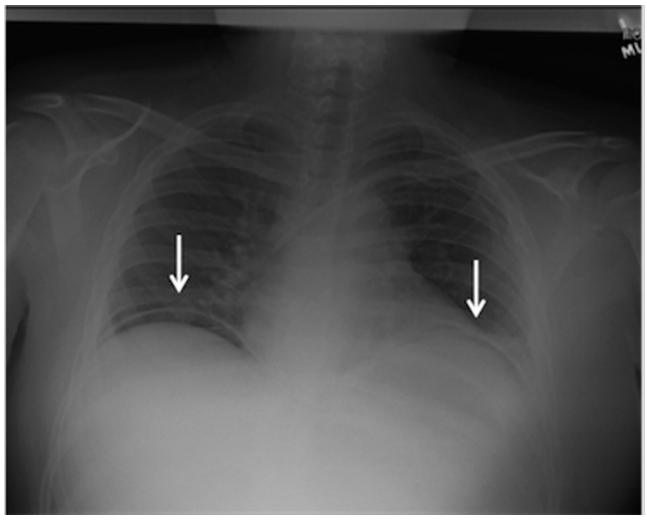

Fig. 1. Case 1—Chest X-ray with free air under the right and left hemidiaphragm.

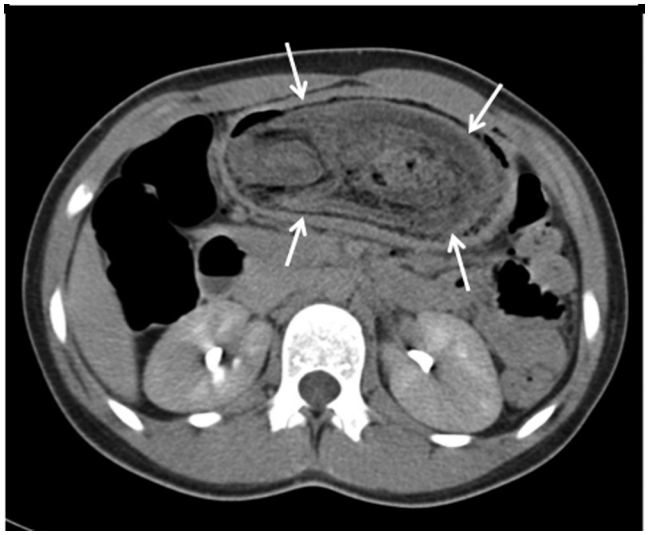

Fig. 2. Case 2—Abdominal CT with large bezoar.

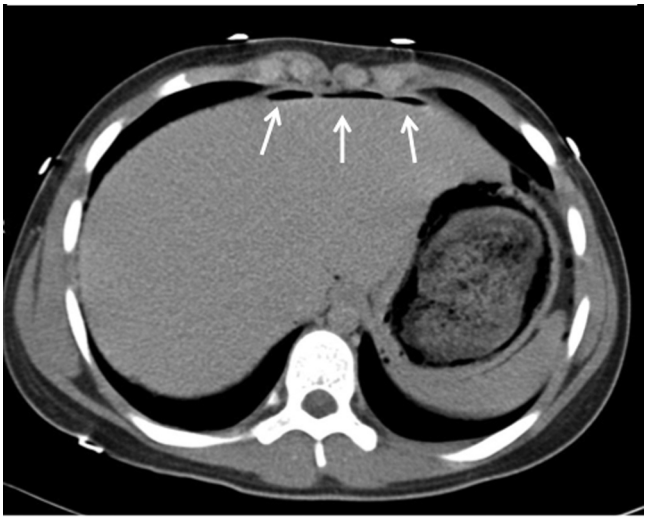

Fig. 3. Case 2—Abdominal CT with pneumoperitoneum.

Fig. 4. Case 3—Abdominal CT with pelvic debris.

2.2. Case 2

A 13-year-old female presented with a four-day history of abdominal pain. She had a past medical history significant for depression, anxiety, and trichotillomania. On examination, her abdomen was soft, non-distended, with tenderness to palpation in the epigastric region, and rebound tenderness. She was afebrile with a WBC count of 14.2 k/μL. An abdominal CT scan demonstrated a large bezoar within the stomach (Fig. 2) and intraperitoneal free air (Fig. 3). A chest X-ray was not performed. The patient then underwent an emergent laparotomy because of concern for perforation of the stomach due to the bezoar. Inspection of the peritoneal cavity, revealed no signs of perforation, but the stomach was markedly distended. A gastrotomy was performed revealing a large trichobezoar completely obstructing the gastric outlet. The trichobezoar was removed and the abdomen was irrigated and closed. The patient remained stable after the procedure and was discharged home three days later.

2.3. Case 3

A 10 year-old female presented to the emergency department with a one-day history of right-sided abdominal pain with periumbilical radiation, nausea, vomiting, and anorexia. Her past medical history was significant for recurrent urinary tract infections. On examination, her abdomen was soft, non-distended, tender to palpation in the right lower quadrant, with guarding, and no rebound tenderness. Rovsing and oburator signs were positive. The patient was afebrile with a WBC count of 20.0 k/μL and urinalysis was positive for nitrites and leukocyte esterase. An abdominal/pelvic CT showed scattered foci of air in the right upper quadrant, left lower quadrant, and left hemipelvis. The Appendix was noted to appear normal and debris was visualized in the gynecologic pelvis (Fig. 4). The patient underwent a diagnostic laparoscopy at which time purulent material was visualized in the pelvis. The stomach, small bowel, colon, appendix, and pelvis were examined, but no perforations were seen. The operation was converted to an open laparotomy due to poor visualization, and the ovaries and uterus were noted to be normal at this time. Following abdominal closure, a pelvic exam was performed revealing purulent material in the vagina with an intact hymen and no signs of sexual trauma. Culture and grain stain of peritoneal and vaginal fluids revealed no