The treatment of retained stones in the common bile duct with sodium cholate infusion

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SUMMARY Six patients with stones retained in the common bile duct after cholecystectomy and common duct exploration were treated by intraductal infusion of a sodium cholate solution. In the five patients whose stones were between the T-tube and the duodenum the treatment was successful within a few days. A stone became transiently impacted in the ampullary region soon after beginning therapy in three patients and produced mild pancreatitis in two. The only failure was in a patient whose stone was between the T-tube and the liver.

Gallstones are retained in the biliary tree after cholecystectomy with common bile duct exploration in approximately 10% of patients (Bartlett and Dreyfuss, 1960). Since a second operation upon the bile duct is hazardous, several non-surgical approaches to therapy, including dissolution of the stones by instillation of substances through the T-tube (Pribram, 1947; Torresyap, 1958) and removal of the stones by instrumentation through the T-tube, have been proposed (Bean and Mahorner, 1972; Burhenne, 1973).

The purpose of this report is to describe our experiences in six patients with retained common bile duct stones treated by sodium cholate infusions through the T-tube, as described by Way, Admirand, and Dunphy (1972).

Patients and Methods

The patients were studied at least four weeks after operation. Their ages and sex are shown in the table. They were fully informed and agreed to participate in the experimental procedure. They were asymptomatic and tests of liver function were normal at the time of study.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Age and Sex</th>
<th>Duration of Perfusion (Days)</th>
<th>Number of Stones</th>
<th>Location of Stones</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Side Effects</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VB</td>
<td>37, F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Impacted in distal bile duct</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Mild pancreatitis, haematoabilia, diarrhoea</td>
<td>See text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA</td>
<td>56, M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Above T-tube in common hepatic duct</td>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>Minimal diarrhoea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CW</td>
<td>19, F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 (or more)</td>
<td>Distal common bile duct, partially obstructed</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Diarrhoea, nausea, pancreatitis</td>
<td>Combination cholate-deoxycholate infusion Complete obstruction few hours after infusion began</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>60, M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Distal common bile duct, partially obstructed</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>58, F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Free in distal common bile duct</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Mild diarrhoea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF</td>
<td>28, F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Free in distal common bile duct</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Stone became impacted within first six hours of infusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Results of treatment with sodium cholate infusion

Results

In all five patients in whom the stone or stones were distal to the T-tube, the stones passed (table). Cholangiograms before and after treatment in one patient (CW) are shown in figure 1. In four patients, the stones passed after three to five days of infusion, but in the fifth (VB) the stone passed two weeks.

Fig 1 Patient C.W. The left panel shows a cholangiogram before treatment. Arrows point to two definite stones. The right panel shows a cholangiogram after the stones had passed.
after a four-day infusion had been completed. There were minor, but potentially important complications in three of the five patients who were treated successfully. In all three, a stone became transiently impacted in the distal bile duct associated with a rise in intraductal pressure and pain in the epigastrium and back. Mild pancreatitis developed in two; both had slightly elevated serum and urinary amylase levels, and one had an elevated white blood count. In two patients, the stone was free in the distal duct at the beginning of the infusion. In the other patient (VB) it was impacted initially, and after four days of cholate infusion, there developed mild mid-epigastric pain and a small amount of blood appeared in the bile. A cholangiogram showed the stone to be free in the duct (figure 2). The infusion was stopped, she became asymptomatic, and was discharged. Two weeks later, upon readmission to hospital, a cholangiogram showed that the stone was again impacted in the distal bile duct. The next day before the cholate infusion could be reinstituted, the signs and symptoms of pancreatitis developed and after two days the stone passed and the patient became asymptomatic. In all three patients the obstruction lasted less than 48 hours and was followed by passage of the stone into the duodenum.

In the one failure (KA), the stone was proximal to the tube. That patient was treated for 10 days...
with a sodium cholate infusion and later for three
days with a 100 mM mixture of 70% sodium cholate
and 30% sodium deoxycholate. The second infusion
had to be terminated because of uncontrollable
diarrhoea.

Discussion

In four of the five patients with retained stones in the
common bile duct distal to the T-tube, the stones
passed out of the duct within five days of beginning
the sodium cholate infusion. In the fifth patient
the stone passed two weeks after the infusion. Was
this the natural history of the disease, the mechanical
effect of bile duct perfusion, or a specific effect of the
bile salt solution.

Common bile duct stones do pass into the duo-
denum spontaneously, but since they had not passed
in these patients during the preceding four to six
weeks of observation, spontaneous passage seems
unlikely.

A non-specific effect of bile duct perfusion cannot
be excluded in these patients because we did not use
a control saline solution, but other studies suggest that
bile duct perfusion alone would not give these results.
Way et al, (1972) used saline in four patients for six
days without passage of the stones but in all four the
stones passed during the sodium cholate infusions.
Furthermore, since maximum intraductal pressure
was maintained at a level no greater than normal
intraductal pressure, it seemed very doubtful that the
stones were forced or flushed out of the duct.

Small (1970) and Earnest and Admirand (1971)
showed that incubation of cholesterol stones in bile
salt solutions in vitro dissolves some cholesterol out
of the stones and decreases their size. In our patients
the stones did not dissolve nor was it possible to
detect radiographically a decrease in size. It is highly
probable, however, that a decrease in size sufficient
to allow passage into the duodenum did occur. This
view is supported by the impaction of stones in the
ampullary region in two patients only a few hours
after beginning the infusions. In those patients the
stones had remained free in the bile duct without
entering the narrower intraduodenal portion for
four to six weeks before the bile salt infusions.

The only complications of therapy were diarrhoea
in all patients and the transient impaction of the
stone in the ampulla of a Vater, causing mild pan-
creatitis in two patients. The diarrhoea was easily
controlled with cholestyramine in all patients except
the one who was given a mixture of sodium cholate
and sodium deoxycholate. The deoxycholate was
employed because of its greater cholesterol solubi-
lizing capacity (Earnest and Admirand, 1971). Pancreatitis is a potentially serious complication,
but in these patients it was mild and transient.

On the basis of our experience we recommend
continued use of sodium cholate infusion into the
common bile duct to treat retained stones, especially
when the stones are between the T-tube and the
duodenum.

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