Mystery Case: Hypoglossal nerve palsy in occipito-temporal pneumatization

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A 47-year-old man, with a 25-year history of frequent scuba diving, presented with a right-sided hypoglossal palsy 2 days after occipital head trauma. CT showed excessive occipito-temporal and atlas pneumatization, a right-sided hypoglossal canal fracture (B, black arrow), gas around atlanto-occipital joints (C, white arrowheads) and in surrounding soft tissue (A and C, black arrowheads). There is a right-sided partial opacification of mastoid air cells by a fluid collection, on CT (A, white arrow) and MRI FLAIR sequences (D, white arrow).

Repetitive positive pressure phenomena (e.g., Valsalva maneuver) are often associated with cranial bone pneumatization. The preexisting cranial bone pneumatization probably placed the patient at risk for cranial bone fracture of the thinned bone in the setting of minor head trauma.

REFERENCES

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Figure 1
CT and MRI fluid-attenuated inversion recovery (FLAIR) sequences

Figure 2
CT

CT (A to D, coronal views) showing occipital, temporal, and atlas pneumatization, gas around atlanto-occipital joints (A and C, arrowheads), and soft tissue emphysema (D, arrowheads).

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this Mystery Case as an education tool. Responses were solicited through a group e-mail sent to the American Academy of Neurology Consortium of Neurology Residents and Fellows and through social media.

All the answers that we received came from individual residents rather than groups, and they were all well-reasoned and thoughtful. Many respondents considered an injury of the hypoglossal nerve (CN12) in the hypoglossal canal as the putative pathophysiologic mechanism for this clinical presentation. Dr. Sweta Singla has provided the most complete answer, indicating that “severe pneumatization of the mastoid cells” led to “hypoglossal nerve injury at the level of the hypoglossal canal.”

This case illustrates an uncommon skull fracture of the hypoglossal canal associated with bone pneumatization secondary to chronic repetitive exposure to positive ventilatory pressures.

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