Original article

The ilio-inguinal approach for recent acetabular fractures: Ultrasound evaluation of the ilio-psoas muscle and complications in 24 consecutive patients

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The ilio-inguinal approach is used to achieve internal fixation of acetabular fractures. Although the outcomes of this procedure have been extensively reported, information is lacking on potential complications. More specifically, the effect on the ilio-psoas muscle, whose iliac attachments are almost completely released, has not been accurately evaluated.

Hypothesis: Endopelvic dissection does not alter the ultrasound structure of the ilio-psoas muscle compared to the normal side at a distance from acetabular internal fixation via the ilio-inguinal approach.

Patients and methods: We retrospectively evaluated 26 patients who underwent internal fixation of acetabular fractures via the ilio-inguinal approach between 2006 and 2010. Two patients with multiple injuries died shortly after the procedure, leaving 24 patients with unilateral fractures for the study. In 2012, an observer who was not involved in the surgical treatment of these patients conducted an assessment (Oxford score except in the 8 patients who required revision surgery for arthroplasty and evaluation for a deficit of the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve in the full cohort). At the same time point, ultrasonography was performed to compare ilio-psoas muscle morphology on the two sides. Any other complications (vascular, nervous, or parietal) were recorded.

Results: Of the 24 patients, 11 (45%) experienced complications, of whom only 3 required further surgery, 2 with infections that recovered fully after lavage and 1 with a haematoma responsible for compression of the urinary bladder. The lateral femoral cutaneous nerve was injured in 8 (33%) patients, including 4 who had achieved a full recovery at last follow-up. At last follow-up, none of the 24 patients had ultrasound evidence of a significant difference in ilio-psoas muscle size at the lateral window: mean transverse diameter was 51.8 ± 0.8 mm (range, 44–58 mm) on the operated side versus 51.7 ± 0.79 mm (range, 44–59 mm) on the other side (P = 0.9). After a mean follow-up of 49 months (range, 31–70 months), the mean Oxford score in the 16 patients who had not required further surgery was 20.5/80 (range, 12–44).

Discussion: Our results show that, despite extensive endopelvic dissection, the ilio-inguinal approach has no effect on the ultrasound morphology of the ilio-psoas muscle. There is a high risk of injury to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve that should be disclosed to the patient before the procedure. In contrast, no parietal complications were recorded. In selected patients, the Cole-Stoppa approach is an alternative that spares the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve.

Level of evidence: Level IV, retrospective study.

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1. Introduction

Emile Letournel and Robert Judet [1] standardised the surgical treatment of acetabular fractures by providing an exhaustive radiographic description of the lesions. The ilio-inguinal approach was introduced in 1961 to treat anterior wall and column injuries, as well as selected recent cases of transverse and bicondylar fractures [2]. This anterior approach is widely used and recognised as effective in these indications [3–7]. However, the complications are rarely reported, and most studies focus on the quality of the reduction [4–7] or on immediately life-threatening complications [8,9]. A few studies evaluated changes in muscle strength after internal...
fixation of acetabular fractures [10,11] but they had small sample sizes (≤ 15 patients) and did not include an evaluation of muscle morphology. The ilio-psoas muscle is of particular interest, as most of its attachments are released during the endopelvic dissection required for the ilio-inguinal approach [10,11].

The objective of this study was to conduct an ultrasound evaluation of the ilio-psoas muscle after internal acetabular fixation via the ilio-inguinal approach. We evaluated whether this approach resulted in specific complications, with particular attention to the frequency of injury to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve.

2. Material and method

2.1. Patients

Between 2006 and 2010, 32 patients underwent surgery via the ilio-inguinal approach. Among them, 6 required internal fixation of the pelvic ring. We excluded these 6 patients, as the injury per se may have produced muscle damage and other approaches were used concomitantly (para-symphysal approach, lateral window). In the remaining 26 patients, the ilio-inguinal approach was used for internal fixation of the acetabulum. Two patients with multiple injuries died shortly after the procedure, leaving 24 patients for the current study.

There were 8 females and 16 males with a mean age of 39.6 years (range, 24–68 years). The fractures were due to intentional defenestration in 4 patients, work-related accidents in 4 patients, unintentional falls in 2 patients, and motor vehicle accidents in 14 patients. Mean time from injury to surgery was 7.2 days (range, 3–10 days). A single senior surgeon performed all the procedures according to the seminal description by Emile Letournel [2,3] involving ilio-psoas muscle detachment from the iliac fossa of the pelvis until just above the sacro-iliac joint, as well as release of the fascia iliaca. After abundant pulsed lavage, the wound was closed on a suction drain with reattachment of the oblique muscles. None of the patients received non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug therapy to prevent ectopic ossification formation.

Of the 24 patients, 5 had anterior column fractures, 10 bicolumnar fractures, 7 transverse fractures (including 2 with posterior wall fractures), and 2 T-shaped fractures. In 5 patients, an additional posterior approach was used for fixation of a posterior lesion via the Kocher-Langenbeck approach, during the same stage but after re-installation of the patient (2 transverse fractures with involvement of the posterior wall, 1 T-shaped fracture, and 2 bicolumnar fractures). Pelvic ring disruption (dislocation of the sacro-iliac joint or pubic symphysis) was present in 4 patients; we included these patients, as the minimal displacement of the lesions could not have caused damage to the endopelvic muscles. Ipsilateral sciatic nerve palsy was noted immediately after the injury in 2 patients.

2.2. Assessment methods

The same observer assessed the patients after a mean follow-up of 49 months (range, 30–71 months). Perioperative complications were recorded. The assessment included a physical examination to look for a deficit of the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve. In addition, the Oxford functional score [12] was determined in the 16 patients who had not required arthroplasty. Heterotopic ossifications were rated according to Brooker et al. [13].

Ultrasoundography of the ilio-psoas muscle was performed at the level of the scar and comparatively on the uninjured side (Fig. 1). This investigation was performed in all 24 patients, including the 8 patients with arthroplasty, as this second procedure was done exclusively via the posterior approach and was therefore deemed unable to influence ilio-psoas muscle morphology. Width in the coronal plane was measured and compared to the uninjured side (Fig. 2). The entire width of the ilio-psoas muscle was taken into account, including the width of the psoas muscle tendon and the belly of the iliacus muscle. The measurements were obtained by several radiologists, all of whom followed the same standardised protocol: comparative symmetric measurements performed by the same radiologist with the probe perpendicular to the axis of the body, near the cranial ventral iliac spine. The difference between the two sides was evaluated using the non-parametric Wilcoxon test with the first order risk set at 0.05.

3. Results

In 2 patients, infectious complications required surgical lavage and probabilistic antibiotic therapy, which was secondarily adjusted to microbiological cultures. Neither had septic recurrence after a follow-up of at least 2 years with the fixation material left in place. In another patient, a haematoma in the ilio-psoas muscle caused compression of the urinary bladder and required surgical drainage. Ectopic ossifications class IV according to Brooker et al. were noted at the posterior approach in 1 patient [13]. During the immediate postoperative period, injury to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve was diagnosed clinically in 8 (33.3%) patients (1 T-shaped fracture, 1 anterior column fracture, 2 bicolumnar fractures, 2 transverse fractures, and 2 combined transverse/posterior wall fractures). The deficit recovered fully in 4 patients, leaving 4 (16.6%) patients with deficits at re-evaluation (1 T-shaped fracture, 1 transverse fracture, 1 bicolumnar fracture, and 1 combined transverse/posterior wall fracture).

At follow-up, none of the patients had inguinal hernias or abdominal wall dehiscence, but keloid scars were noted in 2 males. In none of the patients was the scar rated a cosmetic sequela.

In 8 (33.3%) patients, arthroplasty was performed, 36 to 48 months after internal fixation. Among them, 4 (3 bicolumnar fractures and 1 T-shaped fracture) underwent total hip replacement. Hip resurfacing arthroplasty was performed in the 4 other patients (3 bicolumnar fractures and 1 combined transverse/posterior wall fracture).

The mean Oxford score [12] in the 16 patients who did not undergo arthroplasty was 20.5 (range, 12–44) after a mean follow-up of 49 months (range, 30–71 months) (5 anterior column fractures, 4 bicolumnar fractures, 6 transverse fractures including 1 with a posterior wall fracture, and 1 T-shaped fracture). The patient with an Oxford score of 44 was a woman with a transverse/posterior wall fracture who was not yet willing to undergo arthroplasty.

By ultrasonography, ilio-psoas muscle width was comparable between the injured and uninjured sides: transverse diameter, 51.8 ± 0.8 (range, 44–58) on the injured side and 51.7 ± 0.79 mm (range, 44–59) on the other side (P = 0.9). Muscle morphology as assessed by ultrasonography was similar on the two sides.

4. Discussion

The ilio-inguinal approach is the most widely used anterior approach to treat fractures of the anterior acetabular column [3–7]. Modifications have been suggested to broaden the indications of this approach [14,15]. In all anatomical variants, however, dissection of the ilio-psoas muscle with detachment of the iliaca portio and division of the fascia iliaca is required. These procedures may conceivably affect muscle trophicity. However, our results show that, despite the extensive dissection, the ilio-inguinal approach has no effect on the ultrasound morphology of the ilio-psoas muscle.

The small sample size is a limitation of our study. However, none of the patients was lost to follow-up and a single surgeon performed all the procedures according to the original description by Letournel [2,3]. Although several different radiologists performed the ultrasound evaluations, the comparative nature of the measurements minimised inter-operator variability and the measurements were quantitative and performed according to a standardised protocol. Finally, we did not evaluate muscle strength during hip flexion, as this movement involves numerous muscle groups in addition to the ilio-psoas muscle. In addition, hip flexion recovery does not seem correlated to the approach [10] but may be dependent instead on cartilage lesions according to Matta et al. [16] or on the postoperative course and rehabilitation programme according to Borelli et al. [11].

The complication rate was high in our study (11/24, 45%). However, only 3 (12.5%) complications required further surgery. Iliac and femoral arterial thrombosis, a complication described in anecdotal case-reports, was not seen in our study [8,9]. None of our patients experienced femoral nerve injuries, which were recorded in 2% of cases by Matta [5]. We are not aware of previous studies detailing injuries to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve or their outcomes (8/24 patients in our study, with recovery in 4/8 patients).

This complication is common (one-third of patients with recovery in half the cases) and should therefore be disclosed to the patients before surgery. Great care should be taken during the procedure to minimise the risk of injury to this nerve. No specific fracture type was associated with injury to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve. The Stoppa approach, an anterior sub-peritoneal approach [17–19] used to treat anterior column fractures, spares the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve but carries a risk of parietal complications: hernias occurred in 3.5% of patients according to Sagi et al. [18] and 1.8% according to Cole et al. [19] with transient obturator nerve palsy in 3.6% of cases. These complications have not been reported with the ilio-inguinal approach. However, these two approaches seem complementary [18], and the Stoppa approach cannot replace the classical ilio-inguinal approach. The Stoppa approach seems particularly well suited to the treatment of anterior and bicolumnar fractures, as well as of intra-pelvic acetabular cup migration [19], as it provides access to the body of the pubis. However, in the various published case-series studies [18–21], the Stoppa approach was often combined with the lateral window to obtain full exposure, thus also resulting in release of the iliaca attachments. Ruchholtz et al. [22] described a minimally invasive approach involving two incisions and avoiding the complications associated with the ilio-inguinal and Stoppa approaches (no complications in 26 patients), opening up the possibility of internal acetabular fixation in older patients [22].

The arthroplasty rate in our study (8/24, 33.3%) was higher than in the study by Peretti et al. [6] (4/25, 16%). However, bicolumnar fractures predominated in our study. Similarly, Matta [5] reported only two cases of arthroplasty among 119 patients but after a mean follow-up of only 3 years, with 16% of fair and poor outcomes. Dunet et al. [23] also found a high arthroplasty rate (35/72) after 3.7 years, with the reason for failure being located on the femoral side in one-third of cases (avascular necrosis, fracture of the head).

Meena et al. [24] identified factors of adverse prognostic significance in a study of 118 patients with acetabular fractures: inadequate reduction, concomitant traumatic injuries, displacement greater than 2 cm, concomitant dislocation, and time to surgery. Most of our patients had multiple lesions, a fact that may explain the high arthroplasty rate. In contrast, none of our patients developed ectopic ossifications on the ilio-inguinal approach (a single case, related to a complementary posterior approach). In contrast, ectopic ossifications were reported by Matta [5] in 1% of patients and by Peretti et al. [6] in 8% (22/25). We believe these data support the usefulness of pulsed lavage to prevent ectopic ossification formation, since this was the only preventive measure used in our study.

5. Conclusion

The ilio-inguinal approach is associated with specific complications that have rarely been described in the literature (injury to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve or femoral nerve, arterial or venous thrombosis). Our case-series study confirms the high frequency of lateral femoral cutaneous nerve injury, which should be disclosed to the patient before surgery, together with the other specific complications. In contrast, the ilio-inguinal approach does not cause morphological changes of the ilio-psoas muscle, despite the extensive dissection of the iliac portion. The ilio-inguinal approach is recommended for recent anterior column fractures, transverse fractures, and selected T-shaped and bicolumnar fractures [3–7].

The Cole-Stoppa approach [17] is an alternative that can be used in selected patients to spare the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve. However, this approach is associated with specific complications and, in some cases, must be combined with a lateral window to ensure full exposure, thus also requiring release of the iliac muscle attachments.

Disclosure of interest

Antoine Lao, Sophie Putman, and Marc Soenen declare that they have no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

Henri Migaud performs occasional research and educational consultancy work for Zimmer and Tornier and received royalties from Tornier.

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