Brachial plexus birth palsy shoulder deformity
treatment using subscapularis release combined to
tendons transfer

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Summary

Introduction: One possible sequela of obstetric brachial plexus palsy (OP) is impaired external rotation (ER) of the shoulder which, in addition to its functional consequences, can generate a posterior humeral head subluxation or dislocation. The goal of the present study was to assess medium-term clinical and radiological results of release of the subscapularis muscle with transfer of the latissimus dorsi and teres major muscles.

Patients and methods: From 1985 to 1995, a continuous series of 32 OP patients underwent subscapularis muscle release, associated in 24 cases to muscle transfer. Mean age was 2.5 years (range, 1—9.2 years). Shoulder function was assessed by measurement of passive ER and graded according to the modified Mallet classification at 1, 5 and 10 years’ follow-up or before revision. The evolution of the glenohumeral deformity was assessed on CT images of glenoid retroversion and the humeral head subluxation (% of humeral head covered), before and 5 years after surgery.

Results: Mean postoperative follow-up was 9.5 ± 5.6 years. Treatment brought significant improvement in passive ER (mean preoperative and 1-year follow-up values: −10° and 52°, respectively). This explained the good modified Mallet score at 1 year: mean = 18.4/25. Subsequent significant progressive degradation was noted: 10 years postoperatively, mean ER amplitude and modified Mallet score were respectively 13° and 15.8. The CT study showed correction of the glenoid retroversion (mean preoperative and 5-year follow-up values: 29° and 18°, respectively), and of the humeral head subluxation (mean preoperative and 5-year follow-up values: 25 and 39%, respectively). Surgical revision was indicated six times (five patients): two latissimus dorsi and teres major transfers (not performed initially) and four derotational humeral osteotomies. Three-quarters of the patients who did not initially have muscle transfer had to be reoperated or else showed ER insufficiency at last follow-up.

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Introduction

Obstetric brachial plexus palsy (OP) affects 0.1 to 0.4% of births [1]. Half of these cases show spontaneously favorable evolution. Some children, however, are left with significant impairment of shoulder function due to an active external rotation (ER) deficit. Such failure of muscle recovery may cause glenohumeral joint deformity [2–7]. Ideally, management consists in preventing ER amplitude reduction by orthopedic means such as rehabilitation and Lerique nocturnal braces [8] in external rotation, elbow to body. However, this may be difficult to achieve, and may fail in certain severe cases. A deficit in passive ER is an indication for surgery to restore ER amplitude, with proximal release of the subscapularis muscle on the anterior face of the scapula [9], possibly associated to the transfer of the subscapularis dorsi muscle and on to the posterior side of the humeral head (percentage head, measured at its true anterior glenoid cavity). Mean glenoid retroversion was 29° (5°–40°). Mean posterior subluxation of the humeral head was 25% (10–50%).

Surgical technique

Surgery consisted in exposing the scapula by a posterior inverted-U approach, along the anterior edge of the latissimus dorsi muscle and on to the posterior side of the arm. The subscapularis muscle was released posteriorly at its anterior scapular insertion. This extraperiosteal release restored a mean ER of 45° (30–70°). In case of preoperative active ER deficit, the procedure was completed by teres major and latissimus dorsi tendon transfer at the humeral insertion on the rotator cuff (greater tuberosity), or more precisely on the infraspinatus. Postoperative thoracobrachial cast immobilization with the limb in 45° external rotation, elbow to body, was maintained for a period of 3 to 6 weeks, depending on the surgeon in charge.

Assessment criteria and follow-up

Postoperative follow-up comprised regular consultations, with systematic measurement of passive and active elbow-to-body ER and of active shoulder abduction. Modified Mallet scores were calculated at 1, 5 and 10 years postoperatively.

Discussion and conclusion: Surgical treatment produces objective functional gain, even if this diminishes over time. Moreover, it prevents or corrects posterior subluxation of the shoulder. It is indicated when passive ER amplitude is negative. It seems advisable to associate release to muscle transfer.

Level of evidence: Level IV Retrospective study.

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Figure 1  Analysis of glenoid retroversion and posterior humeral head subluxation on computed tomography. Humeral head posterior subluxation: \((AB/AC) \times 100\) (%). Glenoid retroversion: \((90 - \mu) \(^\circ\)\).

largest diameter, forward of the tangent of the scapular spine) and glenoid retroversion (Fig. 1). The CT scans also enabled precise description of glenoid morphology. The mean postoperative interval to CT was 5.3 years (1—9 yrs).

In case of revision surgery, the indication and type of procedure were recorded.

Statistics

Results were expressed as mean ± standard deviation for quantitative variables, and as percentages for qualitative variables. Mallet scores and postoperative ER values at 1, 5 and 10 years’ FU were compared by parametric ANOVA for repeated measures. Ten-year results were not in all cases available, and analysis was made excluding patients with missing values. CT data were compared by non-parametric Wilcoxon test. The significance threshold was set at \(p < 0.05\) in all tests.

Results

Mean follow-up for the 32 patients was 9.5 ± 5.6 years (range, 2 to 23 yrs).

Clinical results

Hornblower sign was present at 1 year in 35% of cases, at 5 years in 67% and at 10 years in 70%. Residual humeral head posterior subluxation was palpable in five patients (16%).

ER gain (from a mean \(-10^\circ\) (\(-45^\circ\) to \(0^\circ\)) to \(52^\circ\) (\(5^\circ\) to \(90^\circ\)); Figs. 2 and 3) was observed in all patients at 1-year FU, and
was conserved at 5 and 10 years in all cases but one (mean ER at 5 years: 35° (−5° to 80°); and at 10 years: 13° (−50° to 80°)). This progressive reduction in ER was significant on ANOVA test (p < 0.001; Fig. 4).

Mean abduction also improved over the first 5 years, from 113° (30° to 180°) preoperatively to 128° (40° to 160°) at 1 year and 133° (40° to 180°) at 5 years; thereafter, however, there was a slight fall-off, with a mean abduction at 10 years of 120° (40° to 180°).

Mean modified Mallet score was 18.4 at 1 year, 17 at 5 years and 15.8 at 10 years, the progressive reduction being significant on ANOVA test (p < 0.0001; Fig. 5).

Two of the eight patients undergoing isolated subscapularis release required surgical revision (one tendon transfer, and one tendon transfer associated to humeral derotation). Three of the other six patients showed shoulder mobility and function below average for the series as a whole (mean ER = 10° at 10 years; mean modified Mallet score = 16.5 at 1 year, 16 at 5 years and 15.5 at 10 years).

Four patients were at least 5 years of age at surgery; mobility and function were below average for the series as a whole (mean ER = 30° at 1 year, 20° at 5 years and −3° at 10 years; mean modified Mallet score = 17 at 1 year, 15.5 at 5 years and 15 at 10 years). Lack of power (n = 4) precluded any significant difference being shown on ANOVA.

Finally, four patients showed fixed abduction, unable to position their arm in adduction; abduction values ranged from 20° to 70°, which to the best of our knowledge has never previously been reported.

## Radiologic results

Postoperatively, the clinically suspected posterior subluxation of the humeral head was confirmed on standard X-ray in 80% of cases.

Glenoid deformity was found on standard X-ray in 46.15% of cases.

Seven CT scans were performed at a mean 5 years postoperatively; they showed five cases of flattened glenoid cavity with blunted edges, one biconcave glenoid aspect and one convex cavity. Preoperative osteoarticular abnormalities were partially corrected (Figs. 6 and 7), especially the posterior subluxation, with a significant increase in the percentage of humeral head forward of the scapular spine tangent (mean, 39% [20–50%]; p = 0.04). Glenoid retrover-
tion. Finally, Chen et al. [26] recommended associating the pectoralis major laterally so as to enhance abduction.

Cuff, reinserting the two extremities of the clavicular part muscle lengthening to teres major transfer to the rotator cuff, transfers the trapezius muscle to the humerus in patients with less than 90° preoperative abduction. These procedures have been updated by the use of arthroscopy, enabling one-step subscapularis tenotomy or anterior capsulorraphy, with or without tendon transfer, with results equivalent to those obtained with traditional techniques [12,27—29].

Surgical revision

Six patients required surgical revision: two secondary latissimus dorsi and teres major transfers were performed in two patients having had primary isolated subscapularis muscle release. One of these two patients subsequently underwent humeral derotation osteotomy. Four other humeral derotations were performed. All five osteotomies provided clear benefit, with ER at 3 years’ follow-up showing an increase from 10° to 40°, −20° to 10°, −90° to 20°, −40° to 50° and 0° to 50°, respectively.

Discussion

The present study found very clear functional and clinical improvement provided by subscapularis muscle release with latissimus dorsi and teres major transfer. Although evolution showed a fall-off in postoperative gain over 10 years’ follow-up, end-point values were still higher than those observed in the absence of treatment [14], where there is greater loss of external rotation and deterioration in glenohumeral congruence. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study reported such progressive deterioration in mobility and function in the affected shoulder, although it should be borne in mind that mean follow-up never exceeded 4 years except in Pagnotta et al.’s study [15], and even there it was only 5.7 years.

The impact of surgery on impairment of glenohumeral congruence is a matter of debate. Several authors [12,16—19] reported improved shoulder mobility, accompanied by correction of osteocartilaginous deformity leading to reduction in glenohumeral retroversion and in subluxation. Kozin et al. [20], on the other hand, found no such effects on MRI. The scans performed in the present study showed significant reduction in scapulohumeral subluxation and a trend for reduction in retroversion at a mean 5 years’ follow-up.

The various functional, clinical and scan data support the short- to medium-term benefit of this surgical indication. ER deficit or defective internal rotation are indications for surgery. Step 1 consists in releasing the subscapularis muscle so as to restore satisfactory ER amplitude [9]. Transferring the distal teres major and/or latissimus dorsi insertions onto the posterolateral edge of the proximal extremity of the humerus or onto the infraspinatus muscle [21—24] basically inhibits their internal rotation rather than recovering significant active external rotation [8]. Chuang et al. [25] and El-Gammal et al. [16] associated pectoralis major muscle lengthening to teres major transfer to the rotator cuff, reinserting the two extremities of the clavicular part of the pectoralis major laterally so as to enhance abduction. Finally, Chen et al. [26] recommended associating teres major and latissimus dorsi transfer to a transfer of the trapezius muscle to the humerus in patients with less than 90° preoperative abduction. These procedures have been updated by the use of arthroscopy, enabling one-step subscapularis tenotomy or anterior capsulorraphy, with or without tendon transfer, with results equivalent to those obtained with traditional techniques [12,27—29].

Conflict of interest

Nothing declared.

References

Subscapularis release and tendon transfers in brachial plexus palsy


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