Case report

Surgical management of multilevel lumbar spondylolysis: A case report and review of the literature

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Multilevel lumbar spondylolysis accounts for less than 6% of the cases of lumbar spondylolysis and its treatment, as reported in the literature, has not been consistent. Fewer than ten cases presenting triple lumbar spondylolysis have been published. We describe the case of a 33-year-old male presenting bilateral L3, L4, and L5 isthmic lysis with no spondylolisthesis or disc degeneration. The MRI and CT of the lumbar spine were decisive elements in the therapeutic choice and the surgical treatment performed was bilateral L3 and L4 isthmic repair via a combined anterior and posterior L5S1 approach. The clinical and radiological results were good at the last follow-up visit.

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1. Introduction

Spondylolisthesis is defined by the anterior slipping of a vertebral body in relation to the subjacent vertebra. Wilce et al. [1] classified spondylolisthesis into five categories: dysplastic, degenerative, traumatic, pathological, and isthmic, the latter being the most frequent cause. The incidence of lumbar spondylolysis in the adult population is approximately 6% [2] and in more than 90% of cases involves the L5 level [3]. Multilevel lumbar spondylolysis is rare: it can account for up to 5.6% of lumbar spondylolysis cases and in more than 60% involves two levels, L4 and L5 [4]. To our knowledge, fewer than ten cases of three-level lumbar spondylolysis have been reported in the literature. We review the management choices made in these cases and present a case of triple lumbar bilateral spondylolysis.

2. Clinical case

A 33-year-old male presented with lower back pain over the previous 5 years with sciatic irradiation to the lower left limb. He was employed as an electrician and his history included a motorcycle accident 10 years before and obesity: BMI = 32. Medical treatment with antalgescis, anti-inflammatory medications, and myorelaxants did not improve the situation, nor did a L4–L5 and L5–S1 joint infiltration. The clinical examination revealed a positive Lasègue sign in the left leg at 45°, with no sensory-motor deficit. The lumbar spine CT showed bilateral L3, L4, and L5 isthmic lysis with no spondylolisthesis (Figs. 1 and 2). No abnormality of the posterior arches, dysplasia, or spina bifida was found. A lumbar MRI found the L3L4 and L4L5 discs intact with no nerve root compression and the L5–S1 disc with early signs of discopathy. The spinal x-rays showed three bilateral isthmic lysons on a type 4 back according to the Roussouly classification [5]: pelvic incidence, 57°; sacral slope 51° (Fig. 3).

Given this patient’s considerable functional discomfort and the failure of the medical treatment, the indication for surgical management with L3 and L4 isthmic repair and L5–S1 arthrodesis was retained. The surgical intervention was performed in two phases. The first operative phase was L5–S1 fusion using a combined approach. After placing an L5–S1 cage via a retroperitoneal approach, the patient was turned over to the ventral decubitus position and L5–S1 stabilization was performed via a posterior approach as well as bilateral L3 and L4 isthmic repair. After bilateral L5–S1 arthrodesis, the arthrodesis was performed by placing two contoured titanium rods with four pedicular screws. The L3 and L4 isthmi were identified and the lysis area was curetted, freshened, and then grafted with autologous bone substance (Fig. 4). The isthmus was placed under compression with a pedicular screw connected to a sublaminar hook by a short rod (Fig. 5).

Immediate postoperative recovery was uneventful, with no neurological deficit. A brace was placed for 3 months. Follow-up x-rays (Fig. 6) and CT were taken on postoperative day 3 and the clinical and radiological progression were favorable 6 months after surgery.

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3. Discussion

Lumbar spondylolisthesis is frequent, in more than 90% of cases located in L5 [3]. However, multilevel isthmic lyses are rare.

Two factors can explain isthmic lysis, both genetic and mechanical. No specific genetic variation was identified, but it would seem, according to Willis [6] and Wiltsie [7], that a genetic predisposition to this pathology may exist. The frequency of lumbar spondylolisthesis can reach up to 54% in certain ethnic groups [8]. From a mechanical point of view, heavy work and repeated injuries seem to favor the appearance of spondylolisthesis through isthmic lysis: in the series reported by Ravichandran [9], five patients presented symptoms following an injury. Some authors [10] liken isthmic lysis to stress fractures. In their case report, Hersh et al. [11] assumed that the physical occupation of their female patient promoted the appearance of her triple bilateral spondylolysis and that a fall had aggravated the symptoms.

Several studies have found a correlation between the development of isthmic spondylolisthesis and certain parameters defining the morphotype. Marty et al. [12] as well as Labelle [13] and Vialle [14] found greater significant pelvic incidence (PI) and sacral slope (SS) in patients presenting spondylolisthesis.

Pelvic incidence, constant in each individual after growth has been completed, is related to sacral slope and pelvic tilt parameters (PT) through the relation:

\[ \text{PI} = \text{PT} + \text{SS} \]

Roussouly [5] classified the spinal morphotypes of the general population into four groups according to the sacral slope value. Type 4, defined by a value greater than 45°, seems to predispose the individual to developing L5–S1 isthmic lysis spondylolisthesis [16]. The patient reported herein presented high pelvic incidence (57°) and sacral slope (51°) values, explaining the development of spondylolisthesis. However, the pelvic tilt value was low (6°): this anteverision may have increased his sacral slope, with pelvic incidence being constant, finally classifying this patient in morphotype 3. A recent study [17] also found high pelvic incidence in isthmic lysis spondylolisthesis as well as degenerative spondylolisthesis. This factor may well promote spondylolisthesis, by hyperlordosis and hyperextension, with the L5 isthmus squeezed between the supe-

rior S1 joint and the inferior L4 joint, or via the sacral slope through shearing of the L5 isthmus abutting the S1 joint. One hypothesis can be postulated concerning the influence of lordosis on the morphological development of the posterior arches: when the lordosis is severe, the posterior arches have less room to develop and can therefore be less high and shorter than when lordosis is less severe and thus less resistant from a mechanical point of view.

Treatment of multilevel spondylolyses has not met with consensus. A brace can be proposed but seems to provide little improvement [9,10,18,19]. In case of medical and orthopaedic treatment failure, or as first-line treatment, surgical treatment can be recommended [10]. Two options can be discussed: fusion and isthmic repair.


Several surgical techniques can be proposed for isthmic repair. Ravichandran [9] performed direct isthmic repair as reported by Buck [21]. In Ogawa et al.’s series [10], the surgical treatment was repaired using metal wire and bone grafting. Eingorn and Pizzutillo [19] treated a case of unilateral L2 and bilateral L3 and L4 spondylolysis with isthmic repair by wiring and bone grafting. The series found in the literature are summarized in Table 1 [9–11,18–20,22–24].

In 2010, Hersh et al. [11] reported a case resembling the case reported herein. A 46-year-old female presented lower back pain with sciatic pain after a fall. The CT found bilateral L3, L4, L5 isthmic lysis with grade 1 spondylolisthesis in L4–L5 and L5–S1. The MRI showed degenerative discopathy with a L4–L5 median hernia and L5–S1 paramedian hernia on the left. Management consisted of L4–L5 and L5–S1 fusion through a combined approach, and direct L3 isthmic repair using pedicular screws connected to a sublaminar hook in compression. In the present case, the absence of major discopathy led us to choose arthrodesis at a single level so as to preserve maximum mobility of the lumbar segment in this young patient.

Therapeutic management of multilevel spondylolysis is therefore not homogenous. Surgical treatment varies between fusion, isthmic repair, and combined management associating two procedures at different levels.

Several factors should be taken into account. In a young patient, extensive arthrodesis should be avoided, particularly if the discs are normal. A spinal MRI seems indispensable for making the decision. If there is a malformation of the posterior arch, isthmic repair can be compromised. In the present case, the patient was young with

Table 1

Review of the literature of the surgical management choices for multilevel spondylolisthesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Levels involved</th>
<th>Type of surgery</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ravichandran</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>L3 + L4 + L5</td>
<td>L3–S1 isthmic</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>L4 + L5</td>
<td>L4–S1 isthmic</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>L3 + L5</td>
<td>L2–L4 isthmic</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>L2 + L4</td>
<td>L4–S1 isthmic fusion</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eingorn and Pizzutillo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Unilateral L2 + L3 + L4</td>
<td>Isthmic repair with metal wire + bone grafting</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sebai and Al-Khawashki</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>L2 + L3 + L4</td>
<td>Isthmic repair with metal wire + bone grafting</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogawa et al.</td>
<td>5 M, 2 F</td>
<td>19–37</td>
<td>5 cases: 2 levels 2 cases: 3 levels</td>
<td>Isthmic repair with metal wire + bone grafting</td>
<td>5 Excellent 1 Good 1 Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park et al.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>L2 + L3 + L4</td>
<td>L2–L4 posterior arthrodesis</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hersch et al.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>L3 + L4 + L5</td>
<td>L4–S1 posterior arthrodesis, discectomy</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang et al.</td>
<td>6 M</td>
<td>5 cases: 2 levels 1 case: 3 levels</td>
<td>Screw &amp; hook isthmic repair</td>
<td>1 Good 1 Fair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arai et al.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>L3 + L4 + L5</td>
<td>Screw &amp; hook isthmic repair</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chung et al.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>L3 + L4</td>
<td>Screw &amp; hook isthmic repair</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>L3 + L4</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>L3 + L4</td>
<td>Good</td>
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<td>L3 + L5</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
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</table>

As illustrated, the majority of the authors advocate L3–S1 fusion, with levels 2 and 3, and variations in level 1 or S1, warranting further research for optimal results. Notably, authors like Ogawa, Arai, and Chung delineate the need for a more comprehensive approach to surgical management, emphasizing the significance of individual case assessment. Arai et al. and Chung et al. advocate for a more multi-level approach, notably recognizing the importance of considering the proximal level of spondylolisthesis (S1) for optimal outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Few cases of multilevel lumbar spondylolisthesis have been described in the literature and their management varies. Orthopaedic treatment with a brace does not seem adapted to these patients. Surgical management can be isthmic repair, arthrodesis, or an association of the two. We believe that a satisfactory surgical solution was chosen for our patient, with good clinical and radiological outcomes at the last follow-up. It would be useful to pursue the clinical and radiological follow-up over the long term to better appreciate the progress of the segments treated as well as the adjacent segments.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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