Introduction

Primary hyperparathyroidism (pHPT) is a rare disease characterized by increased production of parathyroid hormone (PTH) and subsequent hypercalcemia, with metabolic alterations mainly in the bones and kidney. In about 80% of cases pHPT is due to a solitary parathyroid adenoma, and in the remaining to diffuse hyperplasia involving all glands; parathyroid carcinoma usually occurs in 1-2% of patients. It is already known that in 20-25% of cases parathyroid glands are in ectopic sites, variously positioned in the neck or superior mediastinum, and in about 5% of patients it is possible to find a supernumerary gland that sometimes can be pathologic.

In patients with pHPT a reliable preoperative localization of abnormal parathyroid tissue has not yet been established, and the best procedure seems to be to rely upon experienced surgeons. Nevertheless, knowing the presumed site of the pathologic glands would have a positive impact on the operative time. We undertook a retrospective study to determine the efficacy of noninvasive localization procedures in patients with pHPT.
Patients and methods

We studied 186 consecutive patients, 49 (26.3%) men and 137 (73.7%) women, with a mean age of 52 years (range 23-84 years), who underwent two or three different noninvasive localization procedures before neck exploration and successful parathyroidectomy for pHPT, histologically confirmed after surgery. Table 1 shows pre- and postoperative laboratory data.

One hundred and forty-eight (79.6%) patients were examined by real-time high-resolution ultrasonography (US) with a 7.5 and 10 MHz linear transducer, and 160 (86.0%) by 99mTc-pertechnetate+201Tl chloride or 99mTc-pertechnetate+99mTc-methoxyisobutylisonitrile (sestamibi) (TMSS) subtraction radionuclide scanning. Positive scan imaging was defined as an increased focal uptake area which persisted over time. In 92 (49.5%) patients a computerized tomography (CT) scan of the neck and upper mediastinum was performed. In most cases two or three different procedures were used in the same patient.

All patients underwent bilateral neck exploration and intraoperative findings were compared with preoperative ones. At surgery 159 (85.5%) patients were found to have a single parathyroid adenoma and 6 (3.2%) a parathyroid carcinoma. In 21 (11.3%) patients multiglandular disease (double adenoma in 3 patients and chief cells diffuse hyperplasia in 18) was found. No biopsies were obtained from glands appearing normal intraoperatively. An associated thyroid disease (26 benign nodules and 3 papillary thyroid carcinomas) was found in 29 (15.6%) patients.

Results

The removed glands ranged from 8x8x5 mm to 60x25x10 mm in size and in 41 (22.0%) patients had an ectopic position, mainly in the upper mediastinum (23 patients) and behind the esophagus (12 patients). Both in patients with four hyperplastic glands and in patients with double adenomas, each imaging modality was considered positive only when two (or more) enlarged parathyroid glands were correctly localized.

Overall, and for ectopic glands, the sensitivity of localization by the different procedures is shown in Table 2. In the same patients specificity was respectively 100, 66.6, 80.0 and 100% and accuracy was 95.5% (US) and 84.4% (CT scan).

In 36 (87.8%) out of 41 patients with ectopic parathyroid glands who had accurate preoperative localization of enlarged glands, the median operative time was 95 min, compared with an average of 260 min for 5 patients in whom parathyroid adenoma was not detected and localized before operation. In patients with parathyroid hyperplasia, a subtotal parathyroidectomy was performed.

Discussion

In pHPT, successful parathyroidectomy is dependent on the surgeon’s experience, which allows localization of 90-95% of abnormal parathyroid glands. Failure to identify the parathyroid tumor or a hyperplastic gland results in increased morbidity. In all patients with pHPT, neck exploration must be bilateral and complete, starting from the bifurcation of the inferior thyroid artery, back to the thyroid lobe, in retropharyngeal and thyro-carotid spaces, into the thymus and upper mediastinum and behind the trachea and esophagus.

Rodriguez et al. (1994) reported that preoperative investigation in patients with pHPT is useless because a correct exploration enables the surgeon to find the enlarged gland(s) in more than 90% of cases, and the use of localization procedures should be reserved for patients with persistent or recurrent hyperparathyroidism. In fact preoperative localization of abnormal parathyroid glands is an important aid before re-exploration is performed.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Normal values</th>
<th>Preoperative</th>
<th>Postoperative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intact PTH levels (pg/ml)</td>
<td>10-55</td>
<td>206 ± 115.1</td>
<td>18 ± 7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total calcium levels (mmol/l)</td>
<td>1.90-2.60</td>
<td>3.06 ± 0.51</td>
<td>2.11 ± 0.12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>99mTc/99mTc-sestamibi</th>
<th>99mTc/201Tl</th>
<th>CT scan</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True positive results</td>
<td>(69/81)</td>
<td>(66/79)</td>
<td>(74/92)</td>
<td>(120/148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ectopic glands</td>
<td>81.2%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>81.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True positive results</td>
<td>(13/16)</td>
<td>(31/39)</td>
<td>(11/15)</td>
<td>(31/38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nevertheless, it has been proved to reduce operative time and morbidity rate also after primary neck exploration. Table 3 shows that the sensitivity of each technique in localizing single parathyroid tumors ranged from 76 to 81% for US, 79 to 95% for scintigraphy and 57 to 83% for CT scan, and a combination of two or more different imaging techniques may increase sensitivity to 95-98% (Lumachi et al. 1989). In our series, TMSS showed respectively 85.2 and 81.2% sensitivity in all patients and in those with ectopic glands, with 100% specificity, while US showed 80.4 and 81.6% sensitivity, 80% specificity and 95.5% accuracy.

A further consideration is radiation dosimetry (effective dose equivalent) in patients who underwent scintigraphy. This seems to be moderate for 123I, 99mTc-pertechnetate and 99mTc-sestamibi (Table 4).

In our experience the overall mean operative time was 120 min. In patients having abnormal parathyroid glands localized in ectopic sites, neck exploration required a different median operative time: 95 vs 260 min respectively in 36 patients with positive preoperative localization procedures and in 5 patients without parathyroid adenoma localization before surgery.

In conclusion, preoperative parathyroid localization is helpful in surgical treatment of pHPT, especially if parathyroid glands are in an ectopic site, because it reduces operative time and surgery-related morbidity, and therefore should be performed in all patients with pHPT.

**References**


