Successful reversal of isolated delayed spinal cord ischemia following endovascular abdominal aneurysm repair

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Abstract: A 74-year-old patient presented with isolated fecal incontinence 6 weeks following endovascular aneurysm repair. The delayed presentation of spinal cord ischemia was precipitated by commencement of alpha-blockers for benign prostatic hyperplasia. This case stresses that vulnerability to spinal cord perfusion is not limited to the perioperative period. In addition, systemic arterial pressure should be closely monitored in cases of marginal vascular insufficiency of the spinal cord.

Keywords: abdominal aortic aneurysm, endovascular aneurysm repair, spinal cord ischemia, fecal incontinence

Introduction
Spinal cord ischemia (SCI) remains a rare, but devastating complication following abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) repair. Understanding of the complex pathophysiology of SCI is evolving, but the inciting factors behind many cases remain unidentified. We herein report a case of delayed fecal incontinence due to SCI following EVAR, successfully treated with complete resolution of the patient’s symptoms. Our case suggests that vulnerability to spinal cord perfusion is not limited to the perioperative period, but persists following patient discharge, and that vigilant attention to systemic arterial pressure is crucial in cases of marginal vascular insufficiency of the spinal cord.

Case report
A 74-year-old male patient presented to our hospital with isolated fecal incontinence and loose stool 6 weeks following EVAR. The patient had a notable history of coronary heart disease, previous coronary artery bypass surgery, dyslipidemia, and a history of ulcerative colitis. He was initially referred to our vascular service by the neurosurgery team after a lumbar magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), performed to investigate lower back pain, revealed a large AAA. The MRI also revealed multiple degenerative intervertebral disc bulges in the L2-S1 segments, with significant secondary spinal canal stenosis (Figure 1).

Initial vascular assessment revealed an expansile pulsation in the epigastric region associated with mild tenderness and a prominent pulsation in the right iliac fossa. Peripheral vascular examination was otherwise unremarkable.
A computed tomography angiogram (CTA) revealed a 10 cm infrarenal inflammatory AAA, a 3 cm aneurysmal right common iliac artery, and an ectatic 2 cm left common iliac artery. He was found to have a favorable aortic neck anatomy, and a sufficient landing zone (Figure 2). The patient underwent urgent EVAR with a Medtronic Endurant device (Medtronic Vascular, Santa Rosa, CA, USA). We selectively embolized the right internal iliac artery, and intentionally covered both internal iliac arteries due to the features seen on the CTA (Figure 3).

The patient’s postoperative course was uneventful, leading to his discharge on postoperative day three. Two weeks later, he was seen in the outpatient clinic and was found to be recovering adequately with sufficiently healing wounds. Furthermore, a CTA 4-week postoperation showed complete exclusion of the aneurysm without endoleak, as well as maintenance of pelvic perfusion via retrograde flow from the left internal iliac artery (Figure 4).

Six weeks post-EVAR, the patient experienced an episode of urinary retention due to obstructive uropathy (secondary to benign prostatic hyperplasia), for which he was prescribed Alfuzosin. Following initiation of Alfuzosin, the patient began having dizzy spells and postural hypotension. Two weeks later, he began complaining of loose stool and fecal incontinence, at which time he presented to the vascular clinic.

On clinical evaluation, the patient was hypotensive, with a blood pressure (BP) of 77/44 mmHg. Digital rectal exam (DRE) revealed laxity of the anal sphincter and soft stool, without blood or mucus. A neurological exam indicated 5/5 power in both lower extremities, intact deep tendon reflex, and unremarkable sensory examination. An urgent colonoscopy revealed mild inflammation in the rectum, with a biopsy showing features of ischemic colitis (Figure 5). We consulted the neuromedicine team, who suggested the possibility of isolated SCI, and advised a new lumbosacral spine MRI. This MRI showed no evidence of acute ischemia, and no changes when compared to his initial scan.

The patient was admitted for 5 days of intensive therapy to improve his BP. He was started on IV fluids, and Alfuzosin was ceased. A daily 16 mg dose of IV dexamethasone was initiated for suspected SCI, as well as loperamide to thicken...
his stool. After treatment, his BP rose to an average of 110/60 mmHg, and the patient reported significant improvement in sphincter control. Further DREs revealed greatly improved anal tone. Based on these findings, the patient was discharged and prescribed fludrocortisone (0.1 mg/day), clopidogrel (75 mg), aspirin (100 mg), enoxaparin (40 mg), vitamin E, and loperamide (2 mg).

Two weeks following discharge, the patient was seen in the outpatient clinic, where examination showed a normal BP of 115/60 mmHg, complete recovery of sphincter control, and resolution of diarrheal symptoms.

Discussion
SCI is a potentially disastrous complication following EVAR. SCI can either present immediately or in a delayed fashion. Neurological deficits can be transient or permanent. The reported incidence of SCI following EVAR is marginally less than that following open repair. Luckily, the incidence of SCI following aortic pathologies has recently declined, presumably due to the development of advanced endovascular techniques and improved understanding of variables affecting spinal cord circulation. In a recent systematic review, Moulakais et al identified 25 cases of SCI following elective EVAR and found that only 15% of the reported cases presented with delayed SCI. Additionally, recovery rates remained low, with only 25% of the cohort experiencing complete recovery of neurological deficits.

The mechanism of SCI appears to be a consequence of multiple complex interactions, and our current understanding is derived from thoracic and thoracoabdominal aortic surgeries. EVAR and open repair result in different mechanisms of SCI, including endovascular exclusion of

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Figure 2 Preoperative CTA: (A) axial view showing a thick-walled 10 cm infrarenal AAA, Magnification x1. (B and C) Axial (Magnification X1) and coronal (Magnification X2) views showing an aneurysmal extension into right IIA. Abbreviations: AAA, Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm; CTA, Computed Tomography Angiography.
vital arterial supply to the spinal cord, perioperative hypo-
tensive episodes, and atheroembolization of debris into
pelvic circulation following endovascular
instrumentation. Three important mechanisms contri-
bute to delayed SCI; reperfusion injury with the flux of
inflammatory and neurochemical mediators, spinal cord
edema, and lastly arterial hypotension. Recently,
Awad et al unveiled the importance of spinal cord edema
in the development of SCI, suggesting a multifactorial
process of development. Our understanding of SCI is
continuously evolving and most likely multifactorial.

Understanding the anatomical blood supply to the spinal
cord is fundamental for identifying the etiology of SCI. The
spinal cord is not only reliant on a key feeding artery, but
also on a rich network of collaterals from branches of the
subclavian and vertebral arteries proximally, branches of the
intercostal and lumbar arteries centrally, and branches of
the inferior mesenteric artery, internal iliac artery, and sacral
arteries distally. These important collateral networks can
be interrupted or sacrificed by aortic pathology, or the
treatment modality used to correct it. Furthermore, spinal
cord autoregulation is disrupted when aortic treatment is
performed. Preoperative CT and MRI scans must be care-
fully reviewed to identify potential risks of spinal cord
arterial compromise, to identify vulnerable patients, and
guide the course of treatment.

SCI has an unpredictable clinical presentation with some
patients presenting with varying degrees of lower limb par-
alysis or paralysis, accompanied in some cases with fecal and/
or urinary incontinence. Nishioka et al reported a case of
isolated bladder and rectal incontinence following EVAR,
with complete recovery after hyperbaric oxygen therapy.
The current management of SCI following EVAR is evolving.2,4 Various neuroprotective interventions have contributed to improved neurological outcomes following surgical or endovascular aortic interventions.2,5,9,11,12 Technical and pharmacological measures with favorable outcomes include CSF drainage, staged repairs, iliac branched devices, increasing mean arterial pressure, steroid administration, hyperbaric oxygen, naloxone, papaverine hydrochloride, and barbiturates.

The existing body of literature reported three cases of significantly delayed (>2 weeks) SCI following EVAR: Reid et al reported a delayed, but temporary paraplegia 2 weeks following EVAR,13 Goldstein et al reported a delayed, but permanent paraplegia 3 weeks following EVAR,9 whereas Maddock et al reported a delayed, but reversible hemiparesis 8 weeks following EVAR.7 Interestingly, all three cases demonstrated acute hypoperfusion of the spinal cord secondary to hypotension.

In the present case, the etiology of delayed SCI is likely multifactorial. The patient had significant spinal stenosis, which may worsen spinal perfusion pressure in the presence of reperfusion edema within a confined compartment. Additionally, the patient was prescribed
a potent alpha-blocker, which resulted in postural hypoten-
sion and reduced mean arterial pressure. The unique
delayed presentation of SCI in this patient was precipi-
tated by hemodynamic instability resulting from the use
of alpha-blockers in the presence of vulnerable pelvic
circulation.

Substantial evidence highlights the importance of
maintaining adequate perioperative BP in aortic recon-
structions. Safi et al reported that 50% of cases presenting
with delayed SCI following thoracoabdominal aneurysm
repair had a period of BP instability.14 Melissano et al
advocated suspending antihypertensive medications fol-
lowing complex aortic reconstruction to avoid postopera-
tive hypotension and hemodynamic instability.2 Moreover,
Scott et al emphasized the importance of maintaining
adequate arterial pressure regardless of hospitalization
status.11

Our case report highlights the importance of maintain-
ing adequate hemodynamic stability by augmenting ar-
terial BP in cases of marginal pelvic vascular insufficiency.
In our case, CSF drainage was avoided because the patient
was treated with dual antiplatelet therapy and had signifi-
cant spinal stenosis. Furthermore, recent evidence suggests
internal iliac plugging is preferable to coil embolization if
required in EVAR.15

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first reported
case of significantly delayed isolated fecal incontinence
following EVAR that has been successfully reversed by
conservative management.

In conclusion, alpha-blockers are best avoided in
cases of marginal vascular insufficiency of the spinal
cord following aortic interventions. Vulnerability to SCI
is not limited to the perioperative period but per-
sists following patient discharge. Finally, hemodynamic
SCI is potentially reversible if managed promptly and
efficiently.

**Ethics statement and patient consent**

Written informed consent was obtained from the patient
for publication. Institutional approval was not required.

**Abbreviations**

SCI, spinal cord ischemia; AAA, abdominal aortic aneur-
sym; EVAR, endovascular aneurysm repair; HBO, hyper-
baric oxygen; DRE, digital rectal examination; BP, blood
pressure.

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