Parathyroid Autotransplantation During Thyroidectomy

Is Frozen Section Necessary?

Chung-yau Lo, FRCS(Edin); King-yin Lam, FRCPA

Objective: To evaluate the accuracy of parathyroid gland identification and the need for routine frozen section examination before parathyroid autotransplantation during thyroidectomy.

Design: A prospective case series.

Setting: An endocrine surgical unit.

Patients: From January 1, 1995, to December 31, 1997, parathyroid autotransplantation was attempted for devascularized or inadvertently removed glands in 152 (33.7%) of 450 patients during thyroidectomy. Before autotransplantation, a biopsy specimen of the transplanted tissue was sent for histological examination without frozen section confirmation.

Main Outcome Measures: Positive identification of parathyroid tissue in microscopic examination.

Results: Of 179 attempted autotransplantations of parathyroid glands, parathyroid tissue was confirmed in 167 biopsy specimens (93.3%). Incorrect identification of parathyroid gland occurred in 12 instances. The tissue mistaken as parathyroid gland included fat in 6 cases, thyroid tissue in 4 cases, lymph node in 1 case, and thymus in 1 case. Transplantation of at least 1 parathyroid gland (range, 1-3) was confirmed in 144 patients. For patients with confirmed parathyroid autotransplantation at risk of hypoparathyroidism (n = 112), postoperative transient hypocalcemia occurred in 22 (19.6%), while no patient developed any permanent hypocalcemia during a median follow-up of 6 months.

Conclusions: Devascularized or inadvertently removed parathyroid glands can be identified expeditiously without routine frozen section during thyroid surgery. Immediate autotransplantation should be performed and permanent hypoparathyroidism can be avoided with this measure.

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The first successful parathyroid autotransplantation was performed by Lahey1 in 1926 in patients undergoing partial thyroidectomy. Although the practice of implanting parathyroid glands has a long surgical tradition, not until the past 20 years has indication for parathyroid autotransplantation extended to radical head and neck surgery, including total thyroidectomy.2-4 Parathyroid autotransplantation has been increasingly performed to prevent permanent hypoparathyroidism during total, subtotal, or completion thyroidectomy for benign or malignant conditions of the thyroid.2-4

Although the technique of parathyroid autotransplantation varies, parathyroid identity is routinely confirmed intraoperatively by frozen section before autotransplantation.5,6 In fact, in an addendum to his 1926 report, Lahey stated that 19 of 26 specimens autotransplanted were subsequently identified histologically as lymph nodes, rather than parathyroid glands.1 This emphasizes the difficulty of correct identification of normal parathyroid glands for autotransplantation. The present study aims at documenting the accuracy of parathyroid gland identification and evaluating the need for routine frozen section examination before autotransplantation during thyroidectomy.

RESULTS

Parathyroid autotransplantation was attempted in 152 patients (33.7%). There were 26 males and 126 females whose ages ranged from 15 to 75 years (median, 42 years).

Types of operative procedures included total or near-total thyroidectomy in 64 patients, bilateral subtotal thyroid-
PATIENTS AND METHODS

From January 1, 1995, to December 31, 1997, 450 patients underwent thyroidectomy for treatment of various thyroid diseases by a single surgeon or by senior surgical residents operating in conjunction with that surgeon. Any devascularized or inadvertently re-

moved parathyroid gland was identified for autotransplantation, even for patients who underwent uni-
lateral thyroid lobectomy. The suspected parathyroid gland was minced into small (0.5-mm) pieces of which 1 was sent for microscopic examination to confirm its histological identity. The remaining tissue was immediately implanted into a muscle pocket fash-

ioned in the ipsilateral sternocleidomastoid muscle. Routine frozen section examination was not per-
formed.

The accuracy of parathyroid gland identifica-
tion and removal for autotransplantation is ex-
pressed herein as the numbers of positive biopsy specimens divided by the numbers of attempted parathyroid autotransplantations. The resected thyroid specimens were examined histologically, and the in-
cidence of serendipitously identified glands during histological examination is expressed as the percent-
age of glands at risk. Replacement therapy with cal-
cium supplement (calcium carbonate, 2-3 g/d) or cal-
citriol (Rocaltrol, 0.25-0.5 µg/d) or both was
commenced in the presence of symptomatic hypocal-
cemia or a serum calcium level of 1.70 mmol/L or less
(≤6.8 mg/dL) (reference range, 2.10-2.55 mmol/L
(8.4-10.2 mg/dL)). Medications were gradually dis-
continued during 1 to 6 months of follow-up in the
presence of normal serum calcium levels.11

One earlier report12 showed unfavorable results after para-
thyroid autotransplantation, with a permanent hypo-
parathyroidism rate of 43%. That report represents an ex-
ception to the uniform success, and the poor result was
attributed to transplantation of insufficient parathyroid
tissue.5

Table 1. Indications for Surgery in 152 Patients With Attempted Parathyroid Autotransplantation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Disease</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nodular goiter*</td>
<td>82 (54)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graves disease*</td>
<td>32 (21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papillary carcinoma</td>
<td>19 (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follicular adenoma</td>
<td>12 (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follicular carcinoma</td>
<td>4 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous†</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>152 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Position of Parathyroid Glands in Relation to Accuracy of Parathyroid Identification

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. transplanted (n = 179)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. confirmed (n = 167)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>Accuracy, %</td>
<td>89</td>
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*Occult papillary carcinoma in 6 patients (3.9%).
†Anaplastic carcinoma (n = 2) and lymphoma of thyroid gland (n = 1).

The technique of parathyroid autotransplantation differs for different series. Thin sectioning, mincing, and homogenization into a paste form have been de-
scribed.2,9,13 In general, a frozen section biopsy speci-
men is obtained to confirm that it is parathyroid tissue
before reimplantation is performed.5,8

Table 1. Indications for Surgery in 152 Patients With Attempted Parathyroid Autotransplantation

Permanent hypoparathyroidism is a recognized compli-
cation of thyroidectomy and is of sufficient concern that surgeons may refrain from performing radical thyroid surgery, particularly for malignant neoplasms of the thy-
roid. Parathyroid autotransplantation has been shown to
prevent permanent hypoparathyroidism during radical thyroidectomy. Investigators who selectively or rou-
tinely use parathyroid autotransplantation reported a low incidence of permanent hypoparathyroidism,8,9 with more recent series reporting an incidence of less than 2%.5,7,10,11

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tissue.5

For the 119 patients who were at risk of develop-
ing calcium or calcitriol supplements or both. During a
median follow-up of 6 months (range, 6 weeks to 30
months), all patients reverted to normocalcemia with-
out the need for medications. Of the 264 lobes of thy-
roid gland examined histologically, 11 parathyroid tis-
ue fragments were identified attached to the resected thyroid lobe (Figure). The incidence of serendipi-
tiously discovered parathyroid glands in resected thy-
roid specimens was 2.1%.

COMMENT

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gery for malignant disease, frozen section examination can also disclose the presence of malignant involvement of the parathyroid gland and avoid the reimplantation of tumor cells. Cervical exploration for primary hyperparathyroidism by experienced surgeons has been shown to be the best localization tool to detect abnormal parathyroid gland, with a success rate of 95% to 99%. There is no doubt that enlarged parathyroid glands can be identified expeditiously in their normal or ectopic sites by experienced surgeons. However, it is generally agreed that the identification of normal parathyroid glands can be difficult. The ability of surgeons to identify and preserve parathyroid glands during thyroid surgery has not been well documented and is indirectly reflected by the incidence of permanent hypocalcemia. Routine biopsy of all normal glands is not necessary and should not be recommended. In addition, extensive dissection to identify normal glands should be avoided because of potential devascularization and damage to normal glands. A prospective study to assess the accuracy of correct identification of all parathyroid glands during thyroidectomy would be impractical or unethical.

Intraoperative frozen section confirmation was routinely performed and only patients with confirmed parathyroid tissue reimplantation were included in previous reports. As a result, the ability of the surgeons to identify devascularized or inadvertently removed parathyroid glands for autotransplantation has not been documented. Salander and Tisell reported on 86 of 97 patients with well-differentiated thyroid carcinoma who had parathyroid tissue implanted during total thyroidectomy. Biopsy specimens were taken from 132 of the 183 implanted parathyroid glands. The reason for not taking specimens in all cases was the fact that some glands were unquestionable on their macroscopic appearance and the ambition to save a maximal amount of parathyroid tissue. Some parathyroid glands were implanted even before the result of the frozen section biopsy was known.

Parathyroid autotransplantation is advocated because it is simple and effective in preventing permanent hyperparathyroidism by preserving functions of damaged parathyroid glands. Frozen section examination adds additional cost and time to the operation. This is particularly true when inadvertently removed glands are identified at the end of the operation when the resected thyroid lobe is examined. Various sites of autotransplantation have been described, although the neck remains an ideal site for patients during thyroidectomy except in surgery for medullary carcinoma in patients with multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2.

Our results showed that devascularized or inadvertently removed glands can be accurately identified before autotransplantation. Most thyroidectomies were performed for benign thyroid conditions, and the risk of reimplantation of malignant tissue should be negligible. The fact that only 1 of the 12 incorrectly identified tissues was confirmed to be lymphoid in origin suggests that implantation of lymph node or metastasis is unlikely. Immediate autotransplantation of suspected devascularized or inadvertently removed glands should be attempted without the need for routine frozen section confirmation. Not only can a maximal amount of parathyroid tissue and operative time be saved, but ischemic damage to the transplanted parathyroid tissue can be reduced.

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REFERENCES