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Authors: Eleftherios Spartalis, Christos Damaskos, Demetrios Moris, Antonios Athanasiou, Michael Spartalis, Grigorios Karagkiouzis, Dimitrios Schizas, Dimitrios Dimitroulis, Periklis Tomos

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Running head: Surgical approach of a rare retrotracheal goiter

Eleftherios Spartalis¹, Christos Damaskos¹, Demetrios Moris², Antonios Athanasiou³, Michael Spartalis¹, Grigorios Karagkiouzis⁴, Dimitrios Schizas⁵, Dimitrios Dimitroulis¹, Periklis Tomos⁴

¹2nd Department of Propedeutic Surgery, University of Athens Medical School, Athens, Greece
²Department of Surgery, The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA
³Department of Surgery, Mercy University Hospital, Cork, Ireland
⁴Department of Thoracic Surgery, University of Athens Medical School, Athens, Greece
⁵1st Department of Surgery, University of Athens Medical School, Athens, Greece

Address for correspondence: Eleftherios Spartalis, MD, MSc, PhD, Vasilissis Sofias 49, Athens 106 76, Greece, tel: +306974714078, fax: +302106416015, e-mail: eleftherios.spartalis@gmail.com

Abstract
Diving goiters can descend the cervical region expanding directly into the thoracic cavity. In most cases, diving goiters extend into the anterosuperior compartment, but they may also extend behind the trachea. We herein present a case of a male patient with retrotracheal goiter and history of left thyroid lobectomy and median sternotomy for thoracic aortic aneurysm repair with graft placement. After detailed preoperative evaluation, the patient underwent surgical resection of the mass through a combined approach; the existing cervical incision and a right posterolateral mini-thoracotomy. The postoperative course of the patient was uncomplicated. One year after surgery, the patient is asymptomatic and disease-free.

Key words: retrotracheal, goiter, aortic grafting, thyroidectomy, thoracotomy

Introduction
Diving goiters can descend the cervical region expanding directly into the thoracic cavity. In most cases, diving goiters extend into the anterosuperior compartment, but they may also extend behind the trachea [1]. These goiters tend to exhibit increased vascularization arising from the lower thyroid poles. However, there is a possibility up to 1% for primary goiters emerging from ectopic thyroid tissue located in the anterior, the medium or the posterior mediastinum [1,2]. In this case, the blood supply does not originate from the inferior thyroid vessels. Exceptions also include recurrent goiters in which a substernal remnant from the initial surgery underwent neovascularization based on parasitizing mediastinal vessels [2].

**Case presentation**

A 68-year-old Caucasian male was presented to the surgical department complaining of mediocre difficulty swallowing solid food, dyspnea and hoarseness; all symptoms have appeared recently. The physical examination is normal and the neck is supple without thyromegaly. His medical history included left thyroid lobectomy several years ago, median sternotomy for thoracic aortic aneurysm repair using a synthetic graft substernally and long term chronic medical treatment with amiodarone. On chest X-ray, the anterior mediastinum is enlarged and the trachea is displaced to the left. Wires are placed upon the median sternal line. The cardiac silhouette is normal. The lung fields are clear and there are no pleural effusions.

Contrast-enhanced computed tomography (CT) scan images demonstrate a globulous, sharply demarcated lesion to the right of the trachea and oesophagus. The lesion is inhomogeneous, extending up to the vertebral body. The oesophagus appears to be remarkably compressed while the trachea is slightly displaced to the left (Figure 2). The coronal CT image shows airway compromise at the carina level (Figure 1). Figure 3 describes the route goiter follows. It extends posteriorly and inferiorly the brachiocephalic artery and inferiorly the brachiocephalic vein.

After detailed preoperative evaluation, the patient underwent surgical thyroid gland resection through a combined approach; the existing cervical incision and a right posterolateral mini-thoracotomy. This was obligatory due to the acquired anatomic alterations caused by previous surgical interventions, as the anterior mediastinal architecture was affected by the presence of the synthetic graft and post-operative fibrotic tissue.

The histopathological findings (Figure 2) are compatible with thyroid gland tissue, appearing regions of colloid, nodular hyperplasia, cystic-fibrous degeneration and calcification present both at the two specimens sent for control.

The postoperative course of the patient was uncomplicated. One year after surgery, the patient is asymptomatic and disease-free.
Discussion

High suspicion of an intrathoracic goiter could be based on the trachea deviation appearing on a plain chest x-ray [1]. Chest x-rays and CT scanning are usually diagnostic, and additional evaluation is rarely necessary [2-3]. Initial laboratory workup should include thyroid function tests [3]. I-131 uptake scanning can help in order to certify the thyroid gland origin of the tissue in case we set as possible a lymphoma, a thymoma or a germ cell tumor diagnosis [4]. Needle biopsy is not necessary before resection [4]. These tumors should always be resected, even if asymptomatic, because of potential airway compromise, but it is crucial to obtain accurate preoperative imaging in order to plan the procedure accordingly [4].

The majority of the intrathoracic goiters can be safely excised through a standard cervical incision [4,5]. At this point, it is necessary to mention that sternotomy (partial or complete) often offers a better surgical field and is usually preferred if there is a large substernal component, if the tumor’s blood supply arises from an intrathoracic source, or if the tumor appears to infiltrate surrounding structures [4-6]. A combined right thoracotomy and cervical approach can also be performed [6,7]. Ectopic intrathoracic goiters (no cervical component) and substernal goiters in patients who have previously undergone cervical thyroidectomy should be approached by sternotomy or thoracotomy alone [4,5].

Most mediastinal goiters are retrosternally situated in the anterior mediastinal compartment [6-8]. Posterior mediastinal goiters, either retrotracheal or retrooesophageal, are rare. Large posterior mediastinal, contralateral retrotracheal or retrooesophageal goiters are best removed through a combined cervical and thoracic approach [7,8]. It has been reported that skilled head and neck surgeons, with adequate thyroid surgery experience, need to perform an extra-cervical approach in 2−5% of thyroidectomies for retrotracheal goiters, but some authors have reported an incidence of sternotomy in 29% of patients [5-9].

This variability could be correlated with the lack of uniformity in the definition of a retrotracheal goiter [7-13]. Initially, a goiter was generically considered as retrosternal when extended below the thoracic inlet. Later, retrotracheal goiter was defined by De Souza and Smith [13] as a goiter with a portion of its mass ≥50% situated in the mediastinum. However, this definition lacks anatomic precision and can be interpreted unspecifically. More precise definitions of retrotracheal goiters have been suggested; namely, a goiter lying two fingerbreadths below the thoracic inlet with the patient in a supine position, a goiter reaching the aortic arch, or the carina tracheae, a goiter with its inferior pole passing through the cervicothoracic isthmus below the subclavian vessels. Several classification systems have also been developed in order to classify retrotracheal goiters better. Cohen and Cho [14] classify
goiters into four grades, depending on the percentage of goiter mass located in the mediastinum. Huins et al proposed a classification of retrotracheal goiters based on the relationship of goiter with anatomical structures of the mediastinum: They defined three grades of goiter depending upon mediastinal extension, namely, to the level of the aortic arch, to the level of the pericardium or below the level of the right atrium.

Many attempts have been made to define the factors increasing the likelihood of sternotomy specifically, but a general consensus has still not been reached. Flati et al, in 2005, defined the sternotomy approach “inevitable” in the presence of an iceberg-shaped retrotracheal goiter with >70% of the mass lying in the mediastinum. Later, de Perrot et al, [15] in 2007, highlighted the need to perform a sternotomy in goiters >10 cm, in patients previously submitted to cervical thyroidectomy, and in the presence of invasive carcinoma or ectopic goiter. Burns et al [16] performed a sternotomy in only 3/140 patients with retrotracheal goiter, since, in their opinion, the most significant factors giving rise to suspicion of the need to perform sternotomy are CT evidence of adherence to the surrounding mediastinal tissues and extension of the goiter to, or below, the aortic arch. More recently, Cohen [17] identified four factors significantly increasing the need to perform sternotomy: (a) The presence of malignancy, (b) involvement of the posterior mediastinum, (c) extension of the goiter below the aortic arch and (d) the presence of ectopic goiter. Cohen et al, suggests that the presence of symptoms is correlated more with the amount of growth of the thyroid at the level of the thoracic inlet, where the tracheae may be more easily compressed by the presence of the sternal manubrium, than by the total mass of the mediastinal thyroid [17].

Other authors have found that previous thyroid surgery could be a factor increasing the likelihood of sternotomy, due to the frequent finding of adhesions with surrounding tissues [11,12]. Preoperative estimation of thyroid volume, by means of CT scan, can be an effective predictor of which patients are likely to require a thoracic approach [11]. However, the final decision as to whether to perform sternotomy can be reached only intra-operatively, and the choice is related to the experience of the surgeon. In conclusion, even if retrosternal goiter thyroidectomy is performed by a skilled surgical team, familiar with its unique pitfalls, the assistance of a thoracic surgeon may be required.

Conclusions

This case indicates that diving goiter should be considered in the differential diagnosis of retrotracheal mediastinal masses. The preoperative diagnosis is essential and is primarily based on CT imaging findings. Sternotomy (partial or complete) or posterolateral mini-
thoracotomy is required for the mass resection. Prognosis is excellent following a successful excision.

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References:


FIGURE LEGENDS:

**Figure 1.** a: Contrast-enhanced coronal CT scan image demonstrates a globulous, sharply demarcated lesion to the right of the trachea and oesophagus and airway compromised at the carina level. The lesion was inhomogeneous extending up to the vertebral body.
b: The oesophagus appeared to be remarkably compressed while the trachea was slightly displaced to the left.

**Figure 2.** a: The resected intrathoracic specimen (size 6x5.5x4cm)
b: Histopathology of the lesion revealed multiple large pieces of thyroid tissue with thyroid follicles of varying size and shape, lined by uniform cuboidal cells.
c: The cells were filled with colloid with some follicles showing cystic macrophages in the lumen.