Severe mediastinitis caused by an infected bronchogenic cyst

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SUMMARY
Bronchogenic cysts (BCs) are congenital foregut malformations and usually asymptomatic, thin-walled, incidentally diagnosed cysts which can be easily resected by a minimal invasive approach at this time point. However, they may develop symptoms such as infection, bleeding or compression of adjacent structures. There is no consensus about the risk of developing complications during a lifetime; however, recent reports suggest a higher incidence than initially believed. Here, we report a case of severe life-threatening mediastinitis emerging from an infected BC requiring complex surgery, which could have been avoided if surgery had been performed at an early, asymptomatic stage.

BACKGROUND
Bronchogenic cysts (BCs) are rare congenital malformations arising during development of the embryonic foregut and represent the most frequent primary malformations of the mediastinum.1–3 They are usually located in the mediastinum but can be situated intrapulmonary in 15%–25% of cases.1 4 5 The majority of BC are diagnosed incidentally; however, symptoms may occur during a lifetime in the context of BC-related complications such as infection, haemorrhage or local extension and compression of adjacent structures. Associated malignancy has also rarely been reported.3

It is generally agreed that symptomatic or complicated cysts should be completely resected.2–4 However, the management of asymptomatic BC remains controversial despite growing evidence that BC-related complications are probably more common and severe than initially anticipated.1 6 While asymptomatic, thin-walled BC can be easily resected by use of video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS), whereas surgery for complicated BC may be more complex and less likely achieved by VATS. Here we report a case of severe mediastinitis related to an infected BC localised in the aortopulmonary window which required urgent and extensive surgery in order to control infection. This case report supports existing literature that BC should be resected with minimally invasive techniques before major surgery is required to treat BC-related life-threatening complications.1–3 6–8

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP
The postoperative course was uneventful with removal of chest tubes and hospital discharge on postoperative days 4 and 7, respectively. The patient was then transferred to a pulmonary rehabilitation clinic. He was followed up for 3 months postoperatively and presented an uneventful recovery. The histological examination of the surgical specimen confirmed the diagnosis of purulent mediastinitis related to an infected BC arising from the aortopulmonary window (figure 2).

DISCUSSION
Due to the wide use of radiological imaging, an increasing number of BC have been diagnosed in recent years.1 6 Chest CT scans usually reveal a thin-walled cyst adjacent to the tracheobronchial tree in the upper mediastinum and occasionally in the lung, and usually offer sufficient information for the diagnosis and treatment of BC. However, BC may contain protein-rich liquid which may mimic
to recurrence since the secretion of the BC content for diagnosis and treatment of BC.3 6 7 Nevertheless, a final diagnosis can only be established with histological examination following surgical resection. Some reports have suggested the use of transbronchial needle biopsy and aspiration of the BC content for diagnosis and treatment of BC,3 6 7 However, it has been shown, that this approach usually leads to recurrence since the secretion-producing mucosa remains in place. Moreover, there is a risk of subsequent BC infection due to inoculation of germs during biopsy.3

The treatment of BC remains controversial to date. While most authors agree that surgical resection is indicated for symptomatic or complicated BC,1–3 6 the management of incidentally discovered asymptomatic BC remains controversial. However, there is growing evidence that the evolution of BC may be unpredictable and can lead to complications which may be life-threatening, including severe haemoptysis, haemothorax and tension pneumothorax, as well as compression of surrounding organs leading to cardiac tamponade, arrhythmia and superior vena cava syndrome.1–3

Kirmani et al performed a review of the literature including 23 reports with 683 patients in order to investigate the need for surgery for asymptomatic BC. They identified a group of 74 asymptomatic patients undergoing follow-up without surgery, in which 33 (45%) subsequently developed symptoms requiring resection. In 5 of 683 patients (0.7%), the surgical specimen revealed malignancy.6 In addition, several reports indicate significantly more surgery-related complications and longer hospital stays following resection of symptomatic or complicated BC when compared with asymptomatic and non-complicated BC.1–3 6 The same holds true for resection of BC larger than 5 cm, a size cut-off which seems to be associated with increased operating time, blood loss and surgical complexity.2 For those reasons, there is growing evidence in recent literature that surgery should be performed even in asymptomatic, incidentally diagnosed BC.1–3 6

Complete resection of BC is mandatory in order to remove all remaining mucosa and thus decrease the risk of recurrence and complications.1–3 6 7 In the case of an incomplete resection due to technical issues, de-epithelisation with cauterisation of the remaining mucosa is recommended.2 3 Recent reports suggest that a minimally invasive surgical approach such as VATS1–3 7 or robotic-assisted surgery8 is appropriate for the majority of BC and seems to be associated with less postoperative pain and length of stay and chest tube drainage compared with open surgery without increasing the risk of incomplete resection or perioperative complications.7 However, large or complicated BC may still require complex surgery and an open approach in order to prevent intraoperative complications or an incomplete resection.

This report of severe mediastinitis related to an infected BC, adds another piece of evidence that BC should be resected with minimally invasive techniques before major surgery is required to treat BC-related life-threatening complications.

Learning points

- Bronchogenic cysts (BCs) are congenital foregut malformations which are usually asymptomatic. When incidentally discovered, they can be easily resected by a minimally invasive approach.
- BCs tend to grow over time and symptoms may appear in the context of cyst-related complications such as infection, haemorrhage or local extension and compression of adjacent structures. Associated malignancy has also been rarely reported.
- Complicated BCs could be challenging to manage and usually require more extensive surgery with a higher rate of postoperative complications.
- We encourage an upfront surgical treatment of even asymptomatic BCs using minimally invasive techniques when possible.

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Case reports provide a valuable learning resource for the scientific community and can indicate areas of interest for future research. They should not be used in isolation to guide treatment choices or public health policy.

REFERENCES

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