Disabling iatrogenic disorder

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DESCRIPTION

A 74-year-old woman presented with a 9-month history of progressive groin and shoulder pain. She was prescribed a course of prednisolone by her general practitioner, for suspected polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR), with little benefit; C reactive protein (CRP) was 7 prior to starting steroids. The pain had become so severe that the patient was a wheelchair user when she attended the rheuma-

tology clinic. She had a medical history of a meningioma excision, performed 18 months previously, which was followed by a prolonged course of high-dose steroids; she also had a history of treated hypothyroidism.

Examination revealed a markedly restricted, and painful, range of hip and shoulder joint movement. Shoulder X-rays revealed deformities of the humeral heads ([figure 1](#)); pelvic X-ray was reported to show degenerative changes of the hips ([figure 2](#)). Blood tests demonstrated normal erythrocyte sedimentation rate, CRP, thyroid function tests and total protein; serum electrophoresis and urine Bence-Jones proteins were also negative. Neither PMR nor minor degenerative arthritis was felt to be sufficient to account for the patient's severe symptoms. The history of high-dose steroid use and humeral 'deformity' on X-ray prompted a diagnosis of avascular necrosis (AVN) to be considered.

Subsequent imaging, including MRI of the right hip ([figure 3](#)), confirmed the diagnosis of bilateral shoulder and hip AVN. In retrospect, collapse of the humeral heads is evident on X-ray ([figure 1](#)) and similar, but more subtle, changes are also evident on hip X-ray ([figure 2](#)).

Avascular necrosis of large joints is a relatively rare condition with an incidence in England of 1.4–3 cases per 100 000 people.¹ Of these cases, ~3% are thought to be multifocal,² involving three or more joints. Corticosteroids are the second most common cause of AVN, after trauma,³ but account for 90% of multifocal AVN cases.²

Figure 1 X-rays of both shoulders demonstrating fragmentation and collapse of the humeral heads.

Figure 2 X-rays of both hips with subtle evidence of femoral head collapse bilaterally.

Figure 3 X-ray and short T1 inversion recovery MRI of right hip clearly demonstrating collapse of the femoral head, as well as oedema.

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Learning points

- ▶ Avascular necrosis (AVN) can cause an oligoarthropathy.
- ▶ Multifocal AVN should be considered as part of the differential diagnosis in patients presenting with severe large joint pain.
- ▶ X-ray features can be subtle in early AVN, and MRI or CT scanning should be considered in suspected cases.

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