An unusual case of recurrent chest infections

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1. Case presentation

This case presentation relates to a 53 year old male, cachectic in appearance, who presented with progressively worsening dyspnoea, cough, intermittent haemoptysis and a history of nasal dryness ongoing over five months. The patient had received multiple courses of oral antibiotics for suspected community acquired pneumonia with no significant improvement. He was referred to our Respiratory Department for further evaluation of his symptoms. His HRCT showed right middle lobe consolidation with central cavitations. Furthermore, the transbronchial biopsy had been performed and the cytological examination revealed lipid laden macrophage with interstitial inflammatory changes. With return to the patient over the counter drug history, he described the frequent use of petroleum jelly to alleviate the symptoms of nasal dryness. This is the first report case of exogenous lipoid pneumonia presented with haemoptysis and cavitations in the HRCT.

2. Treatment

The patient was advised to stop the offending agent i.e. petroleum jelly. CT Thorax was repeated after 3 months and showed marked improvement. Follow up CT was essential to exclude the possibility of an endogenous lipoid pneumonia and/or underlying malignancy.

3. Discussion

Cholesterol pneumonitis (lipoid pneumonitis) is a rare and under-diagnosed disorder. It results from the accumulation of lipid in the lungs leading to a fibroblastic interstitial inflammatory process [1]. There are two main categories of lipoid pneumonitis:
exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous lipid pneumonia is caused by aspiration or inhalation of oily substances and fat-like materials. Endogenous lipid pneumonia represents the minority of cases and occurs when lipid containing matter is released from degenerated alveolar cells in the setting of impaired clearance e.g. bronchiectasis, malignancy, glycogen storage disorders, lung abscesses [2].

This case highlights that a patient with lipid pneumonia can present with symptoms and radiological findings similar to lung cancer and reinforces the fundamental importance of taking a thorough history. Our patient had a history of nasal dryness preceding his respiratory symptoms. The frequent application of petroleum jelly to his nostrils to alleviate this dryness resulted in the gradual aspiration of the oily substance and lipid accumulation within the right interstitial lung tissue. As a result of this, the patient developed a cough with occasional haemoptysis and shortness of breath.

There are a number of case reports available which describe exogenous lipid pneumonia caused by a variety of substances and circumstances, including sesame oil pulling, inhalation of insecticides and in-fire-eaters. However, in all of these case reports, the patients presented with dry cough only, without haemoptysis [3–5]. The radiological findings in lipid pneumonia are usually reported as non-specific and can mimic many other respiratory diseases e.g. malignancy, tuberculosis, organizing pneumonia [6]. Findings on HRCT can include consolidation, ground glass opacities, linear/nodular opacities, masses and “crazy-paving” patterns [7].

Most of the case reports available have been managed by cessation of the offending agent. Occasional additional use of steroids, in an attempt to counteract the inflammatory response to lipid macrophage activity, has also been reported [3–5].

References