

has any bearing whatsoever on whether it can be defended during litigation. It is misleading to suggest otherwise.

Medicolegal claims and intra-operative cholangiography

James Manson

Department of General and Gastrointestinal Surgery, Singleton Hospital, Swansea, UK
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CORRESPONDENCE TO

James Manson, judith.jones8@wales.nhs.uk

COMMENT ON

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The vast majority of this piece is sensible and reasonable. Predictably, perhaps inevitably, the authors move into troubled waters when they discuss intra-operative cholangiography (IOC). Is there an issue in gastrointestinal surgery that engenders more controversy or discord? Inevitably, participants in this debate quote evidence to support their own prejudice. It is true that ‘the routine use of IOC has been reported to reduce the incidence of bile duct injuries by clarifying the anatomy’.¹ It is also true that numerous national and international series have shown that the use of IOC is not associated with any reduction in the risk or rate of bile duct injury. However, the numbers in these series range between 5 and 70,000 whereas the Flum study already referred to involves 1.5 million procedures.

The authors make the statement: ‘an IOC should be used to confirm the anatomy if any doubt exists’. Is there any evidence to support this statement? The Flum paper demonstrates that when the ‘frequent cholangiographer’ (essentially a surgeon who attempts to perform routine IOC) performs a cholangiogram, a significantly lower incidence of bile duct injury results. This is unarguable. However, the other extremely interesting and seldom mentioned finding of this study is that if the ‘infrequent cholangiographer’ (arbitrarily set at less than 25% of cases but often much less than this) performs a cholangiogram, the bile duct injury rate, far from decreasing, significantly increases. The authors argue, I believe plausibly, that in this instance the cholangiogram was being done in a ‘difficult’ case.

So much for the evidence, what about logic/simple common sense. We have all been faced with a situation where we cannot confidently identify the anatomy in the area of Calot’s triangle. Let us analyse what performing a cholangiogram in these circumstances actually means. It involves selecting a bile duct, the identity of which (it is clearly conceded) is uncertain, putting two clips across it and making a hole in it. Is this justifiable or appropriate? I would argue absolutely not. The safe, and there-

fore the correct, approach in this situation is to dissect the gallbladder, fundus first, off the liver. This approach can sometimes lead to confident identification of the anatomy at the neck of the gallbladder but in my experience rarely. The sensible course of action is then to stay well clear of Calot’s triangle, amputate the gallbladder across Hartmann’s pouch, remove any stones and over-sew the remnant. It is, of course, possible to do this laparoscopically but many surgeons might prefer to employ open surgery and, if this is the case, they should convert without a moment’s hesitation. This approach has served me well for over 20 years, or just under 2500 procedures, with a bile duct injury rate of zero (so far, touch wood!).

The advice that cholangiography should be done if the anatomy is unclear is supported by no convincing evidence, is not sensible or logical and should be ignored by all surgeons, particularly those in training.

Reference

1. Flum DR, Dellinger EP, Cheadle A, Chan L, Koepsell T. Intraoperative cholangiography and the risk of common bile duct injury during cholecystectomy. *JAMA* 2003; **289**: 1639–44.

AUTHORS’ RESPONSE

John H Scurr

Medico-Legal Chambers, The Lister Hospital, London, UK
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CORRESPONDENCE TO

John H Scurr, E: jscurr@uk-consultants.co.uk

James Manson raises an interesting point. Is operative cholangiography more likely to increase the incidence of bile duct injury?

The role of intra-operative cholangiography does remain controversial. As stated in our article, the use of intra-operative cholangiography does not guarantee prevention of a bile duct injury. We also state that: ‘If safe dissection can no longer be performed laparoscopically, the surgeon should convert to an open procedure’. The same surgical judgment is also required when deciding if performing intra-operative cholangiography can be done safely or risks making the situation worse. James Manson’s approach for the scenario he describes is sensible and the points he makes are valid.

In response to Robert Wheeler’s question regarding the ‘resoluteness of expert advice’ in the cases that were settled out of court. These settlements would have been based on the opinion of more than just one expert witness and included opinions given by general surgeons, hepatobiliary surgeons and professors of surgery. In cases that did not proceed, it is likely that only a single opinion may have been sought. However, we are unable to tell if these claimants tried to/succeeded in pursuing action through a different legal team.