Quadrilateral space syndrome: a case study and review of the literature

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CASE STUDY

A 50 year old male, recreational triathlete (right hand dominant) presented with spontaneous onset of acute left posterior shoulder pain, with weakness of external rotation and abduction. He had a 10 year history of episodic left shoulder symptoms. Clinical examination showed acute pain on attempted shoulder abduction, external rotation, and extension. Passive abduction and external rotation aggravated the symptoms. Mild atrophy of the deltoid and infraspinatus was noted. There was no localised swelling or masses present, and vital signs were normal. On muscle testing, weakness was graded 2/5 for external rotation and 3/5 for abduction. Neurologically, drop arm, shoulder relocation, apprehension, impingement, and cervical and thoracic outlet testing were all negative, as was palpation of the anterior shoulder. MRI was performed, which revealed mild fatty involution of the teres minor without cyst formation. No change was noted within the infraspinatus or supraspinatus. There was no full thickness rotator cuff tear. There was prominent cystic change at the anterior aspect of the humeral greater tuberosity associated with minor partial thickness intrasubstance tear of the supraspinatus insertion. There was also some bursal surface irregularity distally and minor subacromial/subdeltoid bursitis. Although no abnormality could be seen within the QS, the appearance suggested QSS.

The patient was treated conservatively with ice and physiotherapy. This included transverse friction massage and active release soft tissue massage techniques to the QS, mobilisation of the humerus into internal rotation, shoulder mobilisations directed at a tight posterior capsule; the patient was also advised to start stretching of the shoulder into horizontal adduction and internal rotation. This continued for one month. After two weeks, there was moderate infraspinatus and deltoid atrophy, and the patient was using compensated muscle actions, adopting a posture of a high left shoulder and left tilted head. The patient began performing active shoulder range of motion exercises and posterior rotator cuff strengthening, beginning with isometrics. Spinal manipulative therapy was given to the upper thoracic and cervical spine, and soft tissue massage was applied to the upper trapezius and pectoral muscles. These treatments collectively resulted in symptomatic relief of back and neck pain. After four weeks, strengthening progressed to concentric with a theraband. After six weeks, the patient was pain free and had near total functional improvement, despite some remaining external rotation weakness (graded 4/5) and abduction weakness (graded 4/5). Long term rehabilitation for a three month period was advised, including scapular stabilisation exercises. Follow up eight weeks later showed continual improvement in strength and shoulder range of movement, and the patient had started swim training again without incident.

DISCUSSION

Entrapment of the axillary nerve occurs with QSS, but injury is most commonly associated with humeral fracture or dislocation. The pathophysiology of QSS remains unclear. Some believe the dominant aetiologic mechanism is neurovascular occlusion, whereas others suggest that vascular occlusion is dominant. Compression may be static or dynamic and it mainly affects young active adults. QSS should be considered in patients with shoulder pain of unknown aetiology or with neck and shoulder pain and QS tenderness. The differential diagnosis includes thoracic outlet syndrome, referred pain from neck structures, rotator cuff syndrome, and impingement syndrome.

QSS most commonly occurs when the neurovascular bundle is compressed by fibrotic bands within the QS as it traverses the QS or by hypertrophy of the muscle boundaries. A combination may occur. Fibrotic bands form as the result of trauma, with resultant scarring and adhesions. However, these changes have not been found in cadaver dissections. Cases reported in throwing athletes, tennis players, and in the dominant arm of volleyball players exist to support fibrosis and hypertrophy based mechanisms. Variation in axillary nerve division and a genetically smaller QSS have been hypothesised to predispose.

Abbreviations: MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; PCHA, posterior humeral circumflex artery; QS, quadrilateral space; QSS, quadrilateral space syndrome
to QSS. This may account for the limited number of reported cases.

Other reported cases of QSS include those associated with acute trauma to the shoulder1 and spontaneous occurrence without trauma.7 Pathology has resulted in QSS due to a ganglion,16 glenoid labral cyst,18 and a paralabral cyst arising from a detached inferior glenoid labral tear.17 Imaging is required to confirm diagnosis and prevent unnecessary surgery, as QSS can mimic rotator cuff or labral abnormalities. Best practice is not definitive. MRI should be favoured, as QSS has a distinctive appearance of select teres minor fatty atrophy10,17,18 which may not be clinically evident on examination.18 MRI also excludes pathological causes. Subclavian arteriogram or angio-MRI with the arm in abduction and external rotation2,5,7 to reveal PHCA occlusion which does not occur in neutral1 have also been used. In the only controlled study, PHCA occlusion was seen in 80% of asymptomatic controls (n = 6).19 This casts doubt on the validity of arteriography, despite it being described as the cornerstone of diagnosis.5 Another study found arteriography not necessary to make the diagnosis.5 Postoperative arteriography cases have not been reported. Electromyographic and nerve conduction studies have been used, producing inconsistent results2,3 and are considered non-specific.

Management literature and reports have been limited. The consensus is that initial treatment should be conservative, comprising analgesics, physiotherapy, and avoidance of athletic activities.4,5 Physiotherapy should include cross friction and active release soft tissue massage techniques to the QS, internal mobilisation of the humerus, stretching into horizontal adduction and internal rotation, and posterior rotator cuff strengthening.20 Shoulder joint contracture and two with no improvement.12 Others have reported relief of symptoms, although functional return in some cases was minimal.1

CONCLUSION

The clinician needs to be aware of the diagnostic features and differential diagnosis of QSS to ensure an accurate diagnosis. This will prevent unnecessary surgery and allow effective treatment to return the patient to full activities.

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REFERENCES


Table 1 Quadrilateral space syndrome physical examination diagnostic summary2

| Point tenderness to the quadrilateral space | Poorly localised shoulder pain and/or paresthesias radiating non-dermatomally to the lateral shoulder and arm | Forced abduction and external rotation aggravate the symptoms | Deltoid and teres minor weakness with possible atrophy | Intermittent claudication symptoms |