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Dyspnea on exertion with cardiomegaly

THE PATIENT IS A 48-YEAR-OLD WHITE MAN WHO presents with a chief complaint of epigastric “pressure” radiating up to the chest. He also complains of increasing shortness of breath with exertion. The symptoms began about 2 to 3 weeks ago. Bending over to pick something up or tie his shoes increased the discomfort and caused facial flushing. He went to his family physician and was found to have cardiomegaly on chest roentgenography. He was referred to a cardiologist for further evaluation.

His past medical history includes hay fever, eczema, and diverticulitis. He has had no viral syndrome and denies any history of tuberculosis, cough, or fever. His family history includes liver failure and diabetes in his father and breast cancer in his mother. He has smoked three packs per day for more than 31 years and he consumes six beers a week. The only medication he takes is terfenadine (Seldane), and he has an allergy to penicillin, which gives him a generalized rash.

Q1 Given the above information, the *best* test to order at this time would be:

- ☐ Exercise treadmill test
- ☐ Cardiac catheterization
- ☐ Echocardiography with Doppler
- ☐ Nuclear multigated angiography

A1 In a 48-year-old male without a significant cardiac history, it would be very unusual to see cardiomegaly on chest roentgenography. Echocardiography can give you a great deal of information regarding chamber enlargement, valvular defects, intracardiac shunts, and overall cardiac function. While the other tests may be useful at a

later date, the best test is echocardiography.

On physical examination, the patient is alert and oriented and is in no significant distress. Blood pressure is 130/80 mm Hg with a pulsus paradoxus of 22 mm Hg. The respiratory rate is 22 per minute, and the heart rate is 110 beats per minute. He is afebrile. Pertinent findings include jugular venous distension at 30 degrees. His heart tones are distant with a normal S₁ and S₂; no S₃ or S₄ is auscultated, and the point of maximal impulse is nonpalpable. His lungs have decreased breath sounds in the bases, and the abdomen is benign.

His electrocardiogram is shown in *Figure 1*. The chest roentgenogram is shown in *Figure 2*. *Figure 3* shows his roentgenogram from several years earlier. His laboratory values are unremarkable.

Q2 Given the physical exam, chest roentgenogram, and electrocardiogram, what is your preliminary diagnosis?

- ☐ Severe left ventricular failure
- ☐ Coronary artery disease, rule out myocardial infarction
- ☐ Exacerbation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- ☐ Cardiac tamponade
- ☐ Pulmonary embolism

A2 Given the physical findings of pulsus paradoxus of 22 mm Hg, tachycardia and distant heart tones, the diagnosis of tamponade is suggested. His electrocardiogram shows subtle signs of electrical alternans, especially in lead V₁, which is consistent with a large pericardial effusion. His chest

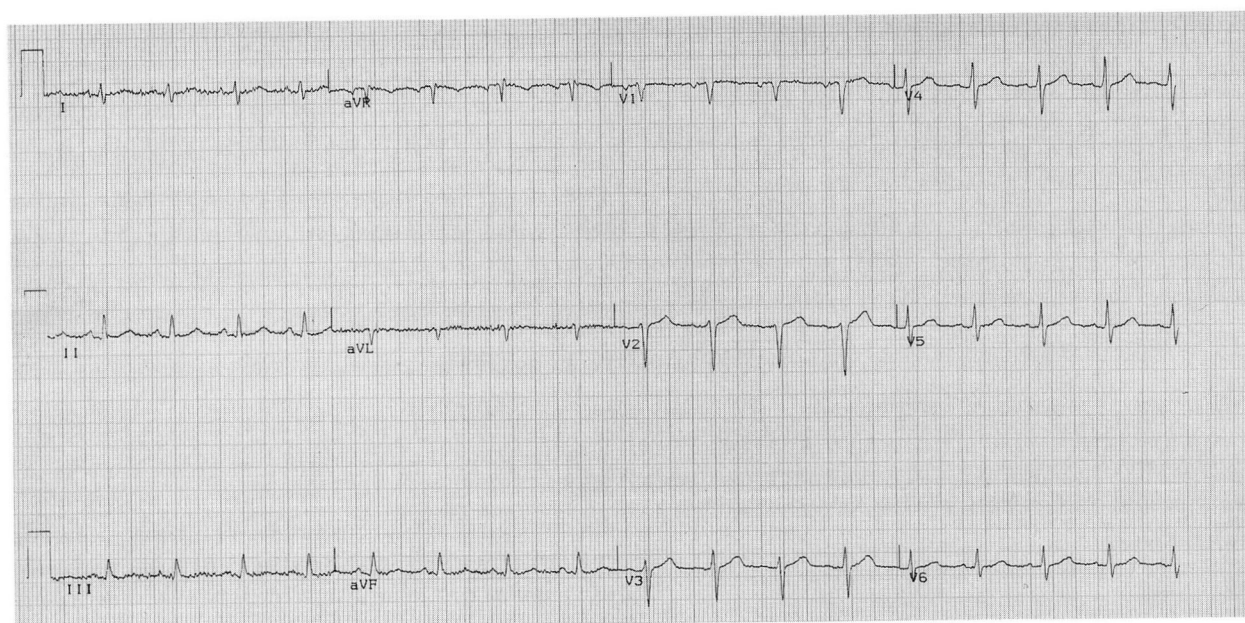


FIGURE 1

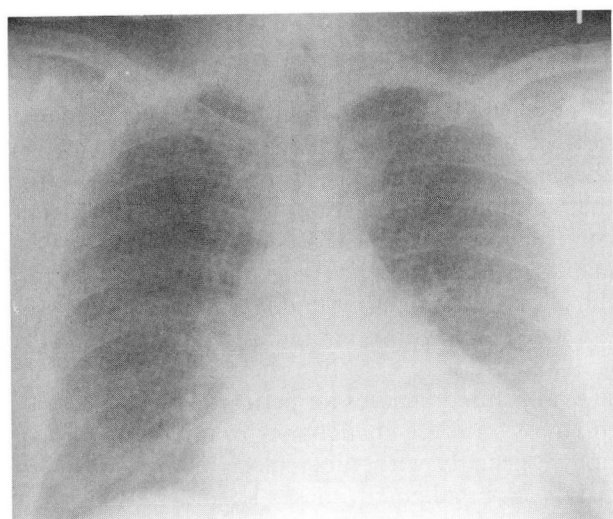


FIGURE 2

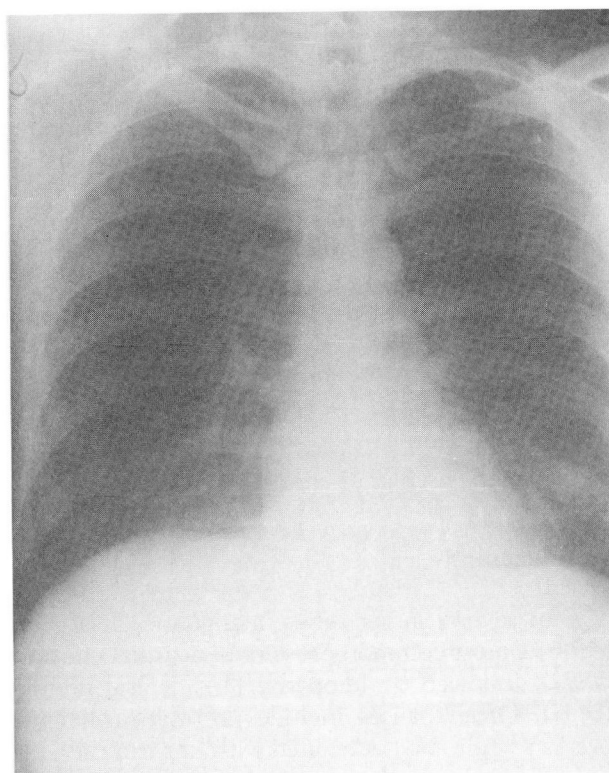


FIGURE 3

roentgenogram clearly shows cardiomegaly and suggests a "waterbottle heart" consistent with pericardial effusion.

Q3 What is the most likely cause of this patient's effusion?

- ☐ Idiopathy
- ☐ Viral infection
- ☐ Collagen vascular disease
- ☐ Malignancy
- ☐ Tuberculosis

ing that acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is one of the more common causes of pericardial effusions, and there is a high rate of underlying tuberculosis infections in these patients.

Q4 What are the most common malignancies known to spread to the pericardium?

- ☐ Gastrointestinal tumors
- ☐ Head and neck tumors
- ☐ Lung cancer
- ☐ Osteosarcomas

A4 Most commonly, lung and breast cancers account for more than 50% of the malignancies causing pericardial effusions. The most common malignancies that spread to the pericardium in order are cancers of the lung and breast, leukemia or lymphomas, sarcomas, and melanomas.

This patient presented with symptoms of shortness of breath and a markedly enlarged heart on chest roentgenography. It is important to remember that cardiomegaly does not always represent chamber enlargement, and that pericardial effusion remains in the differential diagnosis, especially when the patient has no other underlying cardiac disease.

Once the diagnosis of tamponade has been made, it is important to establish the etiology. There are several common causes for pericardial effusions, but the most serious is malignancy or underlying infection, especially with tuberculosis in patients with AIDS. Nonmalignant causes should be sought as well, including hypothyroidism, collagen vascular diseases, or an association with a viral syndrome of myopericarditis. It should also be kept in mind that even patients with underlying malignancy may present with tamponade, particularly if they have had prior mediastinal irradiation.

Patients with malignant pericardial effusions usually have either lung or breast cancer, lymphoma, leukemia, or melanoma. The therapeutic options depend on the underlying condition of the patient. Patients who manifest evidence of tamponade associated with effusion should undergo both diagnostic

and therapeutic pericardiocentesis, and the fluid should be sent for bacteriologic and cytologic examination.

The management of malignant pericardial effusions is limited. After pericardial drainage, a catheter should be left in place to prevent the reaccumulation of fluid. Most likely, the patient will need a pericardial "window" (surgical procedure to remove a segment of pericardium) or a sclerosing procedure. Beyond that, the treatment approach depends on the patient's life expectancy and whether or not the tumor is sensitive to chemotherapy or radiotherapy. The overall prognosis is dictated by the histologic diagnosis of the tumor; however, except for lymphomas or leukemias, involvement of the pericardium virtually always indicates incurability and a very limited prognosis, on the order of several months.

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SUGGESTED READING

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