Role of ultrasound in early pregnancy in differentiating normal and abnormal pregnancies

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ABSTRACT

A prospective study was carried out from November 2006 - December 2008 in which a total of 304 patients with early pregnancy were examined by ultrasound (US). Of these, 203 (66.8%) cases were normal pregnancies (including 8 cases of twin pregnancy), 32 (10.5%) missed abortions, 19 (6.3%) incomplete abortions, 14 (4.6%) complete abortions, 12 (4.0%) blighted ovums, 11 (3.6%) without sonographic evidence of pregnancy, 7 (2.3%) ectopic pregnancies and 6 (1.9%) molar pregnancies. US in early pregnancy gave a reliable and accurate differentiation between a viable normal pregnancy and an abnormal/pathological pregnancy.

Keywords: Ultrasound, normal, abnormal, pregnancy.

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of ultrasound (US) in 1942 by the Austrian neurologist Dussik, it has revolutionized obstetric diagnosis and enriched gynaecology with a valuable diagnostic method.¹ During the first trimester of pregnancy, a unique and dramatic sequence of events occurs, defining the most critical and tenuous period of human development: the remarkable transformation of a single cell into a recognizable human being.² US has played a significant role in the establishment of early pregnancy, estimation of gestational age (GA), and in the evaluation of many problems of early pregnancy.³ Because of the complex sequence of events that accompany first trimester development, it is not unusual for complications to occur. Approximately 15.0% of clinically recognized pregnancies are spontaneously miscarried; the loss rate is estimated to be at two to three times higher with very early and often clinically unrecognized pregnancy.⁴ In women who present with threatened abortion, US is often the first and frequently the only study required to sort out the many differential clinical considerations. In approximately 50.0% of these patients, the results reveal a normal pregnancy, and the pregnancy progresses without difficulty. In the remaining patients whose outcomes are abnormal, US can usually diagnose the specific problem and expeditious and appropriate management can be undertaken.⁵ US is currently the only available technique for the differentiation of abnormal from normal early pregnancy.⁶ Several complications of early pregnancy such as molar pregnancy, blighted ovum, missed, incomplete and complete abortions and ectopic pregnancy can be detected accurately by US.¹

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three hundred and four cases of early pregnancy before 13 weeks of GA, attending Gynecology and Obstetrics Department of Nepal Medical College and Teaching Hospital, who were referred to the Department of Radiodiagnosis for different indications, during a period of 26 months, from November 2006 to December 2008, underwent transabdominal obstetric US. The scans were performed by commercially available real time ultrasound unit with a 3.5 MHz probe (Nemio 17 Toshiba Medical Systems). Confirmation of intrauterine pregnancy was made on the basis of presence of gestational sac (GS) and/ or the Crown-rump Length (CRL) of the embryo. Presence of live embryo was confirmed by detection of cardiac activity in B Mode and was supported by M Mode study.

RESULTS

Altogether 304 patients in early pregnancy between the age of 17 to 32 years, irrespective of their parity and obstetric history were scanned. Out of these, 203 (66.8%) were normal pregnancies (including 8 cases of twin pregnancy), 32 (10.5%) missed abortions, 19 (6.3%) incomplete abortions, 14 (4.6%) complete abortions, 12 (4.0%) blighted ovums, 11 (3.6%) without sonographic evidence of pregnancy, 7 (2.3%) ectopic pregnancies and 6 (1.9%) molar pregnancies. Other pathological conditions of uterus and adnexa during pregnancy were also detected during the scan. These conditions included

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6 weeks, when the MSD is between 5 and 12 mm.\textsuperscript{11,12,13}

The threshold for embryonic pole detection is between 5 and the embryo.\textsuperscript{15}

The term missed abortion, still common in clinical practice, does not adequately describe the pathophysiological changes.\textsuperscript{16}

The diagnosis of embryonic demise should not be made by vaginal sonography in embryos measuring less than 5 mm CRL without a heartbeat, and an empty GS of less than 12 mm average diameter should not be diagnosed as blighted ovum. In these cases, follow up scan is suggested.\textsuperscript{14}

The diagnosis of 12 cases (4.0%) of blighted ovum was made when there is absence of yolk sac or embryo in the GS when the MSD exceeded 20 mm.\textsuperscript{17}

Hydatidiform mole, the usual form of trophoblastic disease, is common in this part of the world. We diagnosed 6 cases (1.9%) of this disease by the presence of snowstorm like echogenic echoes with multiple cystic spaces inbetween. Trophoblastic diseases were diagnosed as early as 7 weeks of GA during a single scanning in this study. Trophoblastic disease is usually associated with a theca luteal cyst in 15.0-30.0\% of cases due to excessive chorio-gonadotrophin secretion.\textsuperscript{20}

Among 7 cases (2.3\%) of ectopic pregnancy, 5 had adnexal mass with hemoperitoneum and 2 had unruptured tubal pregnancy without hemoperitoneum. In theory, an intrauterine sac can be distinguished from a pseudogestational sac because the former is located within the decidua, whereas, the latter is within the uterine cavity.\textsuperscript{21}

US plays a vital role in the early stage of pregnancy. It provides an accurate diagnosis in a vast majority of patients in the first trimester and also gives a reliable differentiation between a viable normal pregnancy and

<table>
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<tr>
<th>US findings</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
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3 cases of bicornuate uterus with normal pregnancy in any one cornua in 2 patients and with missed abortion in 1 patient, 5 cases of fibroid uterus associated with normal pregnancy, different types of unilateral and bilateral ovarian cyst of different size in 7 patients.

DISCUSSION

Two-third of the patients (66.8\%) were found to have normal pregnancies. The first definite sonographic finding to suggest early pregnancy is visualization of the GS which can be seen as early as 4 weeks of GA.\textsuperscript{3,8,9}

Pregnancies might be seen within the uterus before 5 weeks of amenorrhoea. Therefore, US at this early stage has critical value, particularly in patients suspected of having ectopic pregnancy.\textsuperscript{3} Using a transabdominal approach, the yolk sac should be evident by 7 weeks, when the MSD is 20 mm.\textsuperscript{10} Cardiac activity should be evident by 8 weeks, when the MSD is 25 mm.\textsuperscript{10}

The threshold for embryonic pole detection is between 5 and 6 weeks, when the MSD is between 5 and 12 mm.\textsuperscript{11,12,13}

Missed abortion, on the basis of work done by Pennell et al, the discriminating embryonic size for detecting cardiac motion has been determined as being 9 mm.\textsuperscript{14}

The patients with clinical diagnosis of threatened abortion but with sonographic absolute normal findings were also included in this group. About one fifth of patients (21.4\%) had abortion in different stages which could be categorized as missed, complete and incomplete by single scan. Threatened abortion encompasses a broad range of conditions that are named based on the stage of development and the sonographic appearance of the product of conception, and is used when the patient is clinically considered to have a potentially living embryo.\textsuperscript{15}

The term missed abortion, still common in clinical practice, does not adequately describe the pathophysiological changes.\textsuperscript{16}

The diagnosis of about 32 cases (10.5\%) of missed abortion was relatively easy and was performed in one scan. Absence of fetal heart beats confirmed the diagnosis. In 19 cases (6.3\%) of incomplete abortion, the uterus was filled with blood clots and placental remnants. We diagnosed this by US by the presence of an irregular mass in the uterine cavity with or without a GS. Fetal structures were usually not seen. No intrauterine retained product of conception was seen in 14 cases (4.6\%) of complete abortion. The diagnosis of embryonic demise should not be made by vaginal sonography in embryos measuring less than 5 mm CRL without a heartbeat, and an empty GS of less than 12 mm average diameter should not be diagnosed as blighted ovum. In these cases, follow up scan is suggested.\textsuperscript{14}

US findings

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a pathological pregnancy. Being an easily available, safe, reliable, quick, cheap and easily reproducible investigation, US has a very important role in differentiating normal and abnormal / pathological pregnancies and therefore, in accurate management.

REFERENCES