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Rectourethral Fistulas Secondary to Prostate Cancer Treatment: Management and Outcomes from a Multi-Institutional Combined Experience

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Purpose: Rectourethral fistula is a known complication of prostate cancer treatment. Reports in the literature on rectourethral fistula repair technique and outcomes are limited to single institution series. We examined the variations in technique and outcomes of rectourethral fistula repair in a multi-institutional setting.

Materials and Methods: We retrospectively identified patients who underwent rectourethral fistula repair after prostate cancer treatment at 1 of 4 large volume reconstructive urology centers, including University of California-San Francisco, University College London Hospitals, Lahey Clinic and Devine-Jordan Center for Reconstructive Surgery, in a 15-year period. We examined the types of prostate cancer treatment, technical aspects of rectourethral fistula repair and outcomes.

Results: After prostate cancer treatment 201 patients underwent rectourethral fistula repair. The fistula developed in 97 men (48.2%) after radical prostatectomy alone and in 104 (51.8%) who received a form of energy ablation. In the ablation group 84% of patients underwent bowel diversion before rectourethral fistula repair compared to 65% in the prostatectomy group. An interposition flap or graft was placed in 91% and 92% of the 2 groups, respectively. Concomitant bladder neck contracture or urethral stricture developed in 26% of patients in the ablation group and in 14% in the prostatectomy group. Postoperatively the rates of urinary incontinence and complications were higher in the energy ablation group at 35% and 25% vs 16% and 11%, respectively. The ultimate success rate of fistula repair in the energy ablation and radical prostatectomy groups was 87% and 99% with 92% overall success.

Conclusions: Rectourethral fistulas due to prostate cancer therapy can be reconstructed successfully in a high percent of patients. This avoids permanent urinary diversion in these complex cases.

Key Words: urethra, fistula, prostatic neoplasms, prostatectomy, high-intensity focused ultrasound ablation

Rectourethral fistula is an uncommon but potentially devastating consequence of prostate cancer treatment, which may result in urinary incontinence, chronic pain and infections. Small surgical fistulas diagnosed early after RP may heal spontaneously with urinary and...
bowel diversion, although larger or more complex fistulas are often persistent and necessitate surgical repair. Complicating characteristics of fistula include size, concomitant urethral stricture and tissue damage from applied external energy sources such as radiation, cryoablation and HIFU. Some reports describe complex RUFs that were primarily managed by permanent bowel diversion and/or urinary diversion.

Several techniques of surgical repair of RUF have been described, including transrectal, perineal, abdominal and combined approaches. The use of interposition flaps and grafts such as darts, gracilis, buccal mucosa and omentum has also been described. Success rates of RUF repair vary with published reports limited to single surgeon or institution experience.

We discuss the management and combined outcomes of RUF after prostate cancer treatment at 4 reconstructive urology centers where there is experience with managing these cases.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Patients with RUF after prostate cancer treatment were identified at 4 urological reconstructive centers, including University of California-San Francisco, University College London Hospitals, Lahey Clinic and Devine-Jordan Center for Reconstructive Surgery, between 1998 and 2014. Institutional review board approval was obtained at each institution.

RUF was defined as any fistula in the posterior urethra that communicated with the rectum. Patients with a colovesical fistula were excluded from study. Subgroup analysis was performed between patients in whom the fistula developed after prostatectomy and those who received 1 or more energy ablative treatments with brachytherapy, external radiation, cryoablation and HIFU. Patients treated with prostatectomy and 1 or more energy ablative therapy were included in the energy ablative cohort. We defined the success of RUF repair as a fistula repaired without recurrence. Urinary incontinence was defined as patient report of loss of urinary control.

**RESULTS**

We identified 225 patients with RUF after any prostate cancer treatment at a minimum followup of 6 months. Of these patients 210 (98.3%) underwent surgical fistula repair. Primary permanent urinary diversion was performed in 7 patients (3.3%) and bowel diversion was done in 155 (73.8%).

Surgery was performed with the patient in the lithotomy position and the prone jackknife position in 174 (82.8%) and 36 men (17.1%), respectively. A transperineal approach was used in 166 patients (79%), and a combined abdominal and perineal approach was used in 42 (20%). Sometimes concomitant partial prostatectomy was needed to treat prostatic stenosis. Procedures with the patient prone were done through a perineal incision with the rectum dissected off the urinary side of the fistula and not through a transrectal or York-Mason approach. Muscle flaps such as gracilis, levator, darts or omentum were used in 193 patients (91.9%).

When stratified by treatment type, 106 patients were in the nonablative radical prostatectomy group and 104 were in the energy ablative group (table 1). Table 2 lists the types of energy ablative treatment.

We discuss the management and combined outcomes of RUF after prostate cancer treatment at 4 reconstructive urology centers where there is experience with managing these cases.

**Table 1. Patient subgroup characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. RP (%)</th>
<th>No. Radiation/Ablation (%)</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>106 (50.4)</td>
<td>104 (49.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowel diversion</td>
<td>69 (65.0)</td>
<td>87 (83.6)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle flaps or omentum</td>
<td>98 (92.4)</td>
<td>95 (91.3)</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buccal mucosal graft</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46 (44.2)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concomitant stricture</td>
<td>15 (14.2)</td>
<td>27 (26.0)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinary incontinence</td>
<td>17 (16.0)</td>
<td>36 (34.6)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial urinary sphincter</td>
<td>13 (12.2)</td>
<td>19 (18.2)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complications</td>
<td>12 (11.3)</td>
<td>26 (25)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Prostate cancer treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>No. Pts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External beam radiation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brachytherapy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cryotherapy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External beam radiation + brachytherapy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External beam radiation + salvage external beam radiation</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brachytherapy + salvage external beam radiation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP + salvage external beam radiation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External beam radiation/brachytherapy/cryotherapy/HIFU + salvage RP</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge we report the largest cohort of RUF repair after prostate cancer treatment in the literature. Repair of RUF can be technically challenging due to anatomical considerations and preceding complicating factors, such as tissue damage from radiation or ablation and infection. Despite this we found an overall high success rate of RUF repair in the hands of experienced surgeons at 4 reconstructive urology centers. Our findings reveal a lower success rate of RUF repair in patients who underwent prior radiation or ablation for prostate cancer. However, our success rate remained high in this group at 86.5% and we strongly advocate attempted surgical repair in these patients.

Some groups have reported poor outcomes of fistula repair in patients with previous prostate radiation or ablation, and advocated early permanent urinary and bowel diversion. In a series of 50 patients with RUF after prostate or rectal cancer primary fistula repair was successful in 80.9% of nonirradiated patients compared to 0% of irradiated patients (p <0.01). In that study permanent colostomy and urostomy developed in 83% and 100% of irradiated patients, respectively. Another group reported that fistula repair was attempted in only 6 of 29 patients with prior radiation or ablation. Only 1 of 6 patients had a successful closure, and 86% and 93% required permanent colostomy and urostomy, respectively. We advocate early referral of these patients to surgeons experienced with RUF repair, who can achieve high success rates.

Our results also attest to the success of varying surgical approaches to RUF. The surgical approaches used in our cohort included abdominal, transperineal and combined abdominoperineal approaches. The transperineal approach can be done with the patient in the exaggerated lithotomy or prone jackknife position. None of our surgeons used the transrectal or transspihincteric (York-Mason) approach. We believe that a transrectal approach does not as easily facilitate incorporation of an interposition flap or graft.

Our surgeons commonly use an interposition flap or graft in RUF repair. We advocate placing interposition muscle flaps between the urinary system and the rectum in patients with prior prostate radiation or ablation due to the extent of tissue damage and poor wound healing from treatment. In a recent systematic review Hechenbleikner et al described surgical techniques and outcomes in adults with acquired RUF. They found that at most high volume centers transperineal repairs were performed with tissue flaps. In our series the gracilis flap was most commonly used. The gracilis flap can be harvested with the patient in the supine lithotomy position and the prone jackknife position. It is an ideal tissue transfer candidate as it provides robust, well vascularized tissue that can be interposed at the target site. Only 1 of our surgeons used the abdominoperineal approach, in which case a gracilis or an omental flap can be incorporated as an interposition.

We report good outcomes and advocate the use of flaps and grafts in RUF repair. However, our study was not designed to evaluate the outcome of the use vs the nonuse or the type of interposition tissue.

The surgeons in our study are urologists who specialize in reconstructive surgery. Broadly speaking, RUF can also be repaired by colorectal surgeons. However, we believe that RUF after prostate cancer treatment is more often managed by urologists and not by colorectal surgeons because prostate cancer is a disease diagnosed and treated by urologists. Therefore, complications as a result of treatment are more likely to be managed by urologists.

Hanna et al at Duke University have examined other indicators of increased surgical complexity of RUF repair in the irradiated patient. In that cohort of 37 men they found that those with an irradiated fistula had higher blood transfusion requirements, longer time to ostomy reversal and more complex operative repairs, including gracilis interposition flaps in 37% and pelvic exenteration in 19%.

We observed that the incidence of postoperative incontinence was more than doubled in patients with energy ablative fistulas. It is well established that urinary incontinence develops after radical prostatectomy due to the decreased integrity of the bladder neck and damage to the external sphincter at surgery. Surgical dissection of the RUF at the vesicourethral anastomosis may also worsen the continence mechanism in these patients.

We believe that the higher incontinence rate in the energy ablative cohort represents the subset of patients who underwent combined surgery and energy ablative therapy or those who had a large,
complex fistula that spanned beyond the prostatic cavity to involve the bladder neck and external urinary sphincter, thereby compromising the continence mechanisms. Interestingly, 76.5% of incontinent patients in the nonirradiated group subsequently received an artificial urinary sphincter compared to 52.8% in the radiation/ablation group. Selph et al reported successful outcomes in 6 patients who underwent artificial urinary sphincter placement after RUF repair. In that series 2 patients underwent prior thermal ablative treatment. Transcorporeal placement was not done and no complications were reported at a mean followup of 43.5 months.

Only a few groups have examined patient quality of life indicators after RUF repair. Samplaski et al evaluated fecal and urinary quality of life after RUF repair performed via a transperineal approach with a gracilis interposition flap. Nine of 12 patients (75%) reported some degree of stress, urge or mixed incontinence and 2 reported significant incontinence “most of the time.” However, only 2 of 13 men (15%) characterized urinary symptoms as having a significant impact on overall quality of life.

There are limitations inherent to the multicenter, retrospective nature of this study. The degree of variability in patient characteristics and surgical techniques among surgeons was difficult to quantify, given that data collection was a collaborative effort by different investigators. Patient followup was variable among investigators at a minimum of 6 months. In our experience this followup is adequate since fistula recurrence and complications of repair are expected to develop within a few months of surgery. Given the low rate of rectourethral fistula after prostate cancer treatment and the nonuniformity of these cases, a prospective analysis of operative management was not feasible.

CONCLUSIONS
Our findings suggest that the majority of patients with rectourethral fistula can avoid permanent urinary diversion with an overall success rate of 92.8% when referred to a surgeon familiar with these cases. Bowel diversion and muscle or omental flaps should be used in rectourethral fistula repair.

REFERENCES