Life-threatening air embolism during ERCP

Patient #1, a 45-year-old man who was being monitored because of chronic pancreatitis, had anicteric cholestasis and pain caused by double-duct stricture. Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) was undertaken using air, with the patient under general anesthesia with intubation (Fig. 1). After short sphincterotomies had been done, self-expanding metal stents were inserted (10 mm diameter for the common bile duct [CBD], and 6 mm diameter for the pancreatic duct, both 60 mm length). At 1 hour after the procedure was started, the patient became hypocapnic. An inferolateral ST segment elevation mandated coronary angiography. Gas bubbles were visualized in the heart cavities (Fig. 2), and echocardiography showed a patent foramen ovale. Administration of pure oxygen and aspiration of bubbles improved the patient’s hemodynamic status. Brain magnetic resonance imaging revealed ischemic lesions. The patient was transferred for initiation of HBOT. He returned home, without sequelae, on day 16.

Air embolism is a complication of ERCP that has a mortality of 40%. Echocardiography is the diagnostic exploration of choice and can also determine whether the foramen ovale is patent; this condition can lead to paradoxical embolism. A whole-body tomography determines the extent of the lesions. Oxygen is the specific treatment for air embolism, and should be started without delay, to reduce the bubble size. HBOT maintains oxygen supply to ischemic tissues while reducing the intracranial hypertension, and the most favorable neurological results are obtained when HBOT is initiated quickly [1]. The patient’s survival and functional prognosis depend directly on rapid diagnosis and treatment.

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