The Triple Bubble Sign: A Neglected Radiologic Feature of Proximal Jejunal Atresia
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INTRODUCTION
Jejunal atresia is an entity within a spectrum of congenital intestinal anomalies, which includes ileal and colonic atresia among others. With a prevalence rate of about 1 per 3000 live births, it probably constitutes one of the commonest congenital anomalies of the alimentary canal. In affected infants, the typical clinical features of intestinal obstruction are frequently absent. Hence, in pursuing the desirable early surgical intervention, a careful radiologic evaluation of such infants constitutes an indispensable diagnostic tool. Whereas a number of radiologic features had earlier been described in congenital intestinal atresia, radiographic evaluation of plain abdominal radiographs, ultrasonography and contrast studies constitute the most practicable in a resource-poor community like ours. Furthermore, many of these previously described radiological features are not entirely specific. While most clinicians are familiar with the diagnostic utility of the “double bubble” sign in duodenal atresia, the potential diagnostic value of the radiographic “triple bubble” in isolated proximal jejunal atresia (PJA) had eluded appropriate emphasis to date. A recent and extensive search surprisingly showed only two relevant citations, on the potential diagnostic value of the this latter sign. Indeed, neither of these two reports emanated from tropical Africa, where opportunities for modern high-tech imaging modalities remain few. The present report, borne out of our recent experience in managing a Nigerian infant with isolated PJA, highlights the diagnostic importance of the “triple bubble” sign on the plain abdominal radiograph.

CASE REPORT
Baby A.A, was a full-term male singleton. He was the product of a normal vaginal delivery after an uncomplicated pregnancy. Specifically, prenatal clues of possible polyhydramnios were denied, and this was consistent with the normal sonographic findings at the gestational age of 28 weeks. Both parents were Nigerians, and were unrelated. Presentation at our Health Facility was on the second day of life, with the major parental concerns comprising progressive abdominal distention from birth, recurrent vomiting, and failure to pass meconium. The vomiting was said to be projectile in nature, and vomitus was essentially bile stained recently offered feed/gastric contents. He was said to be making urine, and the stream had been noticeably good.

At presentation, the baby was apparently uncomfortable and was crying insconsolably. He was however neither jaundiced nor pale, but the hydration status was adjudged sub-optimal.
The admission temperature was 37.00°C. Although the abdomen was grossly distended, there was no visible peristalsis, and it was soft and tympanitic. Abdominal mass(es) were absent, as were physical signs of ascites. Widespread crackles were heard over both hemithoraces, especially posteriorly. A working diagnosis of intestinal obstruction was made, and this was localized to the upper segment, and the chest findings were attributed to an associated pneumonitis, presumably from pre-consultation aspiration of gastric contents.

A sepsis work-up revealed the absence of haematologic and microbiologic clues of neonatal septicaemia. The subsequent abdominal ultrasound (using a Siemens® Sonoline Sx machine with a 5MHz mechanical sector transducer), however showed a grossly distended abdomen with features of exaggerated peristalsis. The bowel loops were dilated and filled with fluid and gas. No intra-peritoneal (ascitic) fluid was demonstrated. The liver, spleen and both kidneys were essentially normal. The biochemical profile showed a mild/moderate hypo-natraemia, hypochloraeemia, and alkalosis. The serum creatinine was within the local reference values, and this was adjudged consistent with the normal urinary output and stream. The clinical features of pneumonia were corroborated by the presence on the chest radiograph, of widespread inflammatory opacities in both lungs. The cardiac silhouette was however of normal size and shape. The bony thorax and soft tissue were also essentially normal. A plain abdominal radiograph (Figure I - the individual “bubbles” are highlighted in Figure II) showed a grossly distended abdomen, the lower half of which was devoid of gas.

Figure 1
Figure I. The “triple bubble” sign on the erect plain abdominal radiograph.
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Figure 2
Figure II. Illustration of the erect abdominal radiograph highlighting the three bubbles of gas.

Figure 3
Figure III. The barium meal radiograph of the same patient confirming a proximal jejunal obstruction.

Three distinct air fluid levels, consistent with the appearance were however evident in the upper half. A de novo, or associated meconium ileus, with or without perforation and meconium peritonitis were largely excluded by the absence of a right lower quadrant “ground glass” appearance, flank calcification and sub-diaphragmatic peritoneal gas\(^1, \text{6}\). Based on the presence of the “triple bubble” sign, and the subsequent findings from the limited barium meal studies (Figure III),

A pre-operative diagnosis of an isolated proximal jejunal atresia was made. This was corroborated by the intra-operative findings, which were consistent with those of a Type II atresia of the proximal jejunum, in which the blind ends of the jejunum were separated by a fibrous cord\(^6\). The atretic segment was resected and an end-to-end anastomosis carried out. The intra- and postoperative managements were uncomplicated, and the baby was discharged on the 10\(^{th}\) postoperative day. Follow-up evaluations (three so far) at the Paediatric Surgical Clinic showed that the infant has been thriving to date.

DISCUSSION

Jejuno-ileal atresia is the most common cause of congenital intestinal atresia, and the most frequent cause of neonatal intestinal obstruction\(^1, \text{5}\). In affected patients, there is no known gender skewing in the incidence\(_x\), but when compared with dizygotic twins and singletons, monozygotic twins are reportedly at a higher risk\(^6\). The conspicuous
The “triple bubble” sign (which proved invaluable in the pre-operative diagnosis of PJA in this infant) is usually demonstrable on the erect plain abdominal radiographs after the first 4 hours of life. It has been attributed to the natural contrast provided by swallowed air, with the consequent formation of intra-luminal gas-fluid levels in the dilated stomach, duodenum and proximal jejunum. This is unlike ileal atresia where the dilated intestinal loops may be difficult to differentiate from the ahastral colon of a neonate. In view of its diagnostic import, the availability of the required facilities, and the simplicity of its identification, the demonstration of the “triple bubble” sign on the erect plain abdominal radiograph in proximal jejunal atresia is clearly a noteworthy diagnostic clue for Practitioners in third world settings. Although a prospective radiologic series would be necessary to clarify the usefulness in the more severe anatomic varieties of types III & IV jejuno-ileal lesions, our experience with this case suggests that the “triple bubble” sign (which interestingly follows on the numerical and anatomic heels of the “double bubble” sign of duodenal atresia) is near-pathognomonic, and may require no further radiologic studies. That the progressive jejunal distention could compromise the vascular supply of the intestinal wall, leading to catastrophic consequences like gangrene and perforation, constitute valid reasons for pursuing an early diagnosis and surgical intervention. Significant dehydration, hypovolaemia, acid-base aberrations, and shock are possible additional consequences of a belated diagnosis.

In conclusion, the present case suggests a potential diagnostic utility for the “triple bubble” sign on the plain abdominal radiograph of an infant with symptom-complex of congenital upper gastrointestinal obstruction. We submit that in a resource-poor tropical setting, the presence of this radiologic sign “in the gasless abdomen of the newborn” should prompt the need for urgent confirmatory contrast studies, surgical evaluation and intervention as appropriate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We acknowledge and salute the usual team spirit that subsisted between the Radiologists, Radiographers, Paediatricians and the Paediatric Surgeons before, and after the operative intervention in Baby A. A.

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