Possible formation of pulmonary microthrombi in the early puerperium of pregnant women critically ill with COVID-19: Two case reports

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ABSTRACT

Background: Limited data are available on the management of pregnant women with severe or critical forms of COVID-19, such as the optimal timing of provider-initiated delivery, and post-partum care, including antithrombotic prophylaxis. We present the clinical course, pre- and post-partum management, and outcomes of two pregnant women critically ill with COVID-19.

Cases: Both women had confirmed SARS-CoV-2 pneumonia with rapid clinical decompensation that required admission to the intensive care unit, intubation, and delivery by emergency cesarean section at 32 and 29 weeks. Both patients clinically improved in the first two postoperative days, but this was followed by clinical, laboratory and radiological deterioration on the third postoperative day; however, they both improved again after full anticoagulation. This pattern suggests the possible formation of pulmonary microthrombi in the early puerperium. We discuss the challenges faced by the multiprofessional team in the management of these patients.

Conclusions: There are few resources to guide health professionals caring for pregnant women with critical COVID-19. These two cases contribute to the rapidly evolving knowledge on the management and outcomes of pregnant women with COVID-19.

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1. Introduction

Disease severity in pregnant women with COVID-19 is similar to that in non-pregnant adults. Most (86%) will develop a mild form of the disease, while 9.3% will become severely ill (respiratory rate >30 breaths/min, or oxygen saturation ≤ 93% on room air, or partial pressure of arterial oxygen/fraction of inspired oxygen (PaO2/FiO2) < 300), and 4.7% will become critically ill (respiratory failure, septic shock and/or multiple organ failure) [1]. The physiologic changes of pregnancy can bring additional risks to critically ill pregnant patients [2]. Limited data are available on the management of pregnant women with critical COVID-19, such as the optimal timing of delivery, and post-partum care, including antithrombotic prophylaxis.

We describe two cases of pregnant women with critical COVID-19 managed in a single center with possible pulmonary microthrombi after cesarean delivery. The report was approved by the institution’s review board; patients gave informed consent.

2. Cases

2.1. Patient 1

An obese (BMI 33 kg/m²), 44-year-old white nulliparous woman with a singleton pregnancy presented at the hospital’s emergency room at 32 weeks of gestation with myalgia and dry cough that had started 15 days earlier (covid day 1), fever in the last 7 days (covid day 7), and dyspnea in the last 24 h (covid day 14). She had a history of breast cancer treated four years earlier with surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy. During chemotherapy, she had had right upper arm thrombosis treated with full-dose enoxaparin for three months and prophylactic enoxaparin for another three months.

Her temperature was 37.5 °C, heart rate (HR) 109/min, blood pressure (BP) 109 × 65 mmHg, respiratory rate (RR) 18/min and O2 saturation (SpO2) 93% on room air (pulse oximetry). Nasopharyngeal swab for SARS-CoV-2 (RT-PCR) was positive. She was admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) and received oxygen 2 L/min
through a nasal cannula, with initial improvement in oxygen saturation. She received azithromycin, ceftriaxone, oseltamivir and hydroxychloroquine. Chest X-ray showed faint bilateral patchy opacities (Fig. 1A); chest CT had bilateral ground-glass opacities involving >50% of the lungs (Fig. 1D, E, F). Fetal cardiotocography and Doppler ultrasound were normal.

Over the next 12 h, the respiratory pattern worsened, RR increased to 44/min, PaO2/FIO2 decreased from 246 to 177, and oxygen supplementation was increased to 6 L/min. She was intubated in the ICU under rapid sequence, put on lung protective ventilation, received norepinephrine and continuous sedation with midazolam and fentanyl. Six hours after intubation, norepinephrine was increased to maintain mean arterial pressure at 65 mmHg, but PaO2/FiO2 worsened and the patient was transferred to the operating room for an emergency CS due to cardiovascular instability. The surgery was uneventful with normal blood loss (575 mL).

The 1900 g male newborn (1-min and 5-min Apgar scores 1 and 2, respectively) was intubated and transferred to the NICU; he died 9 h later. Umbilical artery blood pH was 6.8, pCO2 114, pO2 82 and lactate 116. Neonatal nasopharyngeal swab was negative for SARS-CoV-2. Placental histology indicated chronic intervillous hypoxemia without chorioamnionitis.

In the immediate postoperative period (hospital day 4/covid day 18), PaO2/FiO2 improved (338) and the patient remained clinically stable over the next two days, despite worsening lung X-ray (Fig. 1B). On hospital day 7/covid day 21 her clinical condition deteriorated again, PaO2/FiO2 declined (243) and leukocytes, platelets, troponin, D-dimer and ferritin increased (Table 1). The multiprofessional team suspected she was developing pulmonary microthrombi and increased antithrombotic prophylaxis (enoxaparin 60 mg/day) to full anticoagulation dose (120 mg/day). On hospital day 12/covid day 26, laboratory exams and radiological pattern improved (Fig. 1C), she was extubated and PaO2/FiO2 remained stable until discharge (hospital day 15/covid day 29) on full anticoagulation.

2.2. Patient 2

A 29-year-old white obese (BMI 30.6 kg/m²) woman (G2P1) with a singleton pregnancy presented at the emergency department at 28 weeks of gestation complaining of fever and dyspnea with a positive COVID-19 RT-PCR test 7 days earlier. Dyspnea had started in the last 12 h (hospital day 1/covid day 7).

Her medical and obstetric history were unremarkable. She had taken methyldopa 1 g/day from 13 weeks of gestation due to hypertension. She was afebrile, HR was 96/min, BP 146 × 89 mmHg, SpO2 96% on room air, RR 24/min; chest X-ray showed patchy opacities predominantly in the left lung (Fig. 2A). Chest CT scan showed bilateral, mostly peripheral, ground-gllass opacities with multiple areas of parenchymal consolidation involving approximately 25% of each lung (Fig. 2D-F). Cardiotocography and fetal Doppler were normal.

She was admitted to the semi-intensive care unit and given azithromycin, hydroxychloroquine and betamethasone (12 mg/day for 2 days for fetal lung maturation). She received oxygen 2 L/min through a nasal cannula with improvement of oxygen saturation. Within 48 h, the respiratory pattern improved, PaO2/FiO2 increased (from 461 to 580) with 3 L of oxygen supplementation; laboratory exams were stable. On hospital day 3 (covid day 9) clinical condition deteriorated, RR increased (35/min) and PaO2/FiO2 decreased (181).

The multiprofessional team decided to intubate the patient and perform an emergency CS. In the operating room she was intubated under rapid sequence and was immediately put on lung protective ventilation. The CS was uneventful, with normal blood loss (320 mL).
The 1390 g male infant (1-min and 5-min Apgar scores 7 and 9, respectively) was transferred to the NICU; nasopharyngeal swab was negative for SARS-CoV-2 on days 1, 7 and 14.

In the immediate postoperative period, PaO2/FiO2 improved and the patient remained clinically stable (Table 2). On the third postoperative day (hospital day 6/covid day 12) D-dimer increased and chest X-ray images worsened (Fig. 2B). The multiprofessional team suspected that she was developing pulmonary microthrombi and increased prophylactic enoxaparin to a full anticoagulation dose (120 mg/day). She was extubated on hospital day 7/covid day 15 and discharged from the ICU on hospital day 9/covid day 15. On hospital day 11/covid day 17, her clinical condition remained stable, laboratory and radiological exams improved (Fig. 2C), and she was discharged home with enoxaparin anticoagulation.

The neonate remained in hospital (67th day of life, 3545 g) and required O2 during breastfeeding.

3. Discussion

These two cases illustrate the rapid clinical decompensation and management of pregnant patients with COVID-19. Both had an immediate clinical improvement in the first two postoperative days, but this
was followed by clinical, laboratory and radiological deterioration on the third postoperative day. Initial improvement after delivery was attributed to reduction of the cardiovascular and pulmonary stress imposed by pregnancy. The subsequent deterioration was attributed to possible microthrombi in pulmonary blood vessels. This hypothesis was based on the coexistence of several prothrombotic conditions (obesity, immobilization, recent surgery, post-partum period) and the finding of increased D-dimer associated with clinical/radiological deterioration. Improvement after full anticoagulation supports this hypothesis.

Thrombotic complications can affect up to 31% of non-pregnant adults in the ICU with SARS-COV-2 pneumonia [3]. Fibrinous thrombi in small pulmonary arterioles in areas of damaged and preserved lung parenchyma, and widespread thrombosis with microangiopathy have been reported in autopsies of COVID-19 patients [4,5].

A CS can potentially increase maternal risks because, in theory, any surgery can increase the inflammatory response induced by COVID-19, exacerbate endothelial dysfunction, and increase the risks of pulmonary and myocardial edema, and cardiac dysfunction [6]. On the other hand, delivery can alleviate maternal cardiac and pulmonary overload and reduce the oxygen consumption imposed by pregnancy [7]. Preterm delivery can lead to neonatal death or long-term disabilities, but the risk of maternal death is usually low [8]. There are few resources to guide health professionals caring for pregnant women with critical COVID-19. At present, multiprofessional teams have to make decisions on the optimal management of these cases based on their own, albeit limited, experience and on the individual characteristics of each patient.

This is the first publication on critical COVID-19 pregnancies in Brazil. A study limitation is the lack of other coagulation tests (fibrinogen, prothrombin time and activated partial thromboplastin time).

Two critical COVID-19 preterm pregnant patients improved in the first two days after emergency CS, deteriorated on the third postpartum day, and improved again after full anticoagulation. This pattern suggests the possible formation of pulmonary microthrombi in the early puerperium. These two case reports contribute to the rapidly evolving knowledge on the management and outcomes of pregnant women with critical COVID-19.

**Contributors**

Celso T. Tutiya was responsible for data acquisition, contributed to drafting of the article and approved the final version.

Monica M. Siaulys conceived the study, contributed to data acquisition, drafted the manuscript and approved the final version.

Mario M. Kondo contributed to data analysis and interpretation, revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

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Maria Regina Torloni contributed to data acquisition and analysis, drafted the article and approved the final version.

Filomena Mello contributed to data analysis and interpretation, revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this case report.
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