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50 Years Ago in The Journal of Pediatrics

Epiglottitis: No Longer a Common Differential in Croup


Historically, epiglottitis was a relatively common diagnosis that needed to be differentiated from croup when a patient presented with stridor, odynophagia, and tripod position. Rapkin recognized that bedside physicians were anxious when children were admitted with croup syndrome. In this study, Rapkin evaluated whether neck radiographs can be used as an adjunct to differentiate nonbacterial croup from epiglottitis, as previously reported in the radiologic literature. All patients were examined gently on admission and taken promptly to radiology department for posteroanterior and lateral films of the neck. Their data revealed that all patients with swelling in the epiglottis area on radiography had subsequent confirmatory diagnosis of epiglottitis with direct laryngoscopy.

Our approach to the diagnosis of someone presenting with stridor is different than it was 50 years ago. Since the introduction of the Haemophilus influenzae type b vaccine in 1985, epiglottitis has become a rare entity in children. In the postvaccine era, we can use radiographic neck films when the presentation of stridor seems unclear, with the differential including retropharyngeal abscess, foreign body, or tracheitis. If epiglottitis is suspected, radiographs should not supersede securing the airway and, if indicated clinically, would require a physician proficient in airway management to accompany the patient to the radiology department in case of sudden deterioration.

Epiglottitis, now also known as supraglottitis, is a potentially life-threatening condition that requires a quick and accurate diagnosis. The gold standard for diagnosis remains laryngoscopic visualization of the epiglottis. Radiographs are often not necessary because immunized children with a characteristic barking cough and hoarse voice likely have nonbacterial croup or patients may have epiglottitis, in which case direct visualization during airway management in the operating room is preferred.

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