Kissing in the Airway: Collateral Damage from Tracheobronchomalacia

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A 68-year-old male with morbid obesity and obstructive sleep apnea reported severe coughing episodes, difficulty expectorating mucus, and recurrent respiratory infections. At presentation, he had no infectious symptoms and a normal white blood cell count. Dynamic computed tomography demonstrated modest midtracheal expiratory collapse (Figure 1), but clinical suspicion for tracheobronchomalacia (TBM) remained high. Flexible bronchoscopy, performed under total intravenous general anesthesia with low V\textsubscript{T} (5 ml/kg predicted body weight) and zero positive end-expiratory pressure, showed nearly 100% midtracheal expiratory collapse, retained distal secretions (Figure 2, yellow arrow), and multiple mucosal “kissing ulcers” on the posterior tracheal wall (Figure 2, red arrows). Biopsy of these superficial, ulcer-like mucosal erosions revealed granulation tissue and negative microbiologic cultures. After a trial of weight loss, expectorants, and positive airway pressure therapy, the patient reported freedom from daily cough and no respiratory infection for over 12 months.

Adult TBM is increasingly recognized among patients with chronic cough, dyspnea, and/or recurrent respiratory infections (1). Risk factors include obesity, tobacco, and steroids (2–4). In severe cases, bronchoscopy may show focal mucosal erosions owing to...
repetitive trauma from expiratory airway collapse ("kissing ulcers"). Differential diagnosis for these lesions includes malignancy, infections, and autoimmune conditions such as granulomatosis with polyangiitis (5). Conservative management of TBM involves weight reduction, positive airway pressure, and maintenance of airway hygiene. Severe and recalcitrant cases may warrant tracheobronchoplasty, preferably after an airway stent trial.

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References