Ref: Ro Med J. 2022;69(4)
Doi: 10.37897/RMJ.2022.4.1

The role of spinal ultrasound in the diagnosis of spinal dysraphism – correlation with MRI examination

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the clinical, ultrasound and MRI appearances in the case of the closed spinal dysraphisms with a cutaneous/subcutaneous mass: lypomyelomeningocele, posterior meningocele and cervical meningocele. There is mentioned first the classification of these defects, then, for each type, a case example is presented, showing the clinical aspect of the lesion, the ultrasound features and the correlation of ultrasound with MRI images. The examples show a good correlation between ultrasound and MRI, entitling the ultrasound exam to be the first line of exploration in the case of this category of patients.

Keywords: MRI, spinal, dysraphism, ultrasound, meningocele

INTRODUCTION

Spinal dysraphism is represented by an incomplete fusion or absence of fusion of the spinal structures at the midline – neural, mesenchymal or osseous [11]. They appear as a consequence of anomalies of three processes that occur during the embryonic phase of development gastrulation, primary neurulation or secondary neurulation [29]. The spinal dysraphisms could be classified as follows: open spinal dysraphism – a direct contact exists between the neural placode and the external environment (meningocele, myelomeningocele), closed spinal dysraphism with a cutaneous/subcutaneous mass (lypomyelomenigocele, lypomeningocele) and closed spinal dysraphism without a cutaneous mass (intrathecal lipoma, lipoma of the filum terminale, abnormalities of the notochordal formation or integration(diastematomyelia, neurenteric cysts, split column malformation) [8,11,29,30]. This paper will discuss the presentation (clinical, ultrasound, MRI) of the closed spinal dysraphisms with a cutaneous/subcutaneous mass.

These abnormalities are different depending on their zone of appearance [29]. Thus, in the lumbar area disjunction abnormalities appear, they are characterized by the appearance of lipomatous structures. A defect occurs in the disjunction process (disjunction = separation of the cutaneous ectoderm from the neural ectoderm, with protrusion of mesenchymal between them – the mesenchyma will form the muscles and bones [29]), the mesenchymal tissue enters in the vertebral canal and a lipoma is formed from it [11,29]. There is a communication between the vertebral canal and the subcutaneous space by which the lipoma or placode passes. Depending on the zone where the junction between the placode and the lipoma is situated (placode = zone of embryonal neural tissue, frozen at the stage of neural plate [31]) two types of anomalies are distinguished [29]:

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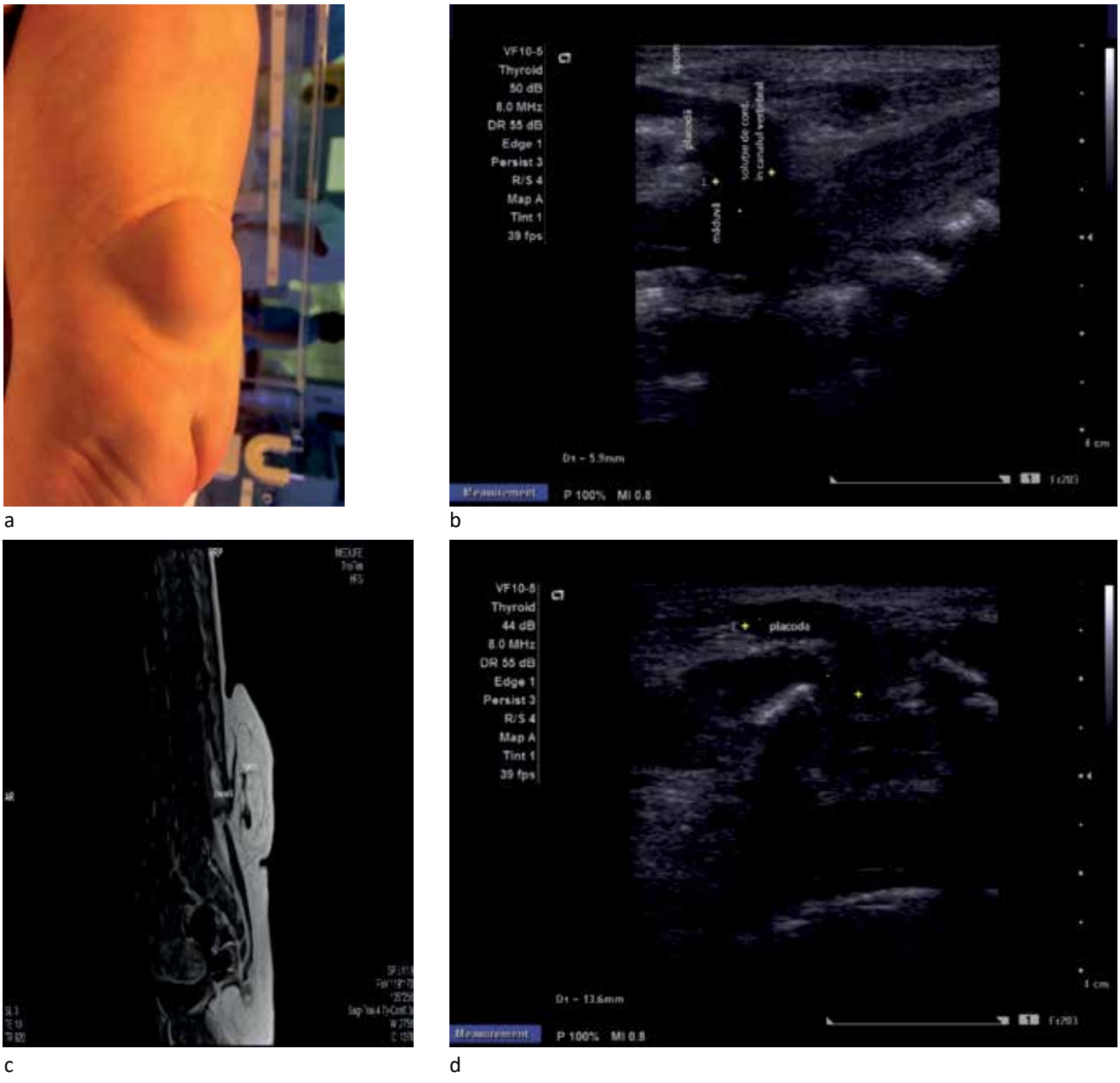
Article History:
Received: 5 December 2022
Accepted: 14 December 2022

- Lypomyelomeningocele – the placode comes out from the vertebral canal, being pushed by the subarachnoid space, and thus the placode/lipoma interface is situated outside the spinal canal (Figure 1)
- Lipomyeloschizis (lipomeningocele) – the subcutaneous tumor consists only of a lipoma, that enters the spinal canal and the placode/lipoma interface is situated inside the canal.

Ultrasonographycally, the examination of the dorsal subcutaneous mass identifies only the hyperechoic lipoma, which enters the spinal canal by a defect of the muscular mass and the vertebrae and fuses with the placode in the case of the lipomyelomeningocele [11]. A tethered cord could appear. In the case of the lipomenyngocele, the placode protrudes outside of the canal and fuses with the lipoma there [29]. Sometimes, a structure like a hamartoma could be noticed inside the subcutaneous lipoma [29].

Other types of anomalies found in the lumbar are represented by secondary neurulation defects – posterior or anterior meningocele and terminal myelocystocele [11,29]. In the case of the meningocele, the ultrasound examination finds a transonic subcutaneous collection, without spinal cord tissue – nerves or filum terminal could be encountered



a b c d

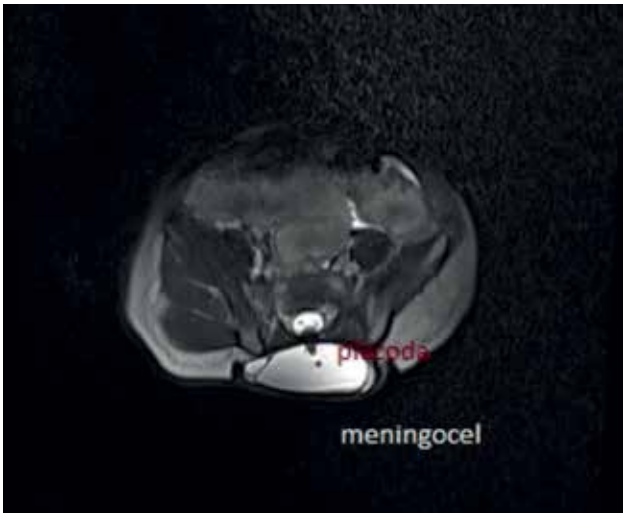
FIGURE 1. Lipomyelomeningocele. a) Photograph – subcutaneous mass at the level of the lumbar region; b) Ultrasound exam. A solution of continuity is noted in the posterior wall of the spinal canal and the placode and the placode/lipoma interface are situated outside of the canal; c) MRI examination – the placode is noted as also the placode/lipoma interface; d) ultrasound – axial section

a

b

c

d

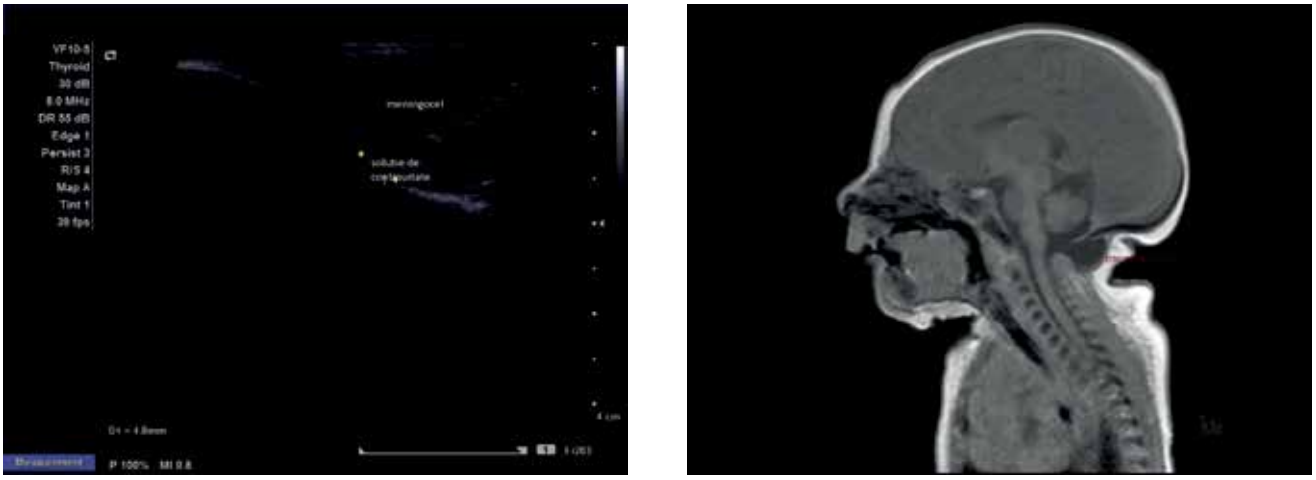


e

FIGURE 2. Lombo-sacred myelomeningocele.
a) Photograph – lumbosacral mass covered by abnormal skin in the central area – hemangioma; b) ultrasound exam – sagittal section – the meningocele could be noticed – covered by the skin – the placode is found inside the meningocele with a rudimentary filum terminale that secures the cord inside the meningocele;
c) ultrasound – axial section; d) MRI – sagittal section;
e) MRI coronal section (both T2 sequences)

there [11]. In the case of myelocystocele, there will be found a dilatation of the central canal due to an obstruction cranial to it [11] – the ultrasound examination finds a transonic structure communicating with the central canal.

In the cervical region, there have been described the myelomeningocele and cervical meningocele [29] (Figure 3). There are extremely rare lesions and the imaging features are similar to the lumbar ones.



a b

FIGURE 3. Cervical meningocele. a) Ultrasound – transonic image, without echoes in the interior, that communicates with the spinal canal; b) MRI examination – same appearance.

CONCLUSION

As previously shown in the case of images of a normal spinal cord, the ultrasound exam could identify correctly the type of malformation in the case of spinal dysraphisms with cutaneous/subcutaneous mass. The ultrasound findings correlated very well with the MRI images. We suggest that the ultrasound examination could be used as a screening tool in case of those masses and the MRI to be performed just in the pre-operatory phase. The ultrasound could not replace MRI but is a useful bedside tool that can be used in order to establish the first diagnosis and to orient future investigations.

Conflict of interest: none declared
Financial support: none declared

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