

Gynaecologic Surgery in Childhood and Adolescence

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Gynaecologic surgery in the child and adolescent presents different problems from those seen in later life. Unless these problems are realised and overcome, the social effects of surgery during these formative years may be profound and far-reaching.

The first problem is one of diagnosis. Physical signs are harder to establish; the conditions encountered are uncommon and perhaps unfamiliar to the doctor concerned. Accordingly, incorrect or unwise surgical treatment may be undertaken. An example will underline the point.

The condition illustrated in Figure 1 is hydrocolpos. An intact membrane obstructs the lower end of a vagina and allows a collection of milky fluid within the vagina. Abdominal pain and swelling, retention of urine, and other features may result. If the correct diagnosis is made, treatment is extremely easy, a simple incision releasing the retained fluid. The correct diagnosis is not always made, however, and there are examples on record of laparotomy and even hysterectomy being performed, sometimes with fatal results.¹⁻³ The diagnostic difficulty may be increased by the very large size which the abdominal swelling may attain in hydrocolpos (Fig. 2). This figure makes it easy to understand that I have seen several cases in which the simple treatment of incision of the retaining membrane has either not been performed, or has been performed only after weeks of investigation or other surgical treatment.

Not all of the lesions encountered are so simple.⁴ When extensive abnormalities are encountered the difficulties presented may seem insoluble. Again two examples will suffice to illustrate.

Figure 3 shows a child with a cloaca, the bowel, genital tract and bladder sharing a single opening, which is greatly contracted by excessive fusion of labial folds. In Figure 4, we see a diagram of the state of affairs which is present. In Figure 5 we see a second case, again with a primitive cloaca, but with very usual features, for at a point on the perineum where the anus would

normally lie is a recessed bit into which bowel, genital tract and urethra all open. Further forward, however, there is an enlarged phallic structure, down which runs a second urethra. It would not be surprising if some of you were wondering if any treatment for severe malformations of this kind is even possible, but I would stress that in such cases some attempt at surgery is always worthwhile. These two children are growing up well, are going to school, and live quite full lives, one with an ileal bladder and colostomy, and the other with a colostomy only. Two further cases at a younger age are also making good progress.

Yet another difficulty encountered in childhood gynaecologic surgery is the emotional content of the illness for parents or child or both. In the very young child, parents alone are involved, and there is no emotional problem for the child. This is best illustrated in the group of cases in which the sex of the child is in doubt. I cannot in a short time do more than make a few important points about this group of cases. All of my experience in the management of doubtful sex extending over nearly 20 years has confirmed the views expressed by earlier workers⁵⁻⁷ that the best form of management of a newborn child of uncertain sex is: (1) full investigation as soon as possible; (2) careful decision on the more appropriate sex of rearing; (3) surgical reconstruction of the external genitalia to make them conform to the chosen sex including, if necessary, removal of any inappropriate gonadal tissue, which if not removed might cause distressing heterosexual manifestations at puberty.

The surgical procedures required are various, and I do not wish to describe them in detail, since they are in any case merely a part of the total management of the child, parents, relatives, and friends, which is so important in any intersex case. My preference, however, is for the necessary surgery to be performed early in the child's life, so that the parents may be allowed to bring up their child as a normal boy or girl, without any visible reminder of sexual ambiguity and without any fear of heterosexual manifestations

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The Gynecology Of Childhood And Adolescence

Huangqi Zhang



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