FOREIGN BODY IN THE LUNG FOR
45 YEARS WITHOUT SYMPTOMS

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Summary

Patients with foreign bodies in the bronchopulmonary tree seldom remain asymptomatic for long (Abdul Majid et al. 1976). We report here a patient who aspirated a 22 carat gold safety-pin at 10 years of age and who continues to be free of respiratory symptoms 45 years later.

*Fig. 1.* Chest radiograph (PA view) showing the open safety-pin in the left lower lobe
Case Report

A 55-year-old man was admitted for evaluation of abdominal pain of 3 months' duration, which on investigation proved to be due to a hepatocellular carcinoma. He also gave a history of having inadvertently aspirated a 22 carat gold safety-pin 45 years ago. He gave no history of paroxysms of cough, wheezing, chest pain or haemoptysis soon after this event. Two years later, when radiograph facilities became available near his village, a chest radiograph showed the pin in the left lung. Surgical removal was advised but his parents decided against this. A radiograph of the chest 8 years ago in this hospital showed the pin in the lower lobe of the left lung and repeat chest films taken during the present admission showed the pin in an identical position to that seen 8 years earlier (Figs 1 and 2). Respiratory function tests revealed a vital capacity of 1.6 litres and a FEV₁ of 1.1 litres.

Fig. 2. Chest radiograph lateral view, confirming PA view findings

DISCUSSION

Foreign bodies in the lung often produce symptoms of cough, choking, wheezing, chest pain or haemoptysis (Jackson & MacCrae 1925; Abdul Majid et al. 1976). Rarely, the patient may not be aware of the incident and medical advice is sought years later because of a complication such as a lung abscess (Jackson & MacCrae 1925). In general, foreign bodies which get impacted in the upper respiratory tract often produce severe symptoms,
whereas objects impacted in the lower respiratory tract are associated with less severe symptoms and may indeed remain asymptomatic for several years (Davidson & Friend 1954). Lewin (1945) has reported a patient who remained asymptomatic for 31 years after having aspirated a piece of broken tobacco pipe before he presented with features of a lung abscess. This abscess was attributed to the vulcanite pipe which acted as a nidus for infection. It is well recognized that some metals such as gold and stainless steel produce little inflammatory response (Jackson 1919). It is probable that this property and the fact that the pin lodged in the lower respiratory tract are responsible for the patient having remained free of respiratory symptoms related to the aspirated safety-pin.

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REFERENCES