

 ISSN (O): 2320-5407 ISSN (P): 3107-4928	Journal Homepage: www.journalijar.com INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR) Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/23263 DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/23263	
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THYROID TUBERCULOSIS MIMICKING MALIGNANCY: A DIAGNOSTIC TRAP IN THE PRESENCE OF CERVICAL LYMPHADENOPATHY – A CASE REPORT

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 10 February 2026

Final Accepted: 12 March 2026

Published: April 2026

Key words:

thyroid tuberculosis, thyroid mass, FNAC, lymph node

Abstract

Primary thyroid tuberculosis (TT) is an uncommon disease, and its incidence is low even in countries where tuberculosis is endemic. The high resistance of the thyroid gland to infectious processes may explain this rarity. The coexistence of thyroid tuberculosis and cervical lymphadenopathy can mislead clinicians toward a diagnosis of malignancy. We present the case of a 37-year-old patient with a right lateral cervical adenopathy that has been evolving for almost 4 months without any clinical signs of tuberculosis or thyroid dysfunction. A right hemithyroidectomy with lymph node dissection was performed and the diagnosis was confirmed by histological examination. A 6–9 months course of antituberculous treatment was administered with a good outcome.

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Introduction:-

Tubercular involvement of the thyroid body is relatively rare, even in endemic countries. The frequency of thyroid involvement is estimated between 0.1 to 0.4% of all disease sites[1]. It's most often discovered incidentally. The association of lymph node tuberculosis and thyroid tuberculosis presents a diagnostic trap that may lead to unnecessary radical actions, especially when the patient does not present any specific signs of tuberculosis. The aim of our article is to report a new case of this localization and to discuss the diagnostic and therapeutic modalities.

Case report:

History: A 37-year-old patient with no significant past medical history presented with a painless right cervical mass that had appeared for almost 4 months. There was no complaint of dysphagia or dyspnea. The patient did not present any history of fever, night sweats, weight loss, cough or hemoptysis. There was no past or family history of tuberculosis and no recent TB exposure.

Clinical examination: The patient was afebrile and in good general condition. A cervical mass associated with right thyroid lobe swelling but no signs of inflammation were found. The other lymph node areas were free, and the other systemic examinations did not show any abnormalities.

Investigations:Thyroid function tests were within normal limits. Ultrasonography of the neck revealed a nodular lesion involving most of the right lobe of thyroid, which was heterogeneous with hypoechoic areas. The Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology (FNAC) findings showed a Bethesda category III, which means “atypia of undetermined significance” (AUS) and “follicular lesion of undetermined significance” (FLUS). A malignant thyroid nodule was suspected.

Management:Given the indeterminate cytology and suspicion of malignancy, the patient underwent a right isthmolobectomy combined with cervical lymph node dissection. Histopathological examination was in favor of a thyroid tuberculosis with lymph node tuberculosis. The patient was put on quadruple anti-tuberculosis treatment (isoniazid, rifampicin, streptomycin and pyrazinamide) for 2 months, followed by dual therapy (isoniazid and rifampicin) for 6 months with good evolution. At 9-month follow-up, there was no cervical mass either on clinical examination or on ultrasound.

Discussion:-

Tuberculosis is a major public-health problem worldwide despite the measures implemented for its prevention. Thyroid gland involvement by Koch's bacillus is an extremely rare condition and the number of cases reported in recent years is very low, even in countries with high tuberculosis prevalence [2]. Bruns *et al.* reported the first case of primary thyroid infection in 1893. It presented as a rapidly enlarging goiter with cervical adenopathy without any evidence of pulmonary tuberculosis. Since then, only a few cases have been reported in literature [3]. The exact incidence of thyroid tuberculosis is lacking, varying from 0.1 to 0.6 % of all tuberculosis sites. The tuberculostatic role of thyroid hormones, the good oxygenation of the thyroid parenchyma, the vascular supply and the high iodine concentration may explain the rarity of this disease [1], [2]. Mycobacterium tuberculosis can directly affect the gland (primary infection) or it can seed the gland from other infected organs by hematogenous route (secondary infection), usually mediastinal, paratracheal, or cervical adenopathies, including nodal involvement of the thyroid isthmus, such as the case of our patient [4].

Tuberculosis of the thyroid can affect all ages, especially young adults between 20 and 50 years old. The female sex is affected by 70 to 80% because of the frequency of thyroid disease in women [3], [5]. The clinical presentation is non-specific and may consist of diffuse goiter with abundant caseous necrosis, a solitary thyroid nodule, the widespread involvement in the setting of miliary tuberculosis, diffuse fibrosis, an acute abscess or cold abscess. It can also mimic thyroid malignancy as patients may have dysphagia, dysphonia and laryngeal nerve paralysis, or when they present with cervical lymphadenopathy [6]. The constitutional symptoms of tuberculosis such as fever, weight loss, night sweats, and anorexia may be present. The thyroid function remains generally normal, but some cases of hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism were reported. In fact, thyrotoxicosis may occur in early stages because of thyroid cells destruction and the release of thyroid hormones into the circulation. The occurrence of hypothyroidism is explained by extensive glandular destruction by caseous necrosis [6].

Ultrasound findings are most of the time unspecific, showing a diffuse or multinodular goiter, and in some cases, nodules can mimic a carcinoma. An abscess is anechoic and may show internal echoes [6], [7]. Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology (FNAC) is a first-line diagnostic tool for thyroid nodules. However, in cases of thyroid tuberculosis, FNAC may be inconclusive due to the paucibacillary nature of the lesion [6]. Additional diagnostic techniques such as Ziehl–Neelsen staining, culture, or molecular tests like PCR (GeneXpert MTB/RIF) can improve diagnostic accuracy and may help establish the diagnosis preoperatively [8]. The use of rapid molecular diagnostic tools such as GeneXpert MTB/RIF assay may provide an early and accurate diagnosis, potentially avoiding unnecessary surgery [8]. In our case FNAC was inconclusive; therefore, surgery was considered necessary due to suspicion of malignancy, as the condition mimics it. The histological examination of TB shows multinucleated giant cells with lymphocytic infiltration and typical granulomas that confirm the diagnosis [9]. Treatment options for thyroid tuberculosis consist of antituberculous therapy and/or surgery. This modality is considered as first-line treatment method as it has been seen that appropriate treatment duration (from 6 to 9 months) may lead to complete resolution of the infection. Surgical drainage is only indicated in case of a large abscess [9].

Conclusion:-

Tuberculosis of the thyroid gland should be kept in mind while managing a patient with a thyroid nodule, and its association with cervical adenopathy requires a high clinical suspicion as it can mimic malignancy. Current modalities may allow for specific, minimally invasive diagnosis, and antituberculous therapy represents a safe and

effective management option. This case of tuberculosis involvement of the thyroid gland was challenging to diagnose due to the rarity of the disease, the atypical clinical presentation, and lack of tuberculosis symptoms.

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