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Hemorrhagic necrosis of small bowel following small bowel obstruction as a late complication of sex reassignment surgery – A gap in transgender care

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Background: For decades, Thailand has been at the forefront of sex reassignment surgeries (SRS). The neo-vagina created by recto-sigmoid vaginoplasty is much more complex procedure when compared with penile skin version technique, but yielded more satisfactory functional outcomes. We report an unusual case of life-threatening small bowel obstruction following previously successful recto-sigmoid vaginoplasty in a transgender woman.

Clinical Case: A 28-year-old Thai transgender woman patient presented to the emergency room with acute periumbilical pain and then developed hematochezia with hypovolemic shock at 12 hours later after admission. The patient had undergone male to female gender reassignment surgery (recto-sigmoid vaginoplasty) 18 months earlier at another hospital but patient was lost to follow-up after 1 year. Physical exam demonstrated marked abdominal distension and tenderness. Hemoperitoneum was detected from ultrasound-guided paracentesis. Exploratory laparotomy revealed 100-cm hemorrhagic necrosis of a segment of jejunum secondary to post-surgical fibrous adhesions with approximately 2,000 ml of blood in the abdominal cavity. Postoperatively, the patient remained well without immediate complications.

Conclusion: Transgender individuals have unique healthcare needs. However, various gaps still exist to provide multi-disciplinary care for these patients. The rate of adhesive small bowel obstruction is highest in the early period of any intra-abdominal postoperative surgeries, but the risk remains life-long. Transgender women receiving complicated vaginoplasty should be instructed to continue long-term follow-up to ensure early detection and management of post-surgical complications. Improved awareness of the complications after sex reassignment surgeries among patients and health care providers should be emphasized to optimize positive outcomes for transgender care.