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CONTENTS

Editorial-I

Dr. A. K. Roy



Editorial-II

Dr. D. Basu



A rare case of adult Polycystic liver disease with Polycystic kidneys and
cyst in pancreas / 9

Dr. Rimik Biswas



A case of successful Pregnancy outcome in a completely
septate uterus /14

Dr. Anita Jain



A rare case of unilateral live twin ectopic pregnancy / 18

Dr. S. K. Kar



An unusual case report--Lymphocele following Blunt Trauma
abdomen with complecation / 21

Dr. Abhijit Roy



A case report of Sigmoid Diverticulitis / 26

Dr. Subhrajit Bhadra



A case report of Obstructive Jaundice with massive Hepatomegaly / 28

Dr. Pabitra Bepari



An interesting case of Cervical Fibroid /31

Dr. Sovana Senapati



Early diagnosis and medical treatment is sufficient for improvement of
the Lower Urinary Tract Symptoms (LUTS) in a case of
Benign Hypertrophy of Prostate (BHP) in a middle
aged man--A short case study / 34

Dr. Sarabindu Bag



An unusual Association of lung and ovarian malignancy in a young nonsmoker female / 37

Dr. Simi Saha



A case of adenomyosis with unusual Ultrasonographic findings & accidental detection of Ectopic Pregnancy during Hysterectomy / 46

Dr. S. K. Kundu



A Case of Tubal Ectopic Pregnancy / 50

Dr. Debraj Basu



1. Fatal Intracranial Cystic Lesion
2. Intra Uterine Gestational Sac Band / 53

Dr. Major (Retd.) Laksheswar Bora



Case Report : Giant high flow Hemangioma of liver diagnosed by Contrast Enhanced Ultrasound (CEUS) / 58

Dr. Dinesh Kumar, Dr. Parveen Kumar, Dr. Chandan Pal



A Case report of Ectopic Pregnancy / 62

Dr. Pralay Naskar



A rare occurrence of ovarian Ectopic gestation with ovarian Endometriosis : A case report / 64

Dr. Paromita Pal

EDITORIAL - I

ROLE OF DOPPLER ULTRASONOGRAPHY INTRAUTERINE GROWTH RESTRICTION

Since its introduction in 1970s Doppler ultrasound use in obstetrics has emerged as an important tool in both the evaluation and management of many pregnancy related pathological conditions such as Intrauterine Growth restriction, pre-eclampsia, foetal hypoxia and foetal anaemia. Doppler ultrasonography is based on the concept of Doppler effect, which is nothing but shift in frequency that occurs when a sound wave generating or reflecting source and an observer move relative to each other. The indices most commonly used to express the Doppler effect in pregnancy are the systolic-to-diastolic (S/D) ratio, pulsatility index (PI), and resistance index (RI).

Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR) is a complex, multifactorial condition which affects 3-10% of all pregnancies IUGR increases the perinatal mortality and morbidity and evidence suggests that it has long-term health consequences such as increased risk of hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes. Amongst all etiologies of IUGR, placentar insufficiency is the single most important final common pathway leading to impaired oxygen and nutrient transport to the foetus. Doppler ultrasound is primarily useful in fetuses whose growth restriction results from placentar insufficiency.

In normal healthy pregnancies placenta transitions to a low resistance and high flow organ as the process of trophoblastic invasion completes early in the second trimester. As a result low resistance umbilical artery exhibits continuous forward flow throughout cardiac cycle. In pathological conditions such as IUGR there are pattern of changes in umbilical artery (UA) end-diastolic velocity that shows increased placental resistance. Initially there is reduced end diastolic flow followed by absence of flow and finally reversal of flow, which occurs when more than 70% of villi are damaged and indicates severe placental compromise. In fetuses with suspected IUGR surveillance with UA Doppler velocimetry reduces the rate of antenatal admissions and caesarean delivery for foetal distress. At the same time, use of UA Doppler ultrasound in pregnancies with suspected IUGR improves perinatal outcome The foetus when challenged with continuous placental insufficiency adapts by diverting more blood to vital organs like cerebral circulation which is normally a high

impedence system. But when hypoxia ensues compensatory vasodilation occurs in the brain. In foetuses with IUGR Doppler study of middle cerebral artery (MCA) in contrast to UA shows decreased resistance indices. MCA peak systolic velocity (PSV) is a better predictor of perinatal mortality than pulsatility index. Another important tool to predict perinatal mortality in a foetus with IUGR is cerebroplacental ratio (MCA pulsatility index /UA pulsatility index). Doppler study of foetal venous circulation reflects foetal cardiac function and most commonly studied veins include ductus venosus (DV), inferior vena cava, hepatic vein, intra-abdominal portion of umbilical vein. Venous vessels exhibit a pulsatile tri-phasic waveform representing flow during systole (S wave), flow during diastole (D wave), and atrial systole (a-wave); exception is umbilical vein which exhibits a non-pulsatile flow under normal conditions. In response to hypoxia there is increased pulsatility index for veins (PIV). With increase in foetal hypoxia leading to acidosis the a-wave become reversed ("reversed a-wave"). This eventually leads to pulsations within intra-abdominal umbilical vein (IAUV) and reversal of flow in the inferior vena cava. These last two alterations represent foetal right heart failure and fetal metabolic acidosis which indicates high risk for the foetus.

Doppler ultrasound is very useful in diagnosing foetal IUGR. Abnormal Doppler waveforms typically appears prior to clinical and other laboratory manifestations of these conditions allowing for earlier identification and surveillance.

Dr. A. K. Roy