Postthoracotomy sternal wound infection (PTSWI) is a major complication after cardiac surgery in adults1–3 and children.4–8 The organisms that are recognized as causing most of these infections in adults and children are mostly Staphylococcus aureus, Staphylococcus epidermidis, and members of the family Enterobacteriaceae, such as Escherichia coli, Klebsiella species, Enterobacter species, and Proteus species.4,9,10 Although anaerobic bacteria were described in PTSWI in adults,11 their recovery has not been documented previously in children. This report describes 4 patients who developed PTSWI caused by anaerobic bacteria.

METHODS

The patients described were treated and studied by the author for PTSWI in hospitals in the metropolitan Washington, DC, area. Between 1983 and 1998 and did not include all of the patients who had PTSWI during this period. The hospitals included the Hospital for Sick Children and Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, DC. The total number of patients who had had a sternal thoracotomy procedure performed on them at these institutions during these years was not recorded. Included were only patients who had developed PTSWI caused by anaerobic bacteria. Patients’ medical and laboratory data were reviewed.

Antimicrobial agents were given as surgical prophylaxis to all patients and included a first-generation cephalosporin (patients 1 through 3) and penicillin (patient 4). Specimens were obtained by direct needle aspiration of the purulent contents into a syringe that was immediately sealed and transported to the laboratory within 30 minutes or by swab that was dipped into the pus and introduced into an anaerobic transport system (Port-A-Cul; BBL Microbiology Systems, Cockeysville, MD) or a Vacutainer (BD Vacutainer System, Rutherford, NJ) and transported to the laboratory within 2 hours. Sheep’s blood (5%), chocolate, and MacConkey agar plates were inoculated at 37°C aerobically (MacConkey) or under 5% CO2 (blood and chocolate) and examined at 24 and 48 hours. For isolation of anaerobes, the specimen material was plated onto prereduced vitamin K1-enriched Brucella blood agar, an anaerobic blood plate containing kanamycin and vancomycin, and an aerobic blood plate containing colistin and nalidixic acid and inoculated into an enriched thioglycolate broth, incubated in GasPak jars (BBL Microbiology Systems), and examined at 48 and 96 hours. Plates that showed growth were held until the organisms were processed and identified. All cultures that showed no growth were held for at least 5 days. Anaerobic and aerobic bacteria were identified as described previously.12,13

RESULTS

Polymicrobial infection was present in all instances. The number of isolates varied from 2 to 3. The predominant anaerobes were Peptostreptococcus species (3) and pigmented Prevotella (2). Anaerobic bacteria only were recovered in 2 patients (patients 1 and 4; Table 1), and mixed aerobic and anaerobic bacteria were isolated in the 2 others (patients 2 and 3).

A median sternotomy incision was performed for repair of congenital defects in all cases. The infections were diagnosed between 18 to 31 days after surgery. All patients had factors that have been shown to predispose to infection.4,7 These included a perfusion time in excess of 1 hour, prolonged ventilation time (>200 hours), delayed sternal closure (>1 day), and inappropriate antimicrobial prophylaxis.

Signs and symptoms associated with PTSWI included fever (38°C–40°C; in all patients), erythema or cellulitis (in all patients), purulent (3 patients) or sanguinous (1 patient) wound discharge, foul-smelling discharge (3 patients), and instability of the sternum (2 patients). A leukocytosis of 16 600/mm3 to 23 800/mm3 with neutrophil predominance (64%–80%) was present when the diagnosis of PTSWI was made in all cases.

Therapy for the PTSWI included open (3 cases) or local (1 case) debridement and parenteral and oral antimicrobial therapy for 28 to 44 days. All patients recovered without complications.

DISCUSSION

This report describes for the first time the isolation of anaerobic bacteria from PTSWI in children. These organisms were recovered as the sole isolates in 2
TABLE 1. Clinical Features of Median Sternotomy Wound Infections in Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Surgical Repair</th>
<th>Interval From Surgery to Diagnosis</th>
<th>Predisposing Factor(s)</th>
<th>Isolate (Source)</th>
<th>Antimicrobial Duration of Antibiotic Therapy</th>
<th>Surgical Procedure</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7 y</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Wound infection</td>
<td>Ventricular septal defect</td>
<td>23 d</td>
<td>Prolonged perfusion time</td>
<td>Prevotella intermedia, Peptostreptococcus micros (wound), Staphylococcus aureus (blood, wound), Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron (wound), Peptostreptococcus prevoti (wound)</td>
<td>Ticarcillin-clavulanate</td>
<td>14 d</td>
<td>Open debridement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 y</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Wound infection, bacteremia</td>
<td>Ventricular septal defect</td>
<td>18 d</td>
<td>Prolonged ventilation time, delayed closure</td>
<td>Escherichia coli (blood, wound), Clostridium perfringens (wound), Prevotella melaninogena (blood, wound), Peptostreptococcus species (wound), Propionibacterium acnes</td>
<td>Imipenem (IV)</td>
<td>14 d</td>
<td>Open debridement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 y</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Wound infection</td>
<td>Fallot’s tetralogy</td>
<td>28 d</td>
<td>Prolonged ventilation and perfusion time</td>
<td>Escherichia coli (blood, wound), Clostridium perfringens (wound), Peptostreptococcus species (wound), Propionibacterium acnes</td>
<td>Clindamycin (IV, PO)</td>
<td>30 d</td>
<td>Open debridement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24 mo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Wound infection, bacteremia</td>
<td>Transposition of the great vessel</td>
<td>31 d</td>
<td>Inadequate antimicrobial prophylaxis, re-exploration for bleeding, prolonged ventilation time</td>
<td>Escherichia coli (blood, wound), Clostridium perfringens (wound), Peptostreptococcus species (wound), Propionibacterium acnes</td>
<td>Ticarcillin-clavulanate (PO)</td>
<td>16 d</td>
<td>Local debridement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV indicates intravenously; PO, orally.
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