Feasibility of a New Philosophy of Stacking Single and Two-Level Cervical Plates End to End on the Same Vertebra Instead of a Three-Level Plate for Multilevel Anterior Cervical Fusion*

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Introduction
Anterior cervical decompression and fusion (ACDF) is a reliable and common surgical procedure producing satisfactory results in the treatment of cervical radiculopathy or myelopathy when conservative management fails[1, 2]. The addition of an anterior plate provides a rigid construct leading to increased stability. Single or two level anterior cervical fusion with anterior plating has yielded great success as shown by high fusion rates and minimal risks of plate failure[3-5]. Unfortunately, when anterior plating was translated to greater than two –level cervical spine surgeries, the fusion results did not reproduce similar findings as with shorter cervical fusions and there was inherently greater risk of plate failure due to the longer moment arm[6-8]. Other potential disadvantages of longer plates include decreased inherent stability and technical challenges of plate placement that could lead to misalignment and increased risk of adjacent segment degeneration and ossification due to settling and or placement too close to the adjacent disc space[9, 10].

Treatments of multilevel spondylosis have evolved to combine corpectomy and discectomy to enhance stability of the construct. The addition of an anterior plate further increases stability[5, 6]. Single or two level anterior cervical constructs are inherently more stable and have higher fusion rates and minimal risks of plate failure compared with three or four-level constructs[6, 8]. Other potential disadvantages of using three or four-level plates include: technical challenges of plate misalignment, extensile retraction of the esophagus possibly leading to dysphagia[11, 12], increased risk of adjacent segment degeneration and ossification due to settling and difficulty of manipulating the ends of a longer plate during placement[13, 14]. Treating adjacent segment disease often necessitates an extensile approach to remove a previous three or four-level plate just to make room for the addition of a single-level plate.

We are proposing a new philosophy of cervical plating to decrease these disadvantages related to multilevel cervical plating by strategically stacking shorter cervical plates either single level or combined single and two-level plates rather than a single long three or four-level plate. This is a similar philosophy to combining a corpectomy and discectomy rather than a two-level corpectomy. Both patients were informed about their case submission for publication and have agreed to this.

Illustrative Case #1 of an anterior single level plate caudal and two-level plate cephalad
This is a case of a 61 year old female with severe neck pain, radicular myelopathy and radiculitis from C4 to C7 with spondylosis (Figure 1A-B).

After a trial of conservative management she underwent C4-7 anterior cervical discectomies. We stacked a two-level plate from C4-C6 and a single level plate from C6-C7. This patient had mild dysphagia that resolved within her first two week follow-up, and she maintained radiographic evidence of fusion at her latest eight month radiographs with no neck complaints up to her latest clinical follow-up at twenty months.

Surgical Technique
Under general endotracheal anesthesia we performed left-sided anterior decompressions of each disc level at C4-5, C5-6, and C6-7.
Illustrative Case # 2 of a single level plate cephalad and two-level plate caudal

A 64 year old male presented with severe neck pain and cervical radiculomyelopathy. He had spondylosis from C3-C6 (Figure 3). After a trial of conservative management we performed a C3-C6 anterior cervical discectomy and fusion. We stacked a single level cervical plate at C3-4 and a two-level cervical plate at C4-C6 using the technique-approach described. Post operative radiographic images showed very well positioned plates (Figure 4a-b). This patient reported minimal sensation of dysphagia during his first two days of recovery and no neck complaints at seven months postoperatively.

Discussion

The success of single-level ACDF has not been equaled when applied for greater than two levels[4,7]. Catastrophic complications of long constructs causing airway compromise and death[8], esophageal erosion from bone graft or plate irritation[7] have been documented. Pistoning and failure of multilevel constructs and frequent pseudoarthrosis also occur[4].

We are presenting a surgical technique philosophy that allows stacking of anterior cervical plates for multilevel cervical spine surgery where two short cervical plates are stacked end to end on the same vertebra, even after partial corpectomies, instead of using a three-level cervical plate. We report a new philosophy of stacking two cervical plates end to end on the same vertebra after multilevel ACDF instead of a single three-level plate, thus demonstrating the feasibility of increased stability, increased fusion rates, improved technical ease of alignment and application for the surgeon, and ease of revision for an anticipated adjacent segment disease.

References


*Pending Publication

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