

Placental Pathology, a Survival Guide

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• Placental pathology continues to be an underutilized, undertaught, and inadequately handled surgical subspecialty. The requests for placental pathology are soaring, due partly to demands from obstetricians and to the litigious environment in which they practice, and to improved obstetrical care leading to pregnancies in medically challenging situations. Evaluation of the placenta requires a good understanding of the questions and issues concerning both the fetus/infant and the mother. Information from placental pathology can be critical in early neonatal care and in reproductive planning for the family, and it can provide risk assessment for neurologic outcome of the infant. A comfortable interaction among the obstetric staff, mothers, and pathologists often obviates need for legal intervention in unexpected pregnancy outcomes. Some critical pathologic features that involve maternal and fetal management are illustrated herein. A template for gross examination and a few critical histopathologic diagnostic features with clinicopathologic correlation are included.

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GROSS PLACENTAL FINDINGS/EXAMINATION

I believe that all placentas should have at least a gross examination, saving the full histopathologic examination for a defined subset (Table 1). At the Massachusetts General Hospital, all placentas are delivered to the pathology department with a minimal required set of clinical information: maternal gravidity, parity, gestational age, and a blank section to provide any other information deemed pertinent by the obstetric staff. Using only these provided data, we triage the placenta into a "hold" or "examine" category. Hold placentas are those that do not meet criteria as described in Table 1 and are basically normal-term singleton livebirths who received prenatal care and delivered in the hospital without maternal or fetal/infant pathologic history or complications. The hold placentas are placed in a large, locked refrigerator for at least 7 days and are disposed of after 7 days so long as the infant is not transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit and the

mother is not readmitted with an obstetric or other complication. Maternal admission and neonatal intensive care unit admission lists are checked daily for these events. The examine category includes all placentas from deliveries other than those described in Table 1 or are maternal readmissions or neonatal intensive care unit admissions.

Placentas are stereotypic organs that lend themselves to template gross description (Table 2), ensuring that all the important information is obtained and facilitating dictation and transcription. Deviations from this template—for example, twin gestation or other multiples or fragmented placentas—can be handled without the template or with minor deviations from it. The template ensures that the most critical information is noted: color, cord length^{1,2} (standards in Figure 1), lesions, and trimmed weight.^{3,4} The importance of these gross findings is listed in Table 3. This also allows for easy sampling, as once the gross template is complete the necessary sections needed for histology are neatly outlined. We take at least 2 sections of cord (proximal to the placenta and proximal to fetus), 1 membrane roll (including the membrane rupture site), and 3 full thickness sections of parenchyma, including chorionic plate vessels. All parenchymal lesions should be sampled (just a small representative section), and at least one "normal" representative section of parenchyma needs to be sampled.

These "chunks" of placenta, the membrane roll, and the cord sections are placed into a small specimen jar with 10% formalin and fixed for at least 4 hours. Very sick babies or mothers need pathologic interpretation promptly, and these specimens should be processed the same day as accessioned. Others can be fixed overnight, or as convenient. We fix the remaining placental tissues as well and save it until the case is complete.

HISTOLOGIC FINDINGS

Remembering that the placenta is an organ with circulations from both the mother and the fetus, examination of the placenta should look for pathology from both individuals. Historically, the focus of placental histopathology has been on maternal side diseases/disorders. Recently, much attention has been focused on the fetal side. There may be much more importance in the fetal histopathology of the placenta in terms of predicting or explaining subsequent morbidity.

Maternal side diseases/disorders that affect the placenta are many and are too numerous to describe herein. Instead, I will focus on those that have been shown to have important fetal sequelae or recurrence risk.

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