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Pleural effusion in an old woman

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Background & Aim: An 83 year-old woman attends her general practitioner for general discomfort and cough, no fever, ongoing for 2 days. Medical history: breast cancer with left radical mastectomy and hormone therapy, without radiotherapy or chemotherapy; scoliosis, bipolar disorder. Physical examination: cutaneous dehydration signs, malaise, slightly tachypnea. Pulmonary auscultation: hypoventilation of the left inferior lobe. Abdomen: no pain, hepatomegaly.

Method: Complementary tests: anemia of chronic cause, elevated tumor markers (CA 125 and CA 15-3), rest normal. Arterial blood gases: hypoxemic respiratory failure. Chest X-ray: left pleural effusion (not present in previous X-rays) CT-scan of the thorax: paratracheal and subcarinal mediastinal adenopathies, with malignant characteristics. Left pleural effusion with collapse of the left inferior pulmonary lobe with malignant with a probably malignant cause. Probable metastatic implants in the subcutaneous area of the left hemithorax. Abdominal CT-scan: hepatic, left suprarenal and bone metastases

Results: Diagnosis: Breast cancer progression with bone, hepatic, left suprarenal gland and subcutaneous region metastases. Left pleural effusion Differential diagnosis: Causes of pleural exudative effusion: cancer, pulmonary embolism, tuberculosis, parapneumonic effusion, dressler syndrome, connective tissue diseases. Causes of pleural transudative effusion: congestive heart failure, cirrhosis, nephrotic syndrome, hypothyroidism.

Conclusions: The pleural fluid originates from the pleural capillaries, the pulmonary interstitium, intrathoracic blood and lymphatic vessels or peritoneal cavity. It is being resorbed mainly by the lymphatic vessels of the parietal pleura. The pleural effusion is due to the excess of the fluid generation or due to a diminished reabsorption. The prevalence of pleural effusion is around 400/100000 persons. The most frequent cause of transudative is the congestive heart failure, meanwhile the most frequent cause of exudative effusion is the pneumonia, followed by cancer and pulmonary embolism.