ACUTE HAEMOLYTIC ANAEMIA COMPLICATING PRIMARY ATYPICAL PNEUMONIA

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Acute haemolytic anaemia associated with high titre cold agglutinins is an uncommon complication of primary atypical pneumonia. The first description of a case appears in a paper of Clough and Richter recording their observations on the haemagglutinins in a patient with bronchopneumonia. In the British literature Besterman and Brigden first reported a case and in surveying the literature found 25 previously published cases. Since then cases have been recorded by Neely et al., Sigenthaler, Aaron and by Stewart and Friedlander. Dacie has described the serological investigation of several cases.

The condition is sufficiently rare to warrant reporting a further case with some observations on the serological findings.

Case Report

A 52-year-old taxi driver was admitted to the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, on October 13, 1958, complaining of difficulty in breathing. His previous medical history was that of a chronic asthmatic whose attacks were usually controlled by an inhaler, but were occasionally more severe. He had chronic bronchitis with a cough and the production of moderate sputum.

The present illness began 10 days before admission with general malaise, shivering and cough with purulent sputum. He became increasingly breathless and two days before admission complained of right lower chest pain aggravated by coughing. The family and other medical history was not relevant. His general practitioner had given him a course of terramycin, beginning one week before admission. He had not had sulphonamide therapy.

On Examination

He was a distressed, ill-looking man with mild peripheral cyanosis and marked general pallor. Temperature 101.4°F. (38.5°C.).

Pulse 144 per minute. Regular. Blood pressure 165/85. Heart sounds faint, but otherwise normal. No evidence of cardiac failure.

Barrel-shaped chest, expanding poorly. Respiratory rate 30 per minute with use of accessory muscles. Percussion note was hyper-resonant. Generalized harsh breath sounds with many high-pitched rhonchi and some coarse crepitations at both bases.

Other systems appeared normal.

Investigations

X-ray chest showed increased shadowing, particularly at both bases, and signs of generalized emphysema.

Haematology. Group O positive, genotype DCeE. Hb 43% (6.4 g./100 ml.). W.B.C. 24,000 per cu.mm. Blood film: red cells agglutinated and showed marked polychromasia. Normoblasts and a few proerythroblasts present. Marked neutrophil leucocytosis with small number of myelocytes. Reticulocytes 6.4%. Direct Coombs test strongly positive. Cold agglutinin titre 1/1,600. Sternal marrow showed normoblastic erythroid hyperplasia. Red cell osmotic fragility was normal tested at 20°C. and at 37°C. Cresyl blue preparations showed no Heinz bodies.

Biochemistry. The urine contained no protein, sugar or haemoglobin and no haemosiderin crystals were seen in the centrifuged deposit. Urobilin present in slight excess of normal. Plasma bilirubin 1.4 mg./100 ml., blood urea 75 mg./100 ml., total serum protein 6.2 g./100 ml. Serum electrophoresis on paper indicated an increased gamma globulin fraction.

Microbiological Investigation. Culture of sputum grew Neisseria and coliform organisms sensitive to streptomycin. Blood culture on October 14, 1958, was negative.

An examination for complement-fixing antibodies was made on paired sera dated October 22 and December 3, 1958, by Dr. Vollum. The complement fixation tests of both sera were positive at a titre of 1/8 for influenza A, influenza C and mumps V; and negative for influenza B, psittacosis, Q fever, adenovirus and sendai. The streptococcus M.G. titre of the first serum was 1/40 and of the second serum 1/10.
At a further attendance on December 31, 1958, the direct Coombs test was negative and the cold agglutinin titre had fallen to 1/16. On January 28, 1959, the direct Coombs test was negative and the cold agglutinin titre was 1/2.

**Serological Observations**

**Direct Coombs Tests**

The direct Coombs test was positive to a titre of 1/160 on October 14, 1958, and was not inhibited by gamma globulin. The further observations on the direct Coombs test are given in the table. It is interesting that the direct Coombs test was still weakly positive on December 3, 1958, when the haemoglobin was 100% and the haemolytic episode over.

An eluate made by Kidd’s method showed no activity either at 20°C or 37°C, or by indirect Coombs test. A cold non-specific saline agglutinating antibody was recovered from cells sensitized with the patient’s serum at 4°C and warmed to 37°C.

**Haemagglutinins**

The serum (October 22, 1958) contained cold auto- and iso-haemagglutinins having the following thermal range:

- 4°C: 1/320
- 12°C: 1/128
- 20°C: 1/64
- 31°C: 1/8
- 37°C: No agglutination

No agglutination was obtained with cells by indirect Coombs test at 37°C or with papainized cells at 37°C. The serum showed no difference in the agglutinability of human red cells, as is shown by the high titre cold antibodies of acquired haemolytic anaemia.

**Haemolysins**

Cold haemolysin was demonstrated by the method described by Dacie. Traces of haemolysin were observed with unacidified patient’s serum and frank haemolysis with acidified serum was detectable after 30 minutes.

**Absorption of Haemagglutinins**

The cold agglutinins proved difficult to absorb with the patient’s own cells. Absorption was carried out three times at 4°C, in each case using an equal volume of patient’s own cells washed at 37°C. The titre of agglutination was diminished to 1/8. This effect was equivalent to a single similar absorption with normal cells and three such absorptions removed all but traces of agglutinins.
The absorption procedure with the patient's own cells caused some haemolysis.

Discussion

The case described is an example of moderate severity of this complication of acute virus pneumonia.

The haemolytic episode was fully manifest on admission to hospital 10 days after the onset of respiratory symptoms. The blood picture showed the profound disturbance caused by the haemolysis, whilst the serological findings of high titre cold agglutinins, cold haemolysin and positive direct Coombs test were typical.

The absence of haemoglobinuria was unusual, as was the normal red cell osmotic fragility.

Aetiology

This remains obscure, as does the primary cause of idiopathic acquired haemolytic anaemia. It seems now evident that there is no causal relationship with sulphonamide therapy. Earlier reports, for example, Dameshek, emphasized this association. It is possible that virus particles may be fixed to red cells, rendering the latter susceptible to the action of virus antibodies. This has been suggested by Moolten et al., who have recovered the virus of Newcastle disease from the blood of patients suffering from an acquired haemolytic anaemia. Betke et al. have isolated Coxsackie A virus from the faeces of a boy suffering from acute haemolytic anaemia and Dacie has recorded acute haemolytic anaemia following an attack of measles.

Mechanism of Haemolysis

Apart from the possible effect of a virus, several explanations have been put forward to explain the haemolysis. Stats showed that red cells agglutinated by cold agglutinins were very susceptible to mechanical trauma and the case of Colmers and Snavely showed the injurious effect of sponging with cold alcohol in a case with high titre cold agglutinins. Dacie has described his finding of a haemolysin best demonstrated by acidification of the patient's serum. A similar haemolysis was demonstrated in the case described here. The case of Stewart and Friedlander showed a correlation between the thermal range of the haemolysin and the clinical evidence of the in vivo haemolysis.

Diagnosis

The onset of symptoms and signs of anaemia during the second or third week of a respiratory infection should arouse suspicion of acute haemolytic anaemia. Confirmation may be sought in the blood changes, which, in addition to a fall in haemoglobin, include reticulocytosis and neutrophil leucocytosis. The blood film will show polychromasia and may show normoblasts and myelocytes. Haemoglobinuria may be present. The direct Coombs test will be positive and the serum will contain cold haemagglutinins in high titre. Finland et al. found significant titres of cold agglutinins in infectious disease only in primary atypical pneumonia and in mumps.

Treatment

The management of the case may cause concern, but the ultimate prognosis is good. The patient should be kept warm. Transfusion should be given only if the anaemia is severe. Cross-matching of blood may be difficult. Fresh blood is desirable and should be given at 37°C. Dacie does not recommend splenectomy and considers that ACTH or cortisone should only rarely be required.

Summary

A case of haemolytic anaemia complicating atypical primary pneumonia is described. Initially the serum contained non-specific cold agglutinins in a titre of 1/1,600, though the titre fell rapidly. The positive direct Coombs test was of the non-gamma-globulin type, being not inhibited by gamma-globulin. Treatment was by blood transfusion, after which steady improvement occurred. The aetiology and mechanism of the haemolysis are discussed and some remarks are made on diagnosis and treatment.

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REFERENCES

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