Nonspecific small bowel ulceration

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Summary: Six patients (4 male, 2 female) developed nonspecific small bowel ulceration between the ages of 4 months and 76 y. Five had gastrointestinal haemorrhage, usually chronic and resulting in iron deficiency anaemia. Four had features of subacute intestinal obstruction; there were no perforations. A small bowel enema was the most useful single investigation for delineating the lesions, and surgical excision was curative in all but one case. No aetiological causes could be implicated, other than in one patient taking a daily tablet of Navidrex-K.

Introduction

Since nonspecific ulceration of the small bowel is rare (Boydston et al., 1981), the diagnosis is commonly overlooked and seldom established before operation (Strodel et al., 1981). First described by Bailie in 1795, 'simple' ulcers of the small bowel were reviewed by Combes in 1897. The lesion was defined by Grasman (1925) as 'sharp-bordered, solitary ulceration with no surrounding inflammation, of unknown cause, indefinite pathogenesis, and an acute or chronic course'. Sporadic case reports have not added a great deal to our understanding of these curious ulcers (Boydston et al., 1981; Watson, 1963; Morgenstern et al., 1965; Alexander & Schwartz, 1966; Billig & Jordan, 1965; Brown & Pemberton, 1936; Evert et al., 1948; Morlock et al., 1956), although enteric-coated potassium tablets have now been identified as one specific cause in certain cases (Morgenstern et al., 1965; Campbell & Knapp, 1966; Dayer et al., 1977).

To draw attention to a potential cause of protracted morbidity, we report 6 patients with nonspecific enteric ulceration. Five were eventually cured by resection but one represents a continuing problem.

Patients and results

Age and sex

During the last 5 y 6 patients with nonspecific ulceration of the small intestine have been treated or remain under treatment in Bristol. There were 4 males and 2 females. The age of onset of symptoms ranged from 4 months to 76 y.

Presentation

Five of the 6 patients presented with evidence of gastrointestinal bleeding (Table I). Haemorrhage was occult in 3 cases, resulting in persistent iron-deficiency anaemia. Two patients had melaena, and in one of these a subsequent and profuse haematochezia led to emergency operation. Four patients complained of mild obstructive symptoms, with intermittent crampy abdominal pain and occasional distension. Only one patient vomited, but another 2 had noticed some degree of weight loss.

Apart from one patient (no. 4) who had been receiving 1 Navidrex-K tablet*/d for 3 y, none of these patients had taken enteric-coated potassium. Oral iron was the only other therapy received by any patient. There were no abnormal physical findings apart from anaemia. The only associated clinical conditions were an old healed duodenal ulcer (patient 2) and a successfully resected coarctation of the aorta (patient 3).

Investigation

In 2 patients with solitary ileal ulcer emergency presentation led to a fairly rapid diagnosis. Patient 5 had a brisk bleed per rectum, and angiography identified a bleeding site. Patient 4 had clinical and

*Navidrex-K tablets (Ciba) have an outer coat of sugar containing 0.25 mg cyclopenthiazide and an inner slow-release wax core containing potassium chloride 600 mg (8.06 mEq).

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radiological evidence of subacute small bowel obstruction, and a small bowel enema localized a stricture adjacent to the site of ileal ulceration. In the other cases diagnosis was elusive, and investigation was much more protracted (Table I). Repeated barium studies, colonoscopy and gastroduodenoscopy were undertaken.

Small bowel enema and selective visceral arteriography were the most productive examinations. In 4 patients a small bowel enema correctly identified a stricture in the ileum (Figure 1). In one case (patient 6), arteriography demonstrated a bleeding point in the region of the ileocolic vessels in 2 patients. Superior mesenteric arteriography proved valuable in another 2 patients. A string test, although not a confirmatory diagnostic method, was helpful in the localization of a bleeding point in one patient (no. 3). An intravenous injection of fluorescein after a length of string was given after oral passage of a length of string. The string was then retrieved, and the position of the fluorescein was observed.

In each patient local resection of the affected segment of small bowel was undertaken with end-to-end anastomosis. In 2 patients with disease in the terminal ileum, the resection included the caecum and ascending colon; in 2 patients resection included the ascending colon. Local enterectomy was not performed. In 3 patients end-to-end anastomosis was performed, in 2 patients an ileostomy was performed. In 1 patient a colostomy was performed.

Table I  Symptoms, investigations and treatment of patients with nonspecific enteric ulceration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient no.</th>
<th>Age (y)</th>
<th>Length of history (y)</th>
<th>Presenting symptoms</th>
<th>Bleeding</th>
<th>Radiology</th>
<th>Angiography</th>
<th>Endoscopy</th>
<th>Laparotomy findings</th>
<th>Resection</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Obstructive</td>
<td>occult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Jejunal stricture &amp; 5 ulcers</td>
<td>Local enterectomy</td>
<td>Well at 11 y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Obstructive</td>
<td>occult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Jejunal stricture &amp; 2 ulcers</td>
<td>Local enterectomy</td>
<td>Well at 3 y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Obstructive</td>
<td>occult</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Ileal stricture &amp; 6 ulcers</td>
<td>Local enterectomy</td>
<td>Well at 3 y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1 wk</td>
<td>Obstructive</td>
<td>occult</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Ileal stricture &amp; 1 ulcer</td>
<td>Local enterectomy</td>
<td>Well at 1 y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Overt</td>
<td>overt</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Solitary ileal ulcer</td>
<td>Right hemicolectomy</td>
<td>Still needs regular transfusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Overt</td>
<td>overt</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Multiple, recurrent ileal ulcers</td>
<td>2 hemicolectomies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GI: gastrointestinal; FT: follow through; SB: small bowel.
colon. Excision of the ulcer-bearing segment appears to have been curative in all but one case. In the exception (patient 6) the history has been extraordinary. Intermittent melaena from infancy led to right hemicolectomy at the age of 9 y. In adult life this patient required two further resections of small bowel. Renewed ulceration causing anaemia was then treated by Argon laser photocoagulation with no effect. Repeated attempts to control the bleeding with cimetidine, carbenoxolone, De-Nol and zinc sulphate have been equally unsuccessful. The patient currently requires blood transfusion every second month to maintain a normal haemoglobin level.

Pathology

In all but 2 cases the ulcers were multiple (Figure 2). They were usually linear and circumferential (Figure 3), leading to stenosis of the bowel lumen and thus explaining the obstructive symptoms. Histologically the ulcers were characterized by a circumscribed zone of granulation tissue, which was associated with local hyperplasia of the muscularis mucosae and patchy pyloric metaplasia in the mucosa close to the ulcers (Figure 4). Low-grade chronic inflammation of the submucosa and deeper layers of the bowel was present, but granulomas, oedema and lymphoectasia (as seen in Crohn’s disease) were lacking. Some ulcers had re-epithelialized, but retained the focal muscular hyperplasia beneath them. Vascular changes were all attributable to secondary effects of the ulcers.

Discussion

Nonspecific small bowel ulceration is certainly very uncommon, though its precise incidence is difficult to quantify. The condition itself may not be a distinct entity but merely embrace residual ‘idiopathic’ cases of enteric ulceration after other definitive aetiological types have been excluded. Thus a recent report describes two fatal cases of (multiple) simple ulceration in patients with severe heart disease, in whom intestinal ischaemia was thought to be involved (Glynn et al., 1984), whereas our patients were generally younger and had a less acute presentation.

In any case of small bowel ulceration it is important to look for evidence of infection, including tuberculosis, histoplasmosis, aspergillosis, typhoid, syphilis and cytomegalovirus. Vascular, traumatic, nutritional and hormonal causes should also be excluded. Crohn’s disease and lymphoma have characteristic histological patterns, but malignant histocytosis (Isaacson &
Wright, 1978) can cause rather nonspecific appearances. When enteric ulceration is associated with malabsorption, it is important to exclude coeliac disease as well as lymphoma (Isaacson & Wright, 1978; Baer et al., 1980; Robertson et al., 1983). No patient in this series presented with malabsorption.

The cause of nonspecific ulcer remains unknown. During the 1960s enteric-coated potassium was implicated (Morgenstern et al., 1965; Campbell & Knapp, 1966), and its administration was shown to reproduce such lesions in the dog (Boley et al., 1965). However, in a review of 395 patients from around the world, less than half were taking enteric-coated potassium (Lawrason et al., 1965), and in a recent review from the Mayo Clinic only 10% were receiving such medication (Boydstun et al., 1981). In the present series, none of the patients had received enteric-coated potassium at any time, apart from the one man taking Navidrex-K.

There appears to be a changing pattern in the clinical presentation of nonspecific ulcers. The earlier reports described a high incidence of perforation (Watson, 1963; Evert et al., 1948), whereas more recent studies report a high incidence of intestinal obstruction (Boydstun et al., 1981). In the present series perforation did not occur, and obstruction (in 4 of 6) was never complete. The commonest presenting feature was gastrointestinal haemorrhage, either acute or chronic, but resulting in anaemia. Anaemia was rare in the early reports of this condition (Morgenstern et al., 1965; Billig & Jordan, 1965; Morlock et al., 1956; Lawrason et al., 1965). Later studies suggest that patients with bleeding tend to be younger than those with obstruction (Boydstun et al., 1981; Grosfeld et al., 1970).

It is a measure of our ignorance of this disease that 3 patients suffered from occult bleeding and anaemia for 5 or more years before operation and were submitted to a battery of investigations. The most helpful tests were small bowel enema and arteriography, while a simple follow-through technique failed to delineate any of these lesions. Delayed diagnosis and operative correction are the rule for nonspecific enteric ulcer (Boydstun et al., 1981; Strodell et al., 1981).

Ulceration was ileal in 4 patients and jejunal in 2. This distribution is in accord with other reviews (Boydstun et al., 1981; Evert et al., 1948). Jejunal ulcers are said to have a higher incidence of perforation (Boydstun et al., 1981).

Treatment in every case was by local resection and primary anastomosis. Simple closure of a perforated ulcer has been advocated (Evert et al., 1948), but recurrent bleeding and stricture would seem likely sequelae (Guest, 1963). Complete spontaneous healing seldom occurs (Evert et al., 1948). Fortunately the disease appears to be self-limiting, as resection is generally curative. This is clearly not the case in our one patient with ongoing ulceration of undetermined cause, but it does hold true for the other 5 at a follow-up of 1–11 y.

Acknowledgements

We thank Mr L.R. Celestin, F.R.C.S., Mr H.J. Espiner-Ch.M., F.R.C.S., Mr W.K. Eltringham, Ch.M. F.R.C.S., and Dr R.F. Harvey, M.D., F.R.C.P. for permission to publish details of their cases. The histological appearances of enteric ulceration were kindly reviewed by Dr J.D. Davies, M.D., F.R.C.Path., Consultant Histopathologist at the Bristol Royal Infirmary.

References


