Diabetes and rheumatoid factor

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Previous work from this laboratory (Oreskes and Spiera, 1966) as well as that of many other investigators (Bartfeld, 1969) has shown that the anti gamma globulin antibodies, otherwise known as rheumatoid factor (RF), are found in many persons with a wide variety of diseases other than rheumatoid arthritis. Indeed, it appears that a majority of individuals exhibiting RF activity do not have rheumatoid arthritis (Oreskes and Spiera, 1966, 1967). Presence of RF has been noted in the aged (Heimer, Levin, and Rudd, 1963), and this observation has been associated with higher levels of chronic disease in such groups, notably parkinsonism and diabetes (Litwin and Singer, 1965). In some individuals RF production appears to be due to immune stimulation by isologous γG immunoglobulin. Thus multiple transfusions (Vierucci, 1965), vaccination (Aho, Konttinen, Rajasalmi, and Wager, 1962), and transplacental transfer of γG from mother to child (Steinberg and Wilson, 1963), or child to mother (Fudenberg and Fudenberg, 1964), have all been implicated in the stimulation of RF activity.

Diabetic individuals maintained on insulin therapy are perforce subjected to repeated 'immunization' by a foreign protein. Production of anti-insulin-antibodies by many such individuals appears likely (Berson and Yalow, 1966). In view of the findings cited above, as well as the possibility that circulating antigen-antibody complexes may also stimulate RF production, it was considered that individuals receiving injections of exogenous insulin might exhibit an increased frequency of RF activity as compared to control groups. Formation of RF-like antibodies has been noted in rabbits after hyperimmunization with bacterial antigens (Abruzzo and Christian, 1961) or ovalbumin (Aho and Wager, 1961).

Material and methods

To test this hypothesis, 101 ambulatory clinic outpatients with a confirmed diagnosis of diabetes mellitus were tested for RF activity in their serum by means of the slide latex test (SLT) and the tanned sheep cell test (TSC). Details of these procedures were published some years ago (Oreskes and Spiera, 1966; Oreskes and Plotz, 1965). Positive sera were taken as those exhibiting a 1+ or higher degree of agglutination in the SLT and a titre of 1:20 or more in the TSC test. Sera examined with the TSC test were first adsorbed overnight with an equal volume of packed washed tanned unsensitized sheep cells to remove heterophil activity.

Subjects with a current or previous history of rheumatoid arthritis or other diseases known to be associated with a significant frequency of RF activity were excluded. Serological results were grouped in two categories: (1) Those from patients who had received multiple injections of insulin; (2) Those from patients who had never received insulin and who were instead maintained on dietary or oral hypoglycemic (Orinase) regimens. These two groups exhibited closely similar sex and age distributions.

Results and discussion

The results are summarized in the Table. In the non insulin group, RF activity was found in 10-7 per cent. of cases. This value is not significantly different from 10-2 per cent., the frequency of positive RF tests previously found in a group of patients with osteoarthritis of similar ages (Oreskes and Spiera, 1966). However, in the insulin group, RF activity was found in

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Frequency of positive rheumatoid factor tests in patients with diabetes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insulin</td>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45 (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not given</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56 (c)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age distribution (yrs)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (a)</td>
<td>55-2</td>
<td>53-0</td>
<td>53-8</td>
<td>62-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median (b)</td>
<td>57-1</td>
<td>56-0</td>
<td>56-0</td>
<td>57-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59-0</td>
<td>39-1</td>
<td>58-6</td>
<td>60-7</td>
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28.9 per cent. of cases. Comparing the insulin and non insulin groups by the $\chi^2$ test, this difference in frequency of RF positive tests was found to be statistically significant. ($\chi^2 = 4.27; 0.05 > P > 0.02$).

In both groups TSC titres were low with a median value of 1:160. This is in agreement with the situation usually observed in nonrheumatoid disease, and is in contrast to the higher titres usually encountered in rheumatoid arthritis (Oreskes and Siltzbach, 1968).

There was no correlation between RF activity, age, sex or general clinical condition.

In patients who had received insulin, no relation between duration of therapy or dose level and RF activity could be established.

These results suggest that, in some individuals, the presence of RF activity is associated with chronic antigenic stimulation by a foreign protein due to therapeutic injection of insulin.

Summary
Study of 45 insulin-treated diabetics revealed a statistically significant 2–7-fold increase in positive tests for rheumatoid factor (RF) as compared to 56 diabetic on dietary or oral hypoglycaemic (Orinase) therapy, or to forty patients with osteoarthritis. Frequency of RF was not significantly different in the Orinase and osteoarthritis groups. Age was not a factor in these results, since all three groups were of about the same age (mean and range). In the insulin-treated group, RF activity was twice as common among females as among males. No relation between duration of insulin therapy, dose level, or duration of disease, and RF activity was established.

These results suggest that, in some individuals, the presence of RF activity is associated with chronic antigenic stimulation by a foreign protein due to therapeutic injection of insulin.

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