Acute adrenal failure secondary to bilateral infarction of the adrenal glands as the first manifestation of primary antiphospholipid antibody syndrome

Adrenal insufficiency is an uncommon, life threatening complication of the primary antiphospholipid antibody syndrome (PAPS), secondary to either adrenal haemorrhage or infarction. Adrenal failure more often follows other PAPS thromboembolic manifestations, and has to be clearly differentiated from other PAPS abdominal emergencies, including mesenteric and hepatic infarction. The pathological mechanisms involved are still not clearly understood, but the hypercoagulable state in patients with PAPS supports the concept that adrenal haemorrhagic infarction may possibly be related to adrenal vein thrombosis. We recently observed a new case, which is of particular interest as the patient developed an acute adrenal failure, revealing bilateral adrenal infarction, as a first manifestation of the PAPS.

A 70 year old patient presented with diffuse abdominal pain persisting for 15 days. He had no previous history of thromboembolic or connective tissue disease. On admission, he was dehydrated with pulse 120/min, blood pressure 9/4 mm Hg, and abdomen palpation was tender. Laboratory findings were: haemoglobin 6.3 mmol/l, white cell count 6.4 x10^9/l, platelets were 90 x 10^9/l, ESR 18 mm 1st h. Blood electrolytes were abnormal for natraemia 118 mmol/l, kalaemia 6.3 mmol/l, glycaemia 2 mmol/l. Acute adrenal failure diagnosis was suspected, and was confirmed by a low plasma cortisol concentration 20 nmol/l and an adrenocorticotrophichormone (ACTH) test that failed to raise plasma cortisol over 25 nmol/l. The serum ACTH concentrations were 300 pg/l (normal range 10–50). Coagulation studies found a pronounced prolonged activated partial thromboplastin time (APTT) (95 s; normal: 32 s) with normal activated partial thromboplastin time inhibition test with a high dilution of thromboplastin (1:500); the confirmatory test for LAC was positive. Anticardiolipin antibodies IgG were positive (IgG-aCL: 18GPL U/ml; normal < 15) and IgM were negative. The presence of aCL was determined by solid phase enzyme linked immunosorbent assay according to international standardised methods. Examination of antiphospholipid antibodies (asserachrom APA-Diagnostica Stago) was negative. The results of autoantibody screening, including Treponema pallidum haemagglutination, Venereal Disease Experimental Laboratory test, antinuclear and anti-DNA antibodies, cryoglobulin, and rheumatoid factor were negative. The complement profile was normal. Abdominal computed tomography showed bilateral enlarged adrenal glands, secondary to adrenal haemorrhagic infarction (fig 1). The diagnosis of PAPS was made, because of the presence of LAC and IgG-aCL, associated with bilateral adrenal infarction, which was probably secondary to chronic adrenal failure, even if they have no previous history of thromboembolic disorders. The patient was treated with cortisol acetate and aspirin, with rapid improvement of his clinical status. Three months later, and while APTT, IgG-aCL, and LAC titres were still raised, the patient developed an extensive deep venous thrombosis of the right forearm, confirmed by venous Doppler echography. Anticoagulation treatment was begun.

The PAPS is characterised by recurrent venous or arterial thrombosis, or both, or repeated fetal loss, associated with the persistent presence of anticardiolipin antibodies or LAC, in the absence of connective tissue disease (notably systemic lupus erythematosus). Our case report is original in that the acute adrenal failure, secondary to bilateral adrenal haemorrhagic infarction, was the first clinical manifestation of a typical PAPS. We suggest therefore, that PAPS may be suspected in patients with either acute or chronic adrenal failure, even if they have no previous history of thromboembolic disorders. Because haemorrhagic infarction may precede other thromboembolic events, when this type of complication is noted, an evaluation for PAPS with a search for antiphospholipid antibodies should be systematically done. Moreover, adrenal haemorrhagic infarction secondary to PAPS should be excluded in all patients presenting with enlarged adrenal glands shown by abdominal computed tomography. Our findings further emphasise that diagnosis of adrenal insufficiency should be considered in patients with PAPS and acute abdominal pain.

The authors thank Mr Richard Medeiros for his advice in editing the manuscript.

Figure 1 (A) and (B) Bilateral enlarged adrenal glands, secondary to adrenal haemorrhagic infarction confirmed by computed tomography.


Echocardiographic findings in primary Sjögren’s syndrome

Primary Sjögren’s syndrome (pSS) is a chronic autoimmune disease characterised by lymphocytic infiltration of the salivary and lacrimal glands. Similar lymphocytic infiltration is seen in visceral organs, and this results in several extraglandular manifestations. Among these, a clinically overt heart disease is very rare. However, recent echocardiographic studies showed that asymptomatic cardiac involvement is frequent in pSS. Thus, Rantapää-Dahlqvist and colleagues reported a high prevalence of cardiac involvement in patients with primary antiphospholipid syndrome; a multicenter study using different clotting assays on a panel of 78 samples. The mean age of the pSS patients was 55.3 (7.4) years (range 46–67) and the mean disease duration (SD) was 6 (4.8) years (range 6 months–20). The control group consisted of 18 age-matched healthy women. No patient or control had history of cardiovascular diseases, such as arterial hypertension or ischaemic heart disease. Echocardiography was carried out with an ATL Apogee instrument and normal values of the measured parameters were taken from Feigenbaum. Transmural diastolic flow velocities were recorded by pulsatile Doppler method. Moreover, the left ventricular diastolic function was evaluated according to Choong. Statistical analysis was performed using the Student’s t test and Scheffe’s method for multiple comparison among means. The results show that the deceleration time of the E wave was significantly reduced in pSS (mean (SD) 360 (84.2) cm/s) compared with controls (462 (84.25) cm/s) (<0.0009), and remained significantly different when five subjects older than 60 years were excluded from both groups. No significant valvular disease was found in both groups. Additionally, present or previous pericarditis and pulmonary hypertension were not detected in pSS.

In conclusion, although overt heart involvement in pSS is very rare echocardiography shows an unexpectedly high frequency of cardiac manifestations, mainly pericarditis and diastolic dysfunction. These findings suggest that cardiac involvement must be included in the spectrum of extraglandular manifestations of pSS.

PAOLO MANGANELLI
II Divisione Medica e Reumatologia, Azienda Ospedaliera di Parma, Italy

PAOLA BERNARDI UMBERTO TALIANI
III Divisione Medica, Azienda Ospedaliera di Parma, Italy

CATERINA CAMINITI
Azienda Ospedaliera di Parma, Italy

Correspondence to: D P Manganelli, II Divisione Medica e Reumatologia, Azienda Ospedaliera di Parma, Via Gramsci, 14, 43100 Parma, Italy

An acute multorgan thrombotic disorder associated with antiphospholipid antibodies; two ‘catastrophic’ cases

Over the past decade the antiphospholipid syndrome (APS) was defined by the presence of antiphospholipid antibodies (aPL) and clinical manifestations including thrombosis, recurrent fetal loss, livedo reticularis, splinter haemorrhages and arterial hypertension or ischaemic heart disease. However, ‘catastrophic’ cases of APS were described in 1992. Asherson et al first drew attention to a catastrophic variant of APS (CAPS) that is characterised by multiple widespread vascular occlusions leading to multiple organ failure and often death. We describe two non-systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) patients with a strikingly similar clinical presentation of CAPS and emphasise the difficulties in differentiating CAPS from other thrombotic angiopathies.

Case reports

CASE REPORT ONE

A 20 year old woman presented with transient hemichorea in 1993. Computed tomography of the brain was normal. From June 1995, episodes of hemichorea recurred together with severe frontal headaches. In November 1995 she was admitted to our hospital with rapid deterioration of vision and behavioural changes.

Physical examination showed sub coma, blood pressure 150/115 mm Hg, livedo reticularis, ischaemic skin ulcerations, and a systolic cardiac murmur. Fundoscopy showed arteriolar occlusions, bleeding, and exudates.

Laboratory findings included: platelet count 47 x 10^9/l, creatinine 176 µmol/l, fibrin degradation products 1.0 mg/l (normal <0.5), fibrinogen 4.0 g/l (normal range 2.0–4.0), haptoglobin 0.2 g/l (0.3–1.8), reticulocytes 62% (7–30), positive direct Coombs test, microscopica haematuria and proteinuria (3.9 g/day). Both Lupus anticoagulant (LAC; DRVVT; IL Test Laboratory, Milan, Italy) and high titre IgG and IgM anticardiolipin antibodies (aCL) were present; ANA were negative. Echocardiography showed mitral regurgitation and no vegetations. Brain magnetic resonance imaging showed multiple ischaemic infarctions. A skin biopsy specimen from a livedo-reticularis lesion showed thrombotic occlusions of arterioles and venules with partial recanalisation.

Treatment consisted of high dose corticosteroids, plasma exchange, anticoagulation, cyclophosphamide (1000 mg intravenous), and platelet transfusions. After three weeks she gradually regained consciousness and renal function, but developed hemichorea again:

CASE REPORT TWO

A 25 year old woman was admitted to our hospital in 1995 with a sudden episode of hemichorea. She was referred to hospital due to episodes of transient ischaemic attacks, amaurosis fugax, and severe headache. She also complained of widespread pain and joint stiffness. Computed tomography of the skull showed bilateral ischaemic lesions and magnetic resonance imaging showed multiple cerebral ischaemic infarctions. The patient was normocytic normochromic anaemic with evidence of thrombocytopenia and reticulocytosis. High titre IgG and IgM antiphospholipid antibodies were detected; ANA were negative. The patient was treated symptomatically with aspirin and dipyridamole.

Conclusion

Although there are many clinical aspects of these cases that suggest a catastrophic variant of APS, in our patients the clinical presentation was very different. The patient described here presented with multiple cerebral ischaemic lesions with recent transient ischaemic attacks. In contrast, the patient described in the first case presented with episodic hemichorea and no evidence of autonomic dysfunction, cerebral strokes or cerebral ischaemic lesions. These cases underline the diagnostic difficulties in the clinical recognition of CAPS.
Acute adrenal failure secondary to bilateral infarction of the adrenal glands as the first manifestation of primary antiphospholipid antibody syndrome

I MARIE, H LEVESQUE, F HERON, N CAILLEUX, J Y BORG and H COURTOIS

Ann Rheum Dis 1997 56: 567-568
doi: 10.1136/ard.56.9.567