Synovial fluid β_2 microglobulin and hydroxyproline fractions in rheumatoid arthritis and nonautoimmune arthropathies

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SUMMARY Fourteen patients with classical and definite seropositive rheumatoid arthritis (RA), 5 patients with microcrystalline arthritis, and 7 patients with osteoarthritis were studied with respect to markers of newly synthesised collagen (synovial NDOH pro levels); markers of connective tissue resorption (synovial DOH pro and NBH levels); markers of lymphoid tissue activity (synovial and plasma β_2 m levels). Higher amounts of NDOH pro in RA synovial fluid are compatible with the hypothesis of a local connective tissue production as suggested by Uitto *et al.* on basis of a higher procollagen proline hydroxylase activity in RA synovial tissue. DOH pro and NBH do not differ significantly in synovial fluid from RA or gouty patients, but the correlations between these forms of OH pro and, respectively, synovial lymphocytes and polymorphonuclear leucocytes are indicative of different processes of connective tissue remodelling in the 2 conditions. Synovial β_2 m levels are a direct function of total synovial lymphocyte counts independently of the type of arthropathy being explored. The ratio of synovial to plasma β_2 m is systematically above unity in RA patients only.

Recent work on β_2 microglobulin (β_2 m) led to the discovery of its immunogenetic aspect, though its exact function in this respect is still unknown (Marx, 1974). This 11 700 molecular weight (MW) protein has a close homology with the constant domains of the heavy and light chains of immunoglobulins, especially with the CH3 domain (Berggard and Bearn, 1968; Peterson *et al.*, 1972; Smithies and Poulik, 1972; Cunningham *et al.*, 1973).

β_2 m is normally present in low concentrations in serum and generally speaking in all biological fluids (Evrin *et al.*, 1971; Evrin and Wibell, 1972). The circulating β_2 m, however, does not derive from a splitting of immunoglobulins, and its production does not depend only on B cell function (Cejka *et al.*, 1973; Hutteroth *et al.*, 1973; Nilson *et al.*, 1973). β_2 m is a part of the major histocompatibility cell-membrane-bound antigenic complexes (Cresswell *et al.*, 1973; Grey *et al.*, 1973; Nakamuro *et al.*, 1973; Cresswell *et al.*, 1974; Peterson *et al.*, 1974;

Tanigaki and Pressman, 1974) and is produced by lymphocytes (T and B) and cell lines of tumoral or nontumoral lymphoid tissues (Bernier and Fanger, 1972; Hutteroth *et al.*, 1973; Nilson *et al.*, 1973; Poulik and Bloom, 1973; Kithier *et al.*, 1974; Nilson *et al.*, 1974).

Except for cases of renal insufficiency or pregnancy, increased serum levels of β_2 m were reported in patients with advanced malignant disease and in some inflammatory autoimmune disorders such as ulcerative colitis, regional enteritis, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) dysglobulinaemic purpura, and rheumatoid arthritis (RA) (Evrin and Wibell, 1973; Brauman *et al.*, 1977). Talal *et al.* (1975) reported elevated concentrations of β_2 m in saliva and synovial fluid from patients with Sjögren's syndrome. In patients with RA we described increased circulating β_2 m paralleling the lymphocytosis and reflecting the severity and extension of the joint involvement as well as the onset of extra-articular involvement (Manicourt *et al.*, 1978). An intense subsynovial lymphocytic and inflammatory cell infiltration characterises the RA joint cavity (Talal, 1972), and an increased collagenase production by this hypercellular rheumatoid synovial tissue may be an

Accepted for publication 23 June 1978

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important cause of joint destruction (Evanson *et al.*, 1968; Harris *et al.*, 1969; Wegelius *et al.*, 1970).

Hydroxyproline (OH pro) was described as a metabolic marker of the collagen whose biosynthesis is increased in RA synovial tissue (Uitto *et al.*, 1972).

Among the different OH pro fractions dialysable OH pro (DOH pro) and mainly nonprotein bound OH pro (NBH) appear to be relevant markers of bone collagen disorders and especially of bone resorption (Kivirikko, 1970; Krane *et al.*, 1970; Bishop and

Table 1 *Group A patients with rheumatoid arthritis*

	Plasma β_2m mg/l	Synovial β_2m mg/l	Synovial OH pro ($\mu g/ml$)				Synovial leucocytes count $10^3/mm^3$		JC	ESR mm/1h	LF
			TOH pro	DOH pro	NDOH pro	NBH	Neutrophil polymorphs	Lympho- cytes			
1	1.07	2.02	15.5	8.7	6.8	5.8	10.50	4.11	1	24	40
2	2.48	4.15	15.0	8.4	6.6	6.0	13.20	4.03	2	60	80
3	1.74	6.74	17.0	10.4	6.6	8.0	14.10	3.34	2	85	640
		6.60	14.0	—	—	—	—	—	2	85	640
	1.60	5.24	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	80	320
4	1.92	3.39	18.5	—	—	—	12.80	1.51	3	20	40
5	1.92	3.62	16.0	9.3	6.7	6.9	9.40	2.18	2	35	160
6	4.59	9.68	19.0	12.0	7.0	10.1	19.11	6.20	9	115	1280
	2.57	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	83	—
7	1.18	2.44	14.5	7.2	7.3	4.7	10.00	1.50	2	20	40
		3.00	15.5	9.1	6.4	7.4	9.50	2.32	2	20	40
8	1.72	2.83	15.0	8.0	7.0	5.4	8.10	2.21	2	30	80
9	1.91	4.90	17.0	9.9	7.1	7.1	7.33	2.94	2	37	80
	2.13	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	110	—
	4.98	11.67	23.5	—	—	—	15.01	7.23	10	120	2560
	4.10	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	100	2560
	4.98	12.98	—	—	—	—	14.06	8.64	10	110	2560
	4.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	120	—
10	1.58	3.23	16.0	9.8	6.2	7.5	16.90	2.10	2	70	160
		1.96	12.0	7.4	4.6	5.8	9.74	1.32	2	70	160
	2.00	3.60	16.0	—	—	—	—	—	3	55	320
		5.20	19.0	11.5	7.5	8.7	12.70	6.25	3	55	320
11	2.82	5.26	16.0	9.2	6.8	7.0	8.90	3.47	4	100	640
12	1.20	2.40	—	—	—	—	10.50	2.20	2	30	160
		3.60	—	—	—	—	11.50	2.90	2	30	160
13	2.20	3.90	18.5	9.0	9.5	7.4	9.26	4.22	2	60	640
14	1.24	3.42	—	—	—	—	8.91	0.53	1	53	320
M	2.45	4.86	16.6	9.3	6.9	7.0	11.6	3.5	3.4	66	583
$\pm$ SD	1.25	2.95	2.5	1.4	1.0	1.4	3.1	2.1	2.8	34	816

Table 2 *Patients with microcrystalline osteoarthritis (Group B) and osteoarthritis*

	Plasma β_2m mg/l	Synovial β_2m mg/l	Synovial OH pro ($\mu g/ml$)				Synovial leucocytes count $10^3/mm^3$		ESR
			TOH pro	DOH pro	NDOH pro	NBH	Lymphocytes count	Neutrophil polymorphs	
1	2.70	1.94	15.5	11.0	4.5	9	2.2	7.80	55
		1.55	16.4	13.7	2.7	11	1.4	9.40	55
2	1.99	1.30	17.5	14.0	3.5	12.5	1.0	11.90	80
3	1.94	1.58	12.0	7.5	4.5	5	1.30	5.80	30
4	2.66	2.22	13.5	11.2	2.3	8.7	2.74	7.00	60
		2.10	16.0	11.0	5.0	9.3	1.20	9.50	60
5	3.10	2.40	12.5	9.5	3.0	10	2.00	7.90	45
		2.55	13.0	8.0	5.0	6	2.20	6.90	45
M	2.5	2.0	14.6	10.7	3.8	8.9	1.8	8.3	54
$\pm$ SD	0.5	0.4	2.0	2.4	1.1	2.5	0.6	1.9	15
<i>Group C: Osteoarthritis</i>									
1	1.92	1.57	9.0	—	—	—	—	—	18
2	1.20	0.83	10.0	—	—	—	0.67	0.31	25
3	1.63	1.07	7.5	—	—	—	0.82	0.18	30
4	1.90	1.30	8.5	—	—	—	1.10	0.63	37
5	1.40	1.00	9.2	—	—	—	0.76	0.57	18
6	1.70	0.93	8.0	—	—	—	0.75	0.12	24
7	2.53	1.66	8.7	—	—	—	1.00	0.02	20
M	1.7	1.2	8.7	—	—	—	0.8	0.3	25
$\pm$ SD	0.4	0.3	0.8	—	—	—	0.2	0.2	7

Smith, 1971; Kaye, 1971; Sagar *et al.*, 1971; Goulding *et al.*, 1974; Varghese *et al.*, 1973), whereas the non-dialysable OH pro (NDOH pro) are derived either from collagen newly synthesised and rapidly degraded

or from fragments recently synthesised but not incorporated into tropocollagen (Krane *et al.*, 1967, 1970; Haddad *et al.*, 1970).

As β_2 m production is associated with lymphocytes it was of interest to study the levels of β_2 m in the synovial fluid of patients suffering from RA and to correlate these data with the synovial cytology, the synovial total and different OH pro fractions, and the degree of disease activity as expressed by the joint count (Hollander and McCarty, 1972), the erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR), the serum latex fixation test (LF), and the plasma β_2 m levels (Manicourt *et al.*, 1978). Furthermore it was interesting to compare the data observed in RA with the values observed in degenerative or inflammatory nonautoimmune conditions.

Patients and methods

Fourteen patients with classical and definite seropositive RA according to the criteria of the American Rheumatism Association were admitted in this study (group A), and patients with renal insufficiency amyloidosis or Sjögren's syndrome were excluded. The control group consisted of 5 patients presenting an inflammatory nonrheumatoid arthritis (gout or pseudogout, group B) and 7 patients with osteoarthritis (group C).

Fig. 1 (Upper) Comparison of synovial total hydroxyproline levels (OH pro) in rheumatoid (group A), microcrystalline (group B), and osteoarthrotic patients (group C), and of synovial dialysable, nondialysable, and nonproteinbound hydroxyproline (respectively DOH pro, NDOH pro, and NBH) in rheumatoid and microcrystalline arthritides (μ g/ml). (Lower) Comparison of synovial β_2 m levels in rheumatoid arthritis (group A), microcrystalline arthritis (group B), and osteoarthritis (group C). The traits indicate mean $\pm$ SD.

Fig. 2 Linear correlation between synovial fluid β_2 microglobulin (β_2 m) and synovial fluid lymphocyte count independently of the type of arthropathy.

Blood and synovial fluid samples were collected simultaneously for β_2m and OH pro determinations as well as for other routine biological parameters (ESR, LF). On the same day a physical examination by a member of the staff evaluated the joint count (JC) according to standard directions (Hollander and McCarty, 1972).

β_2m was radioimmunoassayed by the Phadebas β_2m microtest (Phadebas Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden). The total and free OH pro (FOH pro) were measured in hydrolysed and unhydrolysed samples (Delfosse *et al.*, 1975); the nondialysable fraction (NDOH pro) was isolated (Haddad *et al.*, 1970) and the OH pro content was determined as

Fig. 3 Linear correlation between synovial fluid β_2m microglobulin and the joint count (JC) and between synovial fluid β_2m and plasma β_2m in RA patients (group A) (mg/l).

mentioned above. The dialysable fraction (DOH pro) was assessed by subtracting NDOH pro from total OH pro and the NBH by subtracting FOH pro from DOH pro. When several values for synovial fluid appear for the same patient, as in Tables 1 and 2, they were obtained from various joint cavities.

Results

The relevant biological data are presented in Table 1 and 2.

Synovial β_2 m levels are highest in RA patients

(group A) and differ significantly between the 3 groups ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 1).

Total OH pro levels for groups A and B (Fig. 1) are significantly higher when compared to group C ($P < 0.001$); no statistical difference is found between groups A and B ($P < 0.1$). The NDOH pro values (Fig. 1) in group A are significantly higher than those observed in group B ($P < 0.001$) whereas there is no statistical difference between the DOH pro and the NBH values in these 2 different groups (Fig. 1).

Irrespective of the type of arthropathy a signi-

Fig. 4 (Upper) Linear correlation between synovial fluid β_2 microglobulin (β_2 m) and the erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) in the RA patients (Lower) Linear correlation between synovial fluid β_2 microglobulin (β_2 m) and the logarithm of the inverse of the latex fixation test (1/dil. latex) in RA patients (group A)

Fig. 5 Correlation between synovial fluid β_2 microglobulin (β_2m) and synovial fluid total hydroxyproline (OH pro), dialysable hydroxyproline (D OH pro), and nonproteinbound hydroxyproline (NBH) in the RA patients (group A)

Fig. 6 Correlation between synovial fluid lymphocyte count and synovial fluid total hydroxyproline (OH pro), dialysable hydroxyproline (D OH pro) and nonprotein-bound hydroxyproline (NBH) in RA patients (group A).

Synovial polymorphonuclear Neutrophils $\times 10^3 / \text{mm}^3$

Fig. 7 Correlation between the synovial fluid polymorphonuclear count and the synovial fluid total hydroxyproline (OH pro) dialysable OH pro (DOH pro) and nonprotein-bound OH pro (NBH) in the patients suffering from gout or pseudogout (group B).

ficant positive linear correlation is found between the synovial $\beta_2\text{m}$ levels and the synovial lymphocytosis (Fig. 2). In RA patients (group A) measurements of overall disease activity (JC, plasma $\beta_2\text{m}$ levels, ESR, and LF) show a positive correlation with synovial $\beta_2\text{m}$ levels (Figs. 3 and 4). Moreover, in the same patients (group A) the synovial $\beta_2\text{m}$ values correlate significantly with the synovial total OH pro ($r = 0.70$; $P < 0.001$), with the synovial DOH pro ($r = 0.83$; $P < 0.001$) and with the synovial NBH ($r = 0.81$; $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 5). As might be expected from the data in Fig. 2, RA patients further show a positive correlation between synovial lymphocyte counts and synovial OH pro values, namely $r = 0.70$, $P < 0.01$, for synovial total OH pro; $r = 0.75$, $P < 0.01$ for synovial DOH pro; and $r = 0.77$, $P < 0.001$ for synovial NBH (Fig. 6). No such correlations were found in control groups.

Interestingly enough, in gouty patients (group B) the synovial OH pro fractions are correlated with the synovial polymorphonuclear neutrophil (PMN) count (Fig. 7) and not with the synovial lymphocyte count.

In none of the groups studied is there any correlation between synovial NDOH pro levels and synovial cells count (PMN or lymphocytes).

It is further noted that in each RA patient synovial $\beta_2\text{m}$ levels are systematically higher than plasma $\beta_2\text{m}$ levels in contrast to the 2 other groups (Tables 1 and 2).

Discussion

From our results it emerges that synovial fluid NDOH pro is significantly higher in RA than in gouty patients and that no correlation exists between this fraction and the cellular content of the synovial fluid. Since NDOH pro is said to originate from fragments recently synthesised but not incorporated into tropocollagen (Krane *et al.*, 1967, 1970; Haddad *et al.*, 1970), a higher content of this fraction could be evidence of a higher rate of collagen biosynthesis, which agrees with a protocollagen proline hydroxylase hyperactivity in RA synovial tissue (Uitto *et al.*, 1972). In this respect RA joint connective tissue remodelling would appear to differ from microcrystalline arthritis on the grounds of the presence of an active repair process that we cannot demonstrate in microcrystalline arthritis. Nevertheless the high OH pro content of C1q (MW 40 9000; 45 residues per 1000; Reid *et al.*, 1972) may also reflect on the synovial NDOH pro levels and account for the difference seen between RA and gouty patients. We were not in a position to measure systematically the synovial complement levels in our patients, and it is thus impossible to assert to what extent synovial NDOH pro reflects connective tissue activation or increased complement levels or both. However, the usually low C1q synovial values in seropositive RA and the generally normal C1q synovial levels in gout (Hedberg, 1973; Versey *et al.*,

1973; Bunch *et al.*, 1974; Williams, 1976) suggest that NDOH pro in RA reflects rather connective tissue activation. This conclusion would hold unless it can be shown that the low levels described in synovial fluid are not only due to a high consumption rate but to a turnover that is fast enough to produce more NDOH pro in RA than in gout but also specific enough to stop at this stage, since total OH pro appears to be identical in synovial fluid of both conditions.

The amounts of synovial total OH pro, DOH pro, and NBH do not significantly differ in fluids from patients with RA or gout, but the correlation between these OH pro fractions and the 2 types of synovial fluid cells (Figs. 6 and 7) indicates that their production is related to different mechanisms involved in these different inflammatory processes rather than to different rates of connective tissue remodelling. Indeed synovial fluid PMN cells have a key role in the pathogenesis of gout or pseudogout, where it has been shown that, when leucocytes take up urate or calcium phosphate crystals, the latter interact with the lysosomal membrane, causing its rupture, with the liberation of collagenase and various proteolytic enzymes responsible for articular destruction (McCarty *et al.*, 1962; Weissmann, 1966, 1967, 1972; McCarty, 1971; Wright and Malawista, 1973).

In contrast the positive correlation between lymphocyte count and DOH pro or NBH levels in synovial fluid from RA patients (Fig. 6) stresses the primordial contribution of lymphocytes in RA joint injury and destruction. Indeed PMN do not seem to play a key role in RA joint lesions. PMN are not characteristically seen both at the invasion zones and in the synovium itself, where the infiltrate mainly comprises mononuclear cells. Collagenase not originating from PMN has been detected at the cartilage/pannus junction (Woolley *et al.*, 1977). Moreover, macrophages incubated with lymphokines can product collagenase (Wahl *et al.*, 1975), and Dayer *et al.* (1977) have recently reported that lymphocytes produce a low molecular weight factor (MW 11 500) stimulating collagenase production by rheumatoid synovial cells in culture.

Our observation that synovial β_2m levels are a direct function of synovial lymphocyte count irrespective of the joint pathology (Fig. 2) is not surprising since the lymphoid tissue is well known to be a major source of β_2m (Bernier and Fanger, 1972). Synovial β_2m overproduction (Tables 1 and 2) and the correlation between markers of bone collagen resorption (namely, DOH pro and NBH) and synovial β_2m levels on the one hand (Fig. 5) and synovial lymphocyte count on the other (Fig. 6) are observed only in RA patients whose overall disease activity is already shown to correlate with

synovial β_2m levels (Figs. 3 and 4). These data appear as an in-vivo confirmation of Dayer *et al.*'s in-vitro observation of the stimulating effect of lymphocytes on collagenase production (Dayer *et al.*, 1977). Synovial β_2m can be thus considered as a fair index of synovial lymphoid tissue overactivity in RA and of the severity of RA joint involvement and destructive potential. Since β_2m has no known function per se (either as an enzyme or as a stimulator), and in absence of further characterisation of the low molecular weight (MW 11 500) factor described by Dayer *et al.* (1977), it is at best to consider them as special evidence of lymphoid cells activity in RA. This is further substantiated by the observation that the synovial to plasma β_2m ratio is systematically raised above unity in only RA in contrast to non-autoimmune arthropathies (microcrystalline arthritis or osteoarthritis), where it is systematically lower than unity, an observation that could eventually be useful in differentiating both conditions.

This work was supported by a grant from the National Bank of Belgium to the Rheumatology Laboratory (ULB-VUB). The technical help of Miss L. Hennes is greatly appreciated, and the authors thank Misses G. Demillecamps and J. Huysens for secretarial work.

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