Case report

Osteomyelitis presenting as a swollen elbow in a patient with the acquired immune deficiency syndrome

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SUMMARY A patient suffering from the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), who developed swelling of the left elbow four weeks after Staphylococcus aureus septicaemia is reported. The cause was osteomyelitis of the olecranon process.

Case report

A 24 year old bisexual man was seen in March 1986 with oral and oesophageal candidiasis, seborrhoeic dermatitis, and recurrent ecthyma of the trunk, arms, and legs. He was known to be positive for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) antibody. The ecthyma was controlled with topical antibacterial ointment and cream. In June 1986 he was treated with a week’s course of flucloxacillin for severe relapse of the ecthyma and with high dose cotrimoxazole for 21 days for Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. Atypical mycobacterium was also isolated from the sputum.

In October 1986 he complained of diarrhoea, abdominal pain, and distension. Stool culture and toxin assay for Clostridium difficile were positive. Rectal biopsy, performed at sigmoidoscopy, showed histological evidence of cytomegalovirus and atypical mycobacterium. He was treated with vancomycin and 9-(1,3-dihydroxy-2-propoxymethylguanine) (ganciclovir; Syntax Research) for C difficile and cytomegaloviral infections respectively. He also developed ecthymatous skin lesions. As he was febrile (38.7°C) and unwell, blood cultures were performed which grew S aureus. The septicaemia was treated with intravenous flucloxacillin 1 g six hourly for 15 days with good clinical and microbiological response. Maintenance treatment with ganciclovir continued for a further 2 weeks.

Accepted for publication 6 February 1988.
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Fig. 1 An x ray of the left elbow showing radiolucency of the olecranon process.
adequate, though follow up blood cultures were sterile, and a longer course combined with fucidic acid was now advised.

**Discussion**

Joint involvement in patients suffering from AIDS is uncommon. Co-occurrence of Reiter’s disease and HIV infection has been reported, and HIV had been isolated from the joint fluid. Reactive arthritis may be associated with *C. difficile* colitis, and in our patient stool culture and toxin assay for *C. difficile* were positive three weeks before the onset of the swelling of his elbow. There were no other features to suggest co-occurrence of reactive arthritis and osteomyelitis. The response to antistaphylococcal treatment supports the diagnosis of osteomyelitis with a ‘sympathetic’ effusion, possibly precipitated by trauma.

It has been shown that patients with AIDS can have B cell in addition to T cell immune deficiency, which predisposes them to both opportunistic and bacterial infections. The recurrent *S. aureus* infection with septicemia and osteomyelitis in our patient is another widening manifestation of HIV infection. The leucopenia resulting from treatment with ganciclovir may be an additional factor in predisposing him to the severe infection. The rapidity of the severe bony destructive change shown by x ray examination over eight days is unusual and in keeping with his immunocompromised status. Osteomyelitis if close to the joint may initially present as a joint effusion. This should be considered in the differential diagnosis of a ‘swollen joint’ in patients with AIDS.

**References**


