Ankylosing spondylitis in West Africans—evidence for a non-HLA-B*27 protective effect

Dr Brown and his colleagues are to be congratulated for performing a logistically formidable, but necessary, epidemiological study testing the currently in vogue hypothesis that the B*2703 subtype of HLA-B27 is not related to ankylosing spondylitis (AS). They conclude that the B*2705 subtype, as well as B*2703, possesses a lower risk for developing AS in a group of B27 positive West Africans, the Fula from Gambia, when compared with B27 positive white subjects,ollowing the potential protective role of an environmental factor(s). This conclusion is based on an assumed risk of developing AS in B27 positive persons of 11.1% for men and 1.5% for women. No cases of AS were found among 900 adult Fula men and 215 first degree relatives of 48 B27 positive Fula twin pairs. We would argue that the data warrant the more conservative conclusion implied in their discussion, namely, the risk of AS among B27 positive Fula subjects would need to be at least 2.7% in men and 1% in women to assign significance to the finding of no AS in this population.

The risk of developing AS in HLA-B27 positive subjects clearly varies among different ethnic groups, but it is now generally accepted that among white populations, the prevalence of AS is nearer 1-2% rather than 11.1%. The Norwegian survey of 14 539 subjects quoted by the authors is in fact based on a highly selected sample of only 375 people responding positively to a questionnaire for low back pain or stiffness who actually turned up for examination and had x-rays of sacroiliac joints. You arrive at entirely different conclusions if you apply the AS prevalence figures of 1.4% for B27 subjects from the Brousse population study or 1.3% of Dutch B27 positive subjects. The second study examined 2956 subjects older than 44 years who had sacroiliac x-rays and only 3 of these B27 positive subjects had AS. The conclusion drawn by the authors is in fact based on a highly selected sample of only 375 people responding positively to a questionnaire for low back pain or stiffness who actually turned up for examination and had x-rays of sacroiliac joints. You arrive at entirely different conclusions if you apply the AS prevalence figures of 1.4% for B27 subjects from the Brousse population study or 1.3% of Dutch B27 positive subjects.

We would like to thank Dr Maksymowych for his interest in our study. We agree with his conclusion that our study shows that B27 is not associated with ankylosing spondylitis (AS) in the Gambia. In the Gambia the risk of AS in B27 positive men is greater than 7.7% and women is greater than 1% (which we believe to be the case). We feel that most of his criticisms can be satisfactorily answered.

The risk of developing AS in B27 positive subjects is uncertain. The studies mentioned by Dr Maksymowych are among the lowest estimates that have been reported for white populations. Other studies have reported that as many as 20% of B27 positive subjects may develop the disease. The survey by Gran et al is by far the largest reported: 21 329 subjects were invited to participate in a study of cardiovascular disease, of whom 16 621 attended screening sessions. Of these, 14 539 (87%) completed questionnaires including questions about back problems; 2907 reported a history of pain or stiffness in the back—the remainder were asymptomatic. From this group a random sample of 806 were invited to attend for clinical screening, of which 449 died; 573 of these had sacroiliac radiographic abnormalities. Comparisons at each step demonstrated that selection bias was minimal. We believe therefore that not only is this study significantly larger than either of the studies mentioned by Dr Maksymowych, but it is also reliable. It is also the only study of sufficient size to determine the risk for AS among men and women with B27 separately, which was a requirement for our analysis.

The risk for AS among B27 positive men is significantly greater than B27 positive women. In our study 1008 participants were male and 107 female. Therefore it was important to use sex-specific risk estimates, which Dr Maksymowych has not used in his calculations. Also, the study examined 215 relatives of 48 B27 positive subjects in addition to the 900 adult Fula men used in Dr Maksymowych’s calculations. Analysing the total study population (n=1115), we showed that the risk associated with B27 in the Gambia (p=0.05), assuming that the risk of AS was ≥1.85% in B27 positive subjects, and that men were 2.7 times more likely to develop disease than women (both of these assumptions are conservative). Using a higher male/female ratio would allow us to exclude even lower degrees of association of B27 with AS.

Our study confirmed the previous finding that AS is extremely rare in West Africa—indeed no case has yet been reported from the Gambia. This is despite the prevalence of B27 being as high as 7.8% in some ethnic groups. The fact that 68% of B27 positive subjects in this area carry B*2705 indicates that it is not a different form in B27 subtypes that explains the rarity of the disease. Furthermore, two separate groups have now reported cases of AS in B*2703 subjects.

It remains possible that B*2703 has a lower risk for AS than other disease associated subtypes. However AS is not associated with either B*2703 or B*2705 in the Gambia. Future comparisons of the strength of association of B27 subtypes with AS need to consider genetic differences between the different populations studied.

MATTHEW BROWN
PAUL WORDSWORTH

Welcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics,
Oxford, OX1 7BN

Authors’ reply

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We have conducted a prospective study to determine the frequency of normal SUA values in acute gout and also to compare acute and intercritical values. Over a period of three years we observed 38 consecutive patients during 42 episodes of acute gout and who had the following characteristics: 34 men, four women, age 40–80 years mean 54; inpatients 16, domiciliary visits 9, Accident and Emergency 7, and four GPhome visits all patients were seen by one of us during the acute bout. Urate estimations after the episode were made either before commencement of allopurinol or within three months. Values before the episode (within six months) were available from the files of 20 patients. The upper limit of the normal range of SUA in our laboratory is 0.45 mmol/l in men and 0.38 in women. Figure 1 shows the SUA values for the acute and intercritical phases. The respective median values were 0.44 and 0.56 mmol/l for the whole group and 0.42 and 0.54 mmol/l for crystal verified cases (p = 0.004, Mann-Whitney). During the acute episode a normal SUA value was found in 43% as follows: 16 men and two women; 11 of 22 monoarticular, five of 12 polyarticular, and two of four chronic tophaceous gout; four of 10 excessive alcohol, three of eight diuretic use. In 14 men the value was below the saturation value of urate in serum (0.4 mmol/l). Five patients had one normal intercritical value and higher values at other times. In 30 of 42 (70%) the SUA during the acute episode was lower (that is, by <0.05 mmol/l), in seven it was unchanged, and in five it was higher than the intercritical value. These findings indicate that the SUA value usually falls during an acute episode and sometimes to within the normal range in all clinical varieties of gout and including those in whom excess alcohol and diuretic use is implicated. Snath and Coomes found a normal SUA in 17% of acute episodes of gout of unspecified type and Hadler et al in 39% of polyarticular episodes. Both were retrospective case record studies, which may yield inaccurate prevalence data. In our prospective study a normal SUA occurred more often than is generally appreciated during the acute episode and occasionally at other times. We believe that highlighting the differences in the range of values in acute and intercritical gout in medical textbooks and laboratory reports will increase diagnostic accuracy and improve patient management.

J A LOGAN
E MORRISON
P E MCGILL

Department of Medicine and Rheumatology,
Stobhill NHS Trust, Glasgow, Scotland

Giant cell arteritis of the leg in a patient with hepatitis C virus infection

The potential association of chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection with a variety of dermatological features has been reported. In particular, it has been observed that different types of cutaneous vasculitis may develop during the course of HCV infection, such as mixed cryoglobulinaemia related leukocytoclastic vasculitis and polyarteritis nodosa.

We report a case of giant cell arteritis (GCA) involving the medium sized dermal arteries of the right leg, which appeared after a long history of HCV infection. A 44 year old man with an eight year history of chronic hepatitis was admitted to the Rheumatology/Clinical Immunology Units of the University of Pisa in July 1995 because of erythematous cutaneous nodules on the legs. Chronic hepatitis had been suspected since 1987 because of raised, fluctuating values of hepatic enzymes. In 1993 the diagnosis was confirmed by liver biopsy. In June 1995 the presence of anti-HCV antibodies was demonstrated by an ELISA test. From the time of the histopathological assessment of chronic hepatitis to that of the appearance of the cutaneous nodules the patient was not receiving any medical treatment.

At the time of his stay in hospital the patient underwent a complete physical examination, which showed no abnormalities except for the cutaneous lesions. These were tender, red, and painful nodules situated on the medial side of the right leg, which appeared to be confluent in some areas.

Routine laboratory investigation showed only a moderate increase of the acute phase reactants (erythrocyte sedimentation rate 20 mm 1st h, C reactive protein 2.9 mg/dl, fibrinogen 600 mg/dl).

Antineutrophil cytoplasmatic antibodies (ANCA), antinuclear antibodies, immune complexes, and cryoglobulins were absent. Hepatitis B virus markers (antibodies to hepatitis B, anti-HBc, and anti-HBe, and the HBs and HBe antigens) were not detected in the serum, nor were the antibodies anti-HIV1 and -HIV2.

On the contrary, anti-HCV antibodies were found using a third generation ELISA test (Abbott HCV EIA 3.0, Abbott Diagnostics, Wiesbaden-Dielenkheim, Germany). A qualitative ‘dot’ assay (Abbott HCV MA-TRIX, Abbott Diagnostics, Wiesbaden-Dielenkheim, Germany) showed that these antibodies were directed to the HC-34 core and HC-23 NS4 viral recombinant proteins, while there was no serological reactivity against the c-100-3 NS4, HC-23 NS4 viral recombinant antigens.

The presence of viral RNA (indicative of active HCV replication) in the serum was demonstrated by a polymerase chain reaction...
Figure 1. (A) Medium sized artery with acute and chronic transmural inflammation without signs of extension of the process to the surrounding tissue. The lumen is partially obstructed by a thrombus (magnification × 40, haematoxilin and eosin stain). (B) A typical Langhans-type giant cell can be clearly seen in the upper left corner. Other giant cells are barely discernible along the lower edge. The infiltrate is mainly constituted of granulocytes and mononuclear cells. Eosinophils are present in very limited amounts (no more than 2% of the infiltrating cells) (magnification × 200, haematoxilin and eosin stain).

(PCR Primer 5’ UTR, Roche Diagnostic Systems, Branchburg, NJ, USA). The viral genotype was 2a (Inno-LiPA HCV, Nuclear Laser Medicine, Milan, Italy). Liver biopsy showed a mild, chronic hepatitis that was classified as grade 2, stage 2 according to a recently proposed scoring system.8 A skin biopsy specimen taken from a nodular lesion on the right leg showed inflammation and thrombosis of a medium sized dermal artery with presence of a number of Langhans type multinuclear giant cells (fig 1). An immunohistochemical procedure, using an anti-CD68:RP1 monoclonal antibody (DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) showed a specific staining of the multinuclear giant cells, this confirming that those cells were monocytic/macrophagic elements in origin. On the way an antigen-driven feature could be considered suggestive of a giant cells arteritis. An angiogram of the coeliac axis and the superior mesenteric artery did not show any aneurysmal dilatations in the small and medium sized arteries suggestive of polyarteritis nodosa. A clinical examination was completed that excluded any other infectious, immunomediated or neoplastic disorders, which could potentially be linked to the presence of granulomatous lesions of the medium sized arteries.

Corticosteroid therapy (6-methylprednisolone 16 mg per day) was started and was progressively tapered to a low dose maintenance regimen of 4 mg. The cutaneous lesions completely disappeared within four weeks after beginning this treatment.

In the patient described here GCA involves the medium sized arteries. Corticosteroid therapy is required for the management of GCA. A skin biopsy specimen taken from a nodular lesion on the right leg showed inflammation and thrombosis of a medium sized dermal artery with presence of a number of Langhans type multinuclear giant cells (fig 1). An immunohistochemical procedure, using an anti-CD68:RP1 monoclonal antibody (DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) showed a specific staining of the multinuclear giant cells, this confirming that those cells were monocytic/macrophagic elements in origin. On the way an antigen-driven feature could be considered suggestive of a giant cells arteritis. An angiogram of the coeliac axis and the superior mesenteric artery did not show any aneurysmal dilatations in the small and medium sized arteries suggestive of polyarteritis nodosa. A clinical examination was completed that excluded any other infectious, immunomediated or neoplastic disorders, which could potentially be linked to the presence of granulomatous lesions of the medium sized arteries.

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of corticosteroid treatment on these values were also evaluated. Thirty seven patients (25 women, 12 men), mean (SD) age 70 (8) years, with PMR (criteria of Bird et al.) were prospectively followed up until 1996. Follow up blood samples were collected from 31 of the original 37 patients after a median time of 5.8 years (range 3.0–8.8). Five patients died during the observation period and no blood sample was available from one patient. For analysis of vWF and PAI-1, blood was collected in the morning. vWF and PAI-1 were measured as previously described.4

The plasma concentrations of vWF and PAI-1 increased significantly (p<0.05), while erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR), C reactive protein (CRP), fibrinogen and platelets decreased (p<0.0001) (table 1). From these results we conclude that even in an inflammatory disease such as PMR, the ABO blood group and age influence the magnitude of the vWF concentrations and may explain the contradictions pertaining to vWF values reported in inflammatory diseases. In agreement with our earlier study5 PAI-1 values were increased in PMR patients after several years of prednisolone treatment. Persistently high concentrations of vWF about six years after PMR diagnosis, suggest a continuous vascular dysfunction despite clinical and laboratory determined remission.

Agneta Uddhammar
Solbritt Ranta-Paalaja-Dahlqvist
Department of Rheumatology
Torbjorn K Nilsson
Department of Clinical Chemistry, University Hospital of Northern Sweden, S-901 85 Umeå, Sweden

Correspondence to: Dr A Uddhammar.

Septic arthritis by Mycoplasma hominis: a case report and review of the medical literature

Septic arthritis caused by Mycoplasma hominis is rarely diagnosed.7 We present a case of M hominis septic arthritis in a renal transplant recipient.

A 36 years old white man receiving haemodialysis was admitted to hospital for renal transplantation. Two weeks later, while taking cyclosporin A, azathioprine, prednisolone, vancomycin, aztreonam, amoxicillin and tetracycline, he developed inflammation of the right knee. Serological examinations for cytomegalovirus (Ig G and M), hepatitis B and C, HIV, and Epstein-Barr virus were negative. A Mantoux test was positive. On physical examination he was not febrile and had arthritis of the right knee. Laboratory findings included a whole blood cell count of 9570/mm³, packed cell volume 22%, platelet count 224 000/mm³, creatinine 5 mg/dl, and uric acid 9 mg/dl. A chest radiograph was normal. A right knee roentgenogram showed soft tissue swelling without erosions or bone lesions. Arthrocentesis yielded 60 cc of cloudy yellow synovial fluid containing white blood cells 60 000/mm³ (80% polymorphonuclear neutrophils), glucose 114 mg/dl, and lactate dehydrogenase 341 IU/l; no crystals were seen. A direct Gram stain of the aspirate showed no microorganisms. There was no bacterial, fungal, and mycobacterial growth on cultures. Arthritis recurred and two further arthrocenteses were performed. The last aspiration revealed 120 cc of cloudy yellow synovial fluid with white blood cell count 68 000/mm³ (82% polymorphonuclear neutrophils), glucose 30 mg/dl, and lactate dehydrogenase 728 IU/l. Deep venous thrombosis in the right leg was diagnosed and anticoagulant treatment was started. Twenty four hours later he developed a spontaneous haemarthrosis in the knee. Because there was no improvement of the haemarthrosis and the suspicion of septic arthritis by M tuberculosis was high, open synovectomy with synovectomy was performed. Histological examination showed synovial hyperplasia and infiltration with polymorphonuclear cells. No granulomatous reaction or mycobacteria were seen. Direct Gram and Ziehl-Nielsen stains...
were negative. Normal aerobic and anaerobic cultures were also negative. Urethra, phar-ynx, and rectal cultures were negative. Serological tests for Salmonella, Brucella, Lyme, Q fever, Rubella, cytomegalovirus, and Epstein-Barr virus were negative. C reactive protein, rheumatoid factor, antinuclear anti-body, complement, and immunoglobulin val-ues were normal. After 48 hours incubation, the microbiology laboratory reported a growth in blood culture bottles (Bactec Plus, BACTEC 9240, BBL) from the second and third synovial fluid culture. The isolate grew in blood culture bottles (Bactec Plus, BACTEC 9240, BBL) from the second and third synovial fluid culture. The isolate grew on anaerobic agar me-

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The patient had a gradual response to doxycycline 100 mg orally twice daily was given. The patient had a gradual response and there was no evidence of recurrent infec-
tion after 12 months of follow up.

Mycoplasma sp have been associated with reactive arthritis that is sexually acquired and with septic arthritis. They do not grow satisfactorily on bacteriological media rou-
tinely used for joint aspirates, and anaerobic or special mycoplasmal media must be used. On the other hand, many mycoplasmas and bacterial L-forms are ubiquitous and not generally recognised as important pathogens. They may be present in commercial bovine serum and in tap water and are frequent con-taminants of tissue culture. Our patient pre-
sented with acute monarticular arthritis with clinical features that did not differentiate it from other bacterial joint infections. Synovial fluid leucocyte counts were high with a low glucose concentration. Only 17 cases of M hominis septic arthritis have been reported in the medical literature. There are no unifying predisposing factors of these cases, although a review of the medical literature shows that eight of these patients were immunocompromised (47%) (table 1), and only one case after renal transplantation. With only one exception, all the reported cases presented with monarticular or oligar-
ticular arthritis involving large joints. Our case occurred in a renal transplant recipient and although, antibody deficiency is particu-
larly prone to chronic mycoplasmal infections, serum immunoglobulin concentra-
tions were normal. We only performed one measurement and we do not exclude tran-
sient hypogammaglobulinemia. Optimal treatment for M hominis joints infections is unknown. Doxycycline apparently only sup-
presses and does not eradicate the infection. However, our patient had a good clinical response without recurrent arthritis. If bacte-
rial antigens in the joint are critical in the persistence of arthritis, it is possible that the removal of the synovium contributed to the resolution of the arthritis.

We illustrate the importance of considering infection with unusual organisms in immuno-

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NS = not stated.