Genetic testing for polyposis: practical and ethical aspects

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The three autosomal dominant inherited polyposis syndromes, familial adenomatous polyposis, juvenile polyposis, and Peutz-Jeghers polyposis predispose to colorectal cancer as does hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer syndrome. Uncovering the genetic background of these four cancer traits provides the possibility for genetic testing of the family members of an affected patient. Before testing identification of the underlying family specific pathogenic mutation is mandatory. This is possible in about 60% to 95% of families. Endoscopic surveillance can be safely discontinued in mutation negative family members and surveillance or prophylactic surgery can be targeted to mutation positive members alone. Testing requires genetic counselling and written informed consent to prevent misunderstanding and to minimise untoward effects such as anxiety. Permanent surveillance and adequate prophylactic treatment for all mutation positive subjects and families is best ensured in national or regional polyposis registries with the capacity to take care of long term follow up from generation to generation.

The discovery of the genetic causation of the polyposis syndromes and HNPCC offers the possibility for predictive genetic testing of the descendants of the affected family members who have the theoretical risk of 50% of carrying the pathogenic mutation. The test can relieve the unaffected half of the family members from the cancer threat, endoscopic surveillance, and anxiety involved. On the other hand, the mutation positive family members can be identified with certainty, and appropriate clinical surveillance and prophylactic treatment can be offered for them to ensure optimal cancer prevention. The strategies of prevention and their efficacy vary in the four conditions, and many clinical and genetic problems still await for adequate solution. This review gives some guidelines for the management of polyposis and HNPCC families with the advent of predictive genetic testing.

CLINICAL FEATURES AND THE CANCER RISK IN POLYPOSIS SYNDROMES AND HNPCC

Familial adenomatous polyposis MIM (Mendelian inheritance in man) no 175100, FAP and Gardner syndrome; 276300, Turcot syndrome FAP is characterised by multiple adenomatous polyps that tend to progress to adenocarcinoma. In classic FAP the number of polyps is 100 at least but an attenuated form has been distinguished with a fewer number of adenomas. Turcot syndrome is a variant associated with a brain tumour, medulloblastoma. The estimated incidence of FAP varies around 1 per 10 000 newborns or from 1 to 2 per 1 000 000 per annum. Between 30% to 50% of new patients are solitary cases probably representing new mutations of the APC gene. Mutations of this gene located in the long arm of chromosome 5 (5q 21–22) cause the disease.

The clinical diagnosis of FAP requires demonstration of 100 colorectal adenomas. Histological examination of several adenomas is necessary. In the context of a definite family history the detection of fewer adenomas is sufficient as well as in the case of an attenuated disease form. Final diagnosis is achieved by discovery of a mutated APC gene but the detection rate has been about 60% to 95% of all FAP families. Well known extracolonic manifestations of the disease such as epidermoid cysts, osteomas of the jaws, desmoid...
The most important clinical feature in FAP is the almost inevitable progression of one or more colorectal adenomas to cancer. The adenomas become detectable at puberty, symptoms (bleeding, diarrhoea) appear gradually in early adulthood, and the mean age of cancer occurrence is about 40 years. If FAP is diagnosed on the basis of symptoms cancer is present at about the age of 12 to 15 years at intervals of a few years.

Endoscopic screening can be replaced by mutation testing in families with a known pathogenic APC mutation. Mutation positive members alone need subsequent endoscopic surveillance.

The prophylactic treatment of FAP is colectomy. There is still discussion whether colectomy with ileorectal anastomosis is acceptable because it leaves a definite risk of rectal stump carcinoma reaching 15% to 25% within 20 to 25 years. The treatment aims besides decreasing the cancer risk involved preventing the development of symptoms such as bleeding, anaemia, and diarrhoea.

Hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer syndrome (HNPCC)

HNPCC or Lynch syndrome is an autosomal dominant cancer predisposition syndrome without clear clinical signs preceding cancer except for solitary colorectal adenomas. The predominant tumours are colorectal and endometrial cancer. Several other cancer types are, however, also occurring in many non-gastrointestinal cancers such as breast, endometrial, ovarian, or lung cancer with risk ratios from 15 to 30 is difficult to cover with any simple preventive programme. HNPCC is more common than the polyposis syndromes and it explains up to 3% of all cases of colorectal cancer. Colon cancer develops at young age (mean 45 years), located predominantly in the proximal colon, and synchronous or metachronous second tumours occur in more than a third of patients. The DNA content of the tumours is diploid and microsatellite instability is a characteristic feature.

In histological examination tumours exhibit high mucin content, Cohrs’s disease-like inflammatory reaction around, and the differentiation grade is commonly poor. The clinical or pathological features, however, are not specific and do not alone allow a diagnosis of HNPCC to be done. The family history has a central role in the identification. According to the Amsterdam criteria the following conditions should be fulfilled: (1) at least three patients with colorectal cancer of whom one is a first degree relative of the other two, (2) affected family members in two generations, at least, (3) at least one cancer patient should be diagnosed before the age of 50 years. The latest revision of these criteria accepts cancers of the endometrium, small intestine, or uroepithelium besides the colorectum.

The cumulative cancer risk in HNPCC approaches about 80% and 60% for colorectal and endometrial cancers.
respectively. The corresponding lifetime risks for other cancer types remain between 13% and 2%. Cancer prevention in HNPCC consists of repeated colonoscopy with polypectomies at two to three year intervals and of endometrial suction biopsies possibly combined with endovaginal ultrasonography. Prophylactic surgery (colectomy, hysterectomy) remains an alternative in selected cases. Prevention and early detection of other tumour types is problematic because of their relative rarity and when there are no suitable screening methods.

**PREDICTIVE GENETIC TESTING**

The polyposis syndromes can be identified on the basis of their typical clinical features—that is, by demonstration of the intestinal polyps in endoscopy and their histological typing after polypectomies. This is the standard method in symptomatic patients who usually are the probands of a new family or solitary cases. Endoscopic screening of all first degree family members is consequently indicated to achieve early diagnosis before the development of cancer. In this evaluation the extracolonic manifestations of the disease, such as melanin pigmentation in P-JP or retinal pigmentation, epidermoid cysts or osteomas of the jaw in FAP, may offer additional clues.

Clinical screening, however, is unreliable depending on the age of the subject, severity of the polyposis associated with the particular mutation of the family, and the syndrome in question. There is variation in the phenotypic expression even between members of the same family affected with FAP. Some FAP families also present with late onset of adenomas and mild phenotype, attenuated FAP, often associated with APC gene mutations localised either in the 5' or 3' part of the gene or in exon 9. Therefore, negative endoscopic findings at a certain age cannot exclude the possibility of later disease expression. The issue is even more difficult in HNPCC where there are no clear clinical indicators of the disease at all. Thus, knowledge of the pathogenic mutation can greatly help the organisation of family surveillance in polyposis syndromes. In HNPCC this knowledge is almost irreplaceable. Unfortunately, despite typical criteria of a specific polyposis syndrome or HNPCC the underlying mutation remains undetected in some 20% to 40% of families, as is shown in the data of the Finnish Polyposis and HNPCC registry (Table 2).

The first step towards the genetic testing is a reliable clinical and histopathological diagnosis. This makes it possible to direct the search for the pathogenic mutation into the appropriate gene(s). In HNPCC demonstration of microsatellite instability supports the existence of a mismatch repair gene mutation, and immunohistochemical demonstration of the expression of the mismatch repair proteins may indicate in which gene the mutation lies directing further identification. Predictive genetic testing of the at risk family members is possible first after reliable identification of the specific mutation in a family. There are already examples of commercial gene tests with inappropriate use without knowledge of the underlying mutation, which have given misleading results.

After identification of the pathogenic mutation the predictive testing of the family members has high accuracy; practically 100%. Mutation positive subjects can accordingly be advised to appropriate surveillance or prophylactic treatment, while the follow up of the mutation negative subjects can be discontinued. Omission of endoscopic surveillance in half of the descendants correspondingly cuts the costs of family screening. Even though the cost of one mutation test of a known mutation ($550) is higher than a single sigmoidoscopy ($120) or colonoscopy ($320), the total costs are reduced when repeated endoscopies of mutation negative subjects become unnecessary. On the other hand, the cost of the search for a new germline mutation is considerably higher, about £2500.

After all, the economic aspects of the genetic compared with endoscopic screening play a secondary part considering the far greater accuracy of genetic screening. It should be noted that the prices presented above reflect the situation in year 2001 at the Helsinki University Hospital. The prices vary with time and may be quite different elsewhere.

Mutation data have also been suggested to serve as a guide in the planning of prophylactic surgery or clinical surveillance. The idea comes from the observations about genotype-phenotype correlation. In a Dutch series of FAP patients treated with colectomy and ileorectal anastomosis the patients with mutations 3' to codon 1250 had a higher rate of rectal cancer than those with mutations 5' to this codon. It was thought that the choice of the method of surgery, colectomy with ileorectal anastomosis versus proctocolectomy with ileal pouch-anal anastomosis, should be determined on the basis of the APC gene mutation type. The genotype phenotype correlations, however, seem more complicated. For example, mild phenotype occurs in patients with mutations in the 5' part of the gene or in exon 9. Therefore, negative endoscopic findings at a certain age cannot exclude the possibility of later disease expression. The issue is even more difficult in HNPCC where there are no clear clinical indicators of the disease at all. Thus, knowledge of the pathogenic mutation can greatly help the organisation of family surveillance in polyposis syndromes. In HNPCC this knowledge is almost irreplaceable. Unfortunately, despite typical criteria of a specific polyposis syndrome or HNPCC the underlying mutation remains undetected in some 20% to 40% of families, as is shown in the data of the Finnish Polyposis and HNPCC Registry (Table 2).

**ETHICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS OF GENETIC TESTING**

Recognition of a hereditary cancer syndrome in a family provokes anxiety in family members. The possibility of genetic testing for the diagnosis of mutation status of the relatives may cause ambivalent feelings. A mutation negative result naturally provokes anxiety in family members. The possibility of genetic testing should not cause discrimination and the test result should be kept entirely confidential. The practices in different countries considering insurance companies and employers may be different than in the European Union.

The appropriate age for testing depends on the average expression of the disease, which occurs already during teenagers in FAP and possibly earlier in P-JP and JP. In HNPCC the cancer incidence begins to rise significantly first after the age of 20 to 25 years, when the surveillance programme should start. At that age there is usually no problem in obtaining consent after genetic counselling. However, in FAP and other polyposis syndromes the information should be given to both

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<th>Table 2 Detection rate of pathogenic mutations in the Finnish Polyposis and HNPCC registry (December, 2001)</th>
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children and their parents. In this context there may occur instances where an affected person does not permit information about the inherited condition to be distributed to other relatives or even to the child thus preventing the initiation of the medically indicated cancer screening programme. Such a situation causes a serious ethical problem where repeated discussions may eventually give a solution.

The finding of a mutation positive result in polyposis or HNPPC causes the worry about organisation of permanent surveillance and proper prophylactic treatment throughout the rest of the life including screening and testing of all family members involved. An individual clinician faces many practical problems if the family is large and scattered around the country and even abroad. In such instance polyposis registries give the best guarantee of continued care of surveillance, genetic testing, genetic counselling and even research cooperation. In maintenance of updated patient follow up data the registries need at present informed consent of the family members as has been provided by a European Union directive, the Personal Data Act. In many registries including the Finnish Polyposis and HNPPC Registry achieving a permanent position and independent financial status still awaits final solution, a problem that will hopefully be managed in near future considering the established excellent results in cancer prevention. 10, 11

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Knowledge about the genetic causation of the polyposis syndromes or HNPPC has thus far given not much hope for cure of the underlying genetic abnormality by gene therapy, for example, given the very short half time of the cells in the main target organ, intestinal epithelium. The only really curative treatment is induction of abortion after intrauterine molecular genetic diagnosis, a procedure that has not been taken in general use, thus far, despite its applicability. Increasing knowledge about the exact function of the gene involved may help in the development of targeted medical treatments, which normalise the disturbed function. Such development could at best obviate the need for prophylactic surgery or, at least, help in prevention of the poorly treatable extracolonic complications as desmoid tumours or duodenal adenomas and cancer in FAP.

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Gut 2003 52: ii19-ii22
doi: 10.1136/gut.52.suppl_2.ii19

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