Exocrine pancreatic function in juvenile-onset diabetes mellitus

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SUMMARY Exocrine pancreatic function was studied in 20 juvenile-onset diabetics, seven maturity-onset diabetics, and five patients with diabetes secondary to chronic pancreatitis. The results were compared with 13 non-diabetic controls. The outputs of bicarbonate, trypsin, and amylase were reduced in the diabetic patients in response to intravenous secretin and CCK-PZ. In the juvenile-onset group, exocrine pancreatic secretory capacity was reduced in 80% of the patients, and the severity of the reduction was related to the duration of the diabetes. The reduction in pancreatic secretory capacity must be taken into consideration when interpreting pancreatic exocrine function in patients with diabetes.

Abnormal exocrine pancreatic function has been reported in patients with juvenile-onset and maturity-onset diabetes mellitus (Jones et al., 1925; Diamond and Siegel, 1940; Pollard et al., 1943; Chey et al., 1963; Vacca et al., 1964; Bock et al., 1967; Drewes, 1969; Yamagata et al., 1969; Baron and Nabarro, 1973; Domschke et al., 1975). Neither the frequency nor the cause of the pancreatic dysfunction in the insulin-dependent diabetics has been fully defined.

In the present study the exocrine pancreatic secretory capacity of a group of juvenile-onset diabetics was investigated by measuring the pancreatic response to stimulation with an intravenous infusion of secretin and cholecystokinin-pancreozymin (CCK-PZ). The aims of the investigation were to establish the frequency of exocrine pancreatic dysfunction and to assess the relationship between the degree of impairment and the duration of the disease as well as the quality of diabetic control.

Methods

Twenty patients with insulin-dependent diabetes (Table 1) and seven patients with maturity-onset diabetes who did not require insulin were studied. Thirteen non-diabetic patients matched for age and sex, who were undergoing investigation for abdominal pain and who had no subsequent clinical, radiological, or functional evidence of pancreatic disease, were studied as controls. A group of five patients with diabetes secondary to confirmed chronic pancreatitis has also been included for comparison. Eight of the insulin-dependent diabetics had diabetes for less than five years, five had diabetes between five and 10 years, and seven had diabetes for more than 10 years. All patients gave informed consent to the study.

The quality of their diabetic control in the preceding 12 months was assessed using criteria similar to those used by Pirart et al. (1975) in their prospective study of diabetic control. Control is expressed as 'good', 'variable', or 'poor', using the criteria as shown (Table 2). Patients were studied within 12 hours of insulin administration and after an overnight fast. Care was taken to ensure that there was no evidence of ketoacidosis at the time of study and that the withdrawal of insulin had not produced hyperglycaemia before pancreatic stimulation. Plasma glucose was monitored, and the level at the time of pancreatic stimulation is shown (Table 1). With the exception of three patients (nos. 4, 9, and 15), the plasma glucose concentration was less than 16·6 mmol/l (300 mg/100 ml), and two of these patients (nos. 4 and 9) were restudied after receiving their normal pre-breakfast dose of insulin.

Intubation was performed with a multiple-lumen tube; the distal aspiration site was positioned under fluoroscopic control in the second part of the duodenum with the proximal aspiration site in the gastric antrum. Aspirates were collected from both sites by continuous mechanical suction in 15 minute
batches. After a 15-minute basal collection, an intravenous infusion of secretin (1 Clinical Unit/kg-h) and CCK-PZ (1 Ivy Unit/kg-h) in 0.15 mmol/l sodium chloride was administered for 45 minutes. In four patients (nos. 10, 14, 19, and 20) double the dose of hormones (2 CU/kg-h secretin plus 2 IU/kg-h CCK-PZ) were used to ensure that a maximal secretory response had been achieved. The hormones were obtained from the G.I.H. Laboratory, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden. Bicarbonate concentration was measured by adding 1 ml duodenal aspirate to 2 ml 0.1 mol/l hydrochloric acid, and titrating the excess acid after boiling to pH 7.0; trypsin was measured photometrically using N-alpha-Benzoyl-d-l-arginine-p-nitroamidile hydrochloride as substrate, and amylase by the method of Bernfeld and Studer-Pecha (1947). Results are expressed as output per hour, by doubling the sum of the outputs during the steady state response of the final two 15-minute periods of hormonal stimulation. Faecal fat was measured by the modified Van der Kamer method for wet faeces (Anderson et al., 1952). The statistical significance of the differences in pancreatic outputs was assessed using the Mann-Whitney U test.

**Results**

The outputs of bicarbonate, trypsin, and amylase of all the groups of diabetic patients were significantly reduced compared with the non-diabetic patients (Figs. 1-3). The bicarbonate outputs of the insulin-dependent patients with diabetes of more than 10 years' duration were significantly reduced when compared with those of less than five years' duration (p < 0.01) (Fig. 1). The same tendency to reduction in output of trypsin and amylase was observed with increasing duration of the diabetes, but the differences between the insulin-dependent groups were not significant (Figs. 2 and 3). Overall, 80% of the insulin-dependent patients had abnormal outputs of trypsin, and 65% of amylase. However, the reduction in outputs compared with the mean values of the non-diabetic controls was greater for amylase (66%) than for trypsin (54%). The degree of exocrine pancreatic insufficiency demonstrated in the group of patients with chronic pancreatitis and secondary diabetes was much more severe than any of the other groups (Figs. 1 and 2).

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**Table 1 Clinical details of 20 insulin dependent patients**

<table>
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<th>Patient no.</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<th>Total insulin dose (U)</th>
<th>Duration of diabetes (yr)</th>
<th>Diabetic control</th>
<th>Plasma glucose at time of pancreatic stimulation (mmol/l)</th>
<th>Volume duodenal aspirate (ml-30 min)</th>
<th>Pancreatic stimulation secretin-CCK/PZ</th>
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**Table 2 Quality of diabetic control**

| Criteria       | Good                                                                 | Variable                                                                 | Poor                                                                 |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|                                                                    |
|                | No episodes of coma (ketoacidosis) and plasma glucose <11-1 mmol/l (300 mg/100 ml), two hours post-prandial | One episode of hyperglycaemic coma and fluctuating plasma glucose between 11-1 and 16-6 mmol/l (300 mg/100 ml), two hours post-prandial | More than one episode of hyperglycaemic coma, and fluctuating plasma glucose, >16-6 mmol/l, two hours post-prandial |
| Assessment     | 12 months before pancreatic stimulation. A minimum number of six plasma glucose estimations (two hours post-prandial) were used to evaluate quality of control in each patient |                                                                       |                                                                    |
Fig. 1 Mean bicarbonate outputs (± 1 SD) after pancreatic stimulation. Lower limit of normal (broken line) = 20 mmol/h.

Fig. 2 Mean trypsin outputs (± 1 SD) after pancreatic stimulation. Lower limit of normal (broken line) = 160 μg/h.
The outputs of bicarbonate of the insulin-dependent patients with diabetes of less than 10 years' duration showed a significant inverse relationship ($r = -0.64; p < 0.0125$) with the total daily insulin dosage required for control of the diabetes (Fig. 4). No significant correlation was found between the more severely reduced bicarbonate response to the hormones in patients with diabetes greater than 10 years' duration, and their requirement of insulin. No significant correlation was found between insulin dosage and outputs of trypsin and amylase in diabetics of any duration, nor was there any significant correlation between exocrine pancreatic secretory capacity and the preceding quality of diabetic control as judged arbitrarily by the criteria shown.

The exocrine pancreatic response to double the dose of secretin and CCK-PZ did not differ significantly from the response to the standard dose of the hormones, indicating that the response elicited by the lower dose was maximal. Two of the diabetic patients (nos. 4 and 9) who had hyperglycaemia
without ketoacidosis after insulin withdrawal, were
restudied, having received their pre-breakfast
insulin 60 minutes before pancreatic stimulation.
Plasma glucose fell from 22·6 to 15·7 mmol/l
(patient no. 4) and from 23·4 to 14·6 mmol/l (patient
no. 9), with a concurrent decline in serum osmo-
lality. The exocrine pancreatic response of both
patients was unchanged.

Discussion

In the present study exocrine pancreatic secretory
capacity was found to be reduced, compared with
normal subjects, in 80% of insulin-dependent
diabetics, and the degree of dysfunction increased
with the duration of the disease. In previous reports
the pancreatic dysfunction most frequently demon-
strated has been an abnormally low output of
amylose in up to 77% of patients (Pollard et al.,
1943; Chey et al., 1963; Vacca et al., 1964; Bock
et al., 1967; Drewes, 1969; Domschke et al., 1975).
Low bicarbonate (Diamond and Siegel, 1940;
Pollard et al., 1943; Chey et al., 1963; Vacca et al.,
1964; Bock et al., 1967; Domschke et al., 1975),
trypsin (Pollard et al., 1943; Domschke et al., 1975)
and recently chymotrypsin (Domschke et al., 1975)
outlets in response to pancreatic stimulants have
also been described. In our study the output of
amylose during stimulation with secretin and
CCK-PZ was abnormal in 65% of patients, but the
very high incidence and severity of the reduction in
bicarbonate secretion was the most striking abnor-
mality of exocrine pancreatic function in the insulin-
dependent diabetic patients. All except one of the
patients with diabetes of more than five years'
duration had an abnormal bicarbonate-secretory
response to the exogenous hormones. The incidence
of low bicarbonate-secretory capacity is therefore
much more common and severe than previously
reported. The reduction of both bicarbonate and
enzyme-secretory capacity in our patients with
insulin-dependent diabetes was equivalent to the
exocrine pancreatic dysfunction in non-diabetic
patients with chronic pancreatitis (Wormsley, 1969).
However, the reduction of exocrine secretory
capacity in our diabetic patients was not so pro-
found as in our patients in whom chronic pancrea-
titis was sufficiently severe also to cause endocrine
pancreatic insufficiency. The difference in exocrine
pancreatic function between patients suffering from
chronic pancreatitis with diabetes, and those
diabetic patients who show reduced exocrine
pancreatic function is emphasised by the fact that
our five patients with chronic pancreatitis all had
severe steatorrhoea, indicating destruction of more
than 90% of exocrine secretory capacity (Sarles et
al., 1963; Di Magno et al., 1973). Our diabetic
patients with exocrine pancreatic dysfunction all
had a normal faecal fat content.

Our finding of a relationship between the duration
of the diabetes and the severity of the exocrine
pancreatic dysfunction conflicts with previous
reports. For example, Chey et al. (1963) reported
no apparent relationship between exocrine pancrea-
tic dysfunction and the duration of the severity of
the diabetes. Vacca et al. (1964) have suggested
that the frequency of exocrine pancreatic abnormality
is related not to the duration of the disease, but to
the age of the diabetic patients, although studies of
exocrine pancreatic function in non-diabetic patients
have shown no deterioration in function with age
(Rosenberg et al., 1966; Delachalume-Salem and
Sarles, 1970). Other studies have also failed to show
any relationship between exocrine pancreatic dys-
function and the duration of the diabetes (Yamagata
et al., 1969; Domschke et al., 1975), except that
Drewes (1969) found less severe exocrine pancreatic
dysfunction in newly diagnosed juvenile-onset
diabetics than in diabetics with disease for many
years.

Our objective assessment of the quality of diabetic
control, for comparison with exocrine pancreatic
secretion has been only qualitative and approximate
because indices of control such as plasma glucose,
or the degree of glycosuria monitored during hospital
admission or at outpatient clinic attendance are not
necessarily representative of the overall quality of
care, or of the metabolic state which exists at the time of study. Our results suggest that
the juvenile-onset diabetic patients with less than
10 years' history and 'good' control, have a better
exocrine pancreatic secretory response to stimulation
than less well-controlled patients with diabetes of
similar duration.

The cause of the exocrine pancreatic dysfunction
in diabetes mellitus is not known. The pancreas in
juvenile-onset diabetes is sometimes atrophic and
infiltrated with fat (Warren and Le Compte, 1966),
and inflammatory infiltrates have been observed in
and around the islets in the early stages of juvenile-
onset diabetes (Gepts, 1965). It has been suggested
that repeated episodes of infarction with subse-
quent fibrosis may produce progressive destruction
of the islets and acinar tissue, though evidence for
this is limited (Blumenthal et al., 1963). It seems
possible, therefore, that the exocrine dysfunction is
related at least in part to progressive structural
damage of the diabetic pancreas.

It has been proposed that exocrine pancreatic
dysfunction in diabetic rats is caused by the lack of
the trophic effect of insulin on acinar cells, particu-
larly those surrounding the islets (Hansson, 1959).
Studies in rats suggest that insulin is of particular importance for the synthesis and secretion of pancreatic amylase (Palla et al., 1968), but the effects of insulin deficiency on acinar cell function are complex and it is not clear if acinar cell damage is a direct result of insulin deficiency (Bruchhausen, 1975). Moreover, no effect of diabetes on the bicarbonate-secretory capacity of the pancreas has been reported in these animals.

The persistently raised circulating serum concentrations of glucagon in diabetes (Unger et al., 1970) may also have some functional effects on exocrine pancreatic secretion, because the injection of glucagon during pancreatic stimulation in non-diabetic subjects partially inhibited the secretion of enzymes, although bicarbonate secretion was unaffected (Zajtchuk et al., 1967; Dyck et al., 1970). The influence of persistently raised serum concentrations of glucagon on exocrine pancreatic function is not known, but is undergoing further study in our patients.

As the patients had not received insulin from the day before each test, we considered the possibility that the relative lack of metabolic control of our diabetic patients during the test procedure might have contributed to the abnormal exocrine secretory responses that were found, because variations in the osmolality of perfusate had been shown to affect exocrine pancreatic secretion at least in the isolated cat pancreas (Case et al., 1968). In patients with reasonable diabetic control at the time of study, the variation in serum osmolality is unlikely to influence exocrine pancreatic secretion, as the contribution of glucose to serum osmolality is relatively small at plasma glucose concentrations below 16-6 mmol/l. In any case, the administration of insulin shortly before pancreatic stimulation had been shown to make no appreciable difference to the exocrine response (Domschke et al., 1975), and we confirmed this finding in two patients.

Although the cause has not yet been defined, we conclude that exocrine pancreatic dysfunction in insulin-dependent diabetics is a real and significant feature of the disease, and must be taken into account when attempting assessment of exocrine pancreatic function in patients with diabetes.

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References


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