Viral hepatitis

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Foreword by Professor Arie J Zuckerman

The last two decades have witnessed an explosion in knowledge of viral hepatitis, a major public health problem throughout the world affecting several hundreds of millions of people. Viral hepatitis is a cause of considerable morbidity and mortality in the human population from acute infection and the chronic sequelae which include, with at least two types of infection, chronic active hepatitis, cirrhosis, and primary liver cancer. Hepatocellular carcinoma is one of the 10 most common cancers worldwide.

The existing alphabet of viral hepatitis includes a range of totally unrelated and often highly unusual pathogenic human viruses:

HEPATITIS A VIRUS

A small unenveloped symmetrical RNA virus which shares many of the characteristics of the picornavirus family. This virus is classified as Enterovirus type 72, and is the cause of infectious or epidemic hepatitis transmitted by the faecal-oral route.

HEPATITIS B VIRUS

A member of the hepadnavirus group, double stranded DNA viruses which replicate by reverse transcription. Hepatitis B virus is endemic in the human population and hyperendemic in many parts of the world. Natural hepadnavirus infections also occur in woodchucks, beechy ground squirrels, and ducks.

HEPATITIS C VIRUS

An enveloped single stranded RNA virus which appears to be distantly related (possibly in its evolution) to flaviviruses, although hepatitis C is not transmitted by arthropod vectors. Infection with this newly identified virus appears to be common in many countries, and it is associated with chronic liver disease and apparently also with primary liver cancer in some countries.

HEPATITIS D VIRUS

An unusual single stranded circular RNA virus with a number of similarities to certain plant viral satellites and viroids. This virus requires hepadnavirus helper functions for propagation in hepatocytes, and is an important cause of acute and severe chronic liver damage in many regions of the world.

HEPATITIS E VIRUS

The cause of enterically-transmitted non-A, non-B hepatitis, is another non-enveloped single stranded RNA virus, which shares many biophysical and biochemical features with calici-

viruses. Hepatitis E virus is an important cause of large epidemics of acute hepatitis in the subcontinent of India, central and south-east Asia, the Middle East, parts of Africa and elsewhere; and this virus is responsible for high mortality during pregnancy. Much progress is currently being made with this important infection.

Roger Williams and the Institute of Liver Studies at King's College contributed much original and fundamental knowledge to each of these different viruses.

On a more personal note, productive and friendly collaboration and close association between our two laboratories commenced over 20 years ago. Some of the published work which resulted from this very pleasant association included studies on epidemiology (Exposure and immunity to hepatitis virus in a Liver Unit, *Lancet* 1974¹; Australia antigen among heroin addicts attending a London addiction clinic, *J Hyg Camb* 1971²; Hepatitis B virus infection in dental surgical practice, *BMJ* 1976³; immunology of hepatitis B (Immune responses to the surface antigen and liver specific lipoprotein in acute hepatitis B, *Gut* 1977⁴; Cellular and humoral immunity to hepatitis B antigen in chronic active hepatitis, *BMJ* 1975⁵; fulminant hepatitis (Fulminant hepatic failure in leukaemia and choriocarcinoma related to withdrawal of cytotoxic therapy, *Lancet* 1975⁶; Enhanced HBsAg production in pathogenesis of fulminant viral hepatitis B, *BMJ* 1976⁷; Fulminant hepatitis. An ultrastructural study, *J Hepatol* 1986⁸; primary liver cancer (Detection of hepatitis B antigen by radioimmunoassay in chronic liver disease and hepatocellular carcinoma in Great Britain, *Lancet* 1973⁹; non-A, non-B hepatitis (non-A, non-B hepatitis associated with chronic liver disease in a haemodialysis unit, *Lancet* 1979¹⁰; Transmission by factor IX concentrate, *Lancet* 1979¹¹; Cellular changes associated with non-A, non-B hepatitis, *J Med Virol* 1980¹² and 1987¹³; Virus-like particles in liver in sporadic non-A, non-B hepatitis, *J Med Virol* 1989¹⁴ and many others.

Many intriguing questions remain: is there a hepatitis F virus as the cause of fulminant hepatitis, and a hepatitis G virus; what are the implications of the hepatitis B surface and core variants, and is non-B, non-C hepatitis awaiting discovery?

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Viral hepatitis continues to be a major global health problem. It is therefore, not surprising that viral hepatitis has been one of the research domains in the Institute of Liver Studies in King's. With the advancement of many scientific disciplines including molecular biology and immunology, we have witnessed an explosion in knowledge of these viruses in the last two decades. We now know that there are at least five major types of primary hepatotropic hepatitis viruses (Table I). Acute hepatitis caused by other viruses in whom involvement of other organs are more common and prominent than liver involvement notably cytomegalovirus and herpes simplex virus is not described here.

Hepatitis A virus (HAV)

Hepatitis A virus was first discovered in faeces of infected patients by immune electron microscopy in as early as 1973,¹ it is currently still ranked by the World Health Organisation as a prevalent infection worldwide; especially in countries where overcrowding and poor standards of hygiene and sanitation are prevalent as shown by the recent major outbreak involving 1.2 million persons in Mainland China in 1988.

VIROLOGY

The HAV genome is a linear, single stranded ribonucleic acid of messenger-sense (positive) polarity. The single open reading frame gives rise to a precursor polypeptide which is subsequently cleaved into four different polypeptides VP1-4 (Fig 1). Existing information suggests that the molecular sizes of these peptides are VP1 33kd, VP2 27kd, VP3 29kd, VP4 (truncated) 17 amino acids. Around 60 copies of each of these four structural proteins, VP1 to VP4 form the capsid of the typical mature HAV.²⁻⁵

Although HAV is classified as a picornavirus,² increasing evidence supports the view that HAV is different from the other well studied four genera of this virus family as evidenced by the size of its structural proteins, the outstanding overall stability of the virus, and the resolution of only one immunodominant neutralisation site.^{2,6,7}

PATHOGENESIS OF LIVER DAMAGE

The pathogenetic mechanism of liver cell damage in acute HAV infection is still unclear. Existing evidence suggests that a close interplay between the virally controlled and host immunological factors is essential to cause a cytolytic infection with elimination of the virus.² The postulation that hepatocyte destruction is mediated by anti-HAV antibody with or without the help of complements is untenable^{2,8,9} and the interferon system is also unlikely to play a major role in the elimination of the virus in vivo.¹⁰ Two recent studies provide evidence that cytotoxic T cells capable of lysing HAV-infected target cells develop in the course of HAV infection.^{11,12} This effect is also shown to be virus-specific and is functionally restricted by the major histocompatibility complex.

CLINICAL COURSE

Hepatitis A virus infection usually causes a minor or unnoticed illness in children and young adults. On a worldwide scale, less than 5% of the cases are recognised clinically.^{13,14} In a recent outbreak in Shanghai, China, approximately one third of those subjects serologically positive for acute HAV infection were asymptomatic, and less than 20% had overt clinical hepatitis.¹⁵ In a recent study in our institute, an increasing mortality from HAV with increasing age was observed.¹⁶

The persistence of high titre IgM anti-HAV antibodies for up to 400 days and the demonstration of intestinal reinfection with prolonged viral excretion may help to explain the mechanism of viral perpetuation in highly endemic areas.¹⁷ Whether relapse of HAV infection occurs remains controversial but the question of possible chronicity from HAV has been addressed carefully and can be excluded with confidence.

In those rare instances in which severe fulminant HAV infection develop, liver transplantation is the treatment of choice. Interestingly, HAV was detected in the graft livers in two of our patients with fulminant hepatitis A after liver transplantation and one had histological evidence of recurrent acute viral hepatitis and HAV detected in stool.

Figure 1: Structure of the hepatitis A virus genome and the tentative protein cleavage sites. VPg – genome linked viral protein.

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE IMMUNISATION

High titre serum immunoglobulin preparations have long been recognised to be of value in both pre-exposure and post-exposure prophylaxis against HAV infection.¹⁸ Not all travellers from developed countries to highly endemic areas require protective immunoglobulins, however, screening of patients for antibodies against HAV before giving immunoglobulins is economically sensible and results in a more effective use of a limited resource.¹⁹

Although HAV infection does not lead to chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis, it is an important source of morbidity.¹⁴ An effective, safe, and low cost vaccine would be beneficial, especially in the developed countries in which the incidence of HAV infection is low. Killed HAV vaccine has been shown to be safe and effective in animals and clinical studies are ongoing.²⁰ Attenuated HAV vaccine and recombinant HAV vaccine have also been developed and are being assessed.

Hepatitis B virus (HBV)

After identification of the HBV, research into all aspects of infection accelerated with the development of a sensitive radioimmunoassay in Chicago in 1972 for the hepatitis B antigen (which is now called HBsAg). There had not been significant involvement by our Institute until that year – but the pace of progress in HBV research over a period of just less than 20 years is striking.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Hepatitis B virus had not been implicated as the major aetiological factor worldwide in chronic liver disease and the associated hepatocellular carcinoma until the early seventies. One of the early studies that drew attention to this association was from our Institute in 1973.²¹ In a survey of 264 patients with chronic liver disease,

18% with chronic active hepatitis were found to be seropositive for HBsAg. These patients were generally male and had been born outside the United Kingdom – messages that hold true today. The very low incidence of HBsAg in primary biliary cirrhosis was attributed to transfusion – a reminder of the changes in clinical practice over the past 20 years. It is likely that these figures were an underestimate of the contribution of HBV to both conditions because of the sensitivity of the assay at that time. The current estimate is 300 million chronic HBsAg carriers worldwide and 75% of them are Asians.²² Our recent survey in South East London showed a carriage rate of 1%, more frequent than previously thought.²³ It is depressing that an estimated 40% of them will eventually die of chronic liver disease and/or hepatoma.²⁴

VIROLOGY

The HBV genome is the smallest of all known animal DNA viruses, being only 3200 base pairs (bp) in length. The genome exists in the virion in a circular conformation, with circularity maintained by complementary termini of 250–300 bp at the 5' end of each DNA strand (Fig 2). The long (minus, –) strand is the coding strand from which viral mRNA and the viral pregenomic RNA are transcribed. Its end is linked to a protein that probably serves as its transcriptional primer.^{25–26} The 5' ends of both strands are located near 10–12 bp direct repeats (DR1 and DR2) which serve as the primary sites for replication of the two strands.²⁷

The coding organisation of the viral genes is remarkably compact, with several regions of the sequence potentially translatable in more than one frame – clearly an efficient use of a genome of such limited size (Fig 2). Six overlapping open reading frames (ORFs) are identified and four ORFs, designated (surface) S/pre-S, (nucleo-

TABLE 1 Classification of hepatotropic and other viruses responsible for acute viral hepatitis

Hepatitis type	Previously named/description
<i>Hepatotropic viruses</i>	
Hepatitis A (HAV)	Infectious hepatitis
Hepatitis B (HBV)	Serum hepatitis
Hepatitis C (HCV)	Parenteral non-A, non-B hepatitis
Hepatitis D (HDV)	Delta hepatitis (agent)
Hepatitis E (HEV)	Enteric non-A, non-B hepatitis
<i>Others</i>	
Cytomegalovirus (CMV)	
Epstein-Barr virus (EBV)	
Herpes Simplex virus	
Coxsackie B virus	
Echovirus	
Yellow fever virus	

capsid, core) C/pre-c, (polymerase) P, and X are known to code for viral polypeptide/antigen (Table II).²⁸ An enhancer, a glucocorticoid responsive element as well as four promoter elements (surface, core, pre-S1, X) have also been identified.²⁹

The surface ORF contains three in phase translation start codons encoding three envelope polypeptides.³⁰ The shortest envelope polypeptide, designated 'major' based on its relative abundance, contains the group (a) and subtype (d/y, w/r) determinants of the HBsAg. The middle envelope polypeptide contains the major envelope polypeptide plus an extra 55 N-terminal amino acids containing the pre-S2 antigen. The large envelope polypeptide contains the entire middle polypeptide plus an additional 108–119 amino acids including the pre-S1 antigen. The large polypeptide appears to be an important component of the complete virion^{30,31} and may be involved in host cell binding and entry.^{32,33} Of particular interest is the recent demonstration that there is an antigenic mimicry of IgA epitope by a HBV cell attachment site in pre-S1, indicating that HBV may bind to hepatocyte through IgA receptors.^{34,35} Pre-S1 also exerts important structural effects on virus particle formation and secretion such that overproduction of the large envelope polypeptide relative to the other polypeptides inhibits the secretion of HBsAg^{36–41} and may have significant pathogenetic consequences (ground glass formation, hepatocellular necrosis).⁴²

The nucleocapsid ORF contains two in phase translation start codons whereby it encodes two identical polypeptides except for 29 amino acids at the extreme N-terminus of the longer (pre-c) polypeptide.²⁹ The core (c) polypeptide is a nucleic acid binding protein which encapsulates the viral nucleic acid.⁴³ The 29 N-terminus amino acids of the pre-c translation product function as a single peptide which directs the nascent pre-c polypeptide to the endoplasmic reticulum where, after proteolytic cleavage of N-terminus and C-terminus amino acids, it is either transported to the Golgi apparatus and secreted as HBeAg^{44–48} or transport into the nucleus.⁴⁹ The pre-c polypeptide is not required for viral replication.^{50–52} The importance of pre-c in the transport and formation of serum HBeAg has been emphasised by the recent description of a HBV mutant occurring in patients seropositive for anti-HBe, but seropositive for HBV DNA and have active liver disease.^{53,54} This mutant has

Figure 2: Structure of the HBV genome. The positions of the four open reading frames (ORFs) known to produce HBV proteins are shown in open boxes. The relative positions of the enhancer element (ENH), glucocorticoid responsive element (GRE), and the direct repeats (DR1 and DR2) are also shown. (+) and (–) denotes the positive and negative strands. Small, solid arrows show the 5' ends of the three major virus RNA transcripts of 2.1, 2.4, 3.5 kb.

been characterised to have a single point mutation in the pre-c region which generates a translational stop codon. The absence of pre-c excludes the production of HBeAg and this explains the persistence of serum HBV DNA in the presence of anti-HBe.

The polymerase ORF overlaps all the others. It encodes the viral polymerase and reverse transcriptase activity^{55–57} as well as a DNA binding protein located at the 5' end of the DNA (–) strand which is thought to serve as a primer for reverse transcription of the RNA pre-genomes.^{58–60}

The X ORF encodes a polypeptide expressed in some patients with chronic HBV infection and HBV related hepatocellular carcinoma.^{61–66} The X polypeptide has transcriptional transactivating properties which positively regulate transcription from HBV and other viral promoters as well as cellular promoters.^{67–72} Whether X protein/gene is tumourigenic or not is controversial.^{73,73a}

The function of the two potential ORFs, termed ORF5 and ORF6 is not known and no translational product has been identified.²⁹ The most conserved area of the HBV genome, termed U5-like region, has a good homology to the 5'-unique region of retrovirus long terminal repeats, which together with the unique replicative cycle of HBV (with a reverse transcription step) suggest that HBV and retrovirus may have a common evolutionary origin.⁷⁴

The other remarkable feature of HBV is its pronounced hepatotropism. This may be related to its surface proteins which bind directly or indirectly to hepatocytes for its entry.⁷⁵ As mentioned above, pre-S1 sequences are involved in the binding of virions to IgA receptor on the surface of hepatocytes which may be the first step in the infectious cycle.^{32–36} Less convincing is the

evidence that pre-S2 protein carries a binding site or receptor for polymerised human serum albumin (pHSA) which in turn binds to hepatocytes.⁷⁷⁻⁸⁰ pHSA, however, is an *in vitro* product (albumin treated with glutaraldehyde) and has never been found circulating in human subjects.⁸¹⁻⁸² It is therefore, unlikely that this is the mechanism of viral entry into the hepatocytes. Interestingly, human monomeric serum albumin was also shown recently to bind irreversibly to cysteine of the small HBsAg protein, suggesting an alternative way of viral entry into the hepatocytes.⁸³

IMMUNOLOGY

One major sustained thrust of HBV research has been the relationship between HBV and the immune system: the questions that were relevant then remain so now, that is, the basis of chronic carriage and the mechanism of liver damage. In this section some of the institute's work will be highlighted.

(a) Early studies indicating the involvement of the immune system

The test of leucocyte migration inhibition as an indicant of cell mediated immunity has been central to much of this work. Unfortunately, the factor(s) responsible for inhibition of migration that was released in response to antigen specific T cell stimulation has not been identified. In one of the earlier studies using this assay, sensitisation to HBsAg was identified in all six patients convalescent after acute HBV infection and seropositive for HBsAb.⁸⁴ There was also a response to HBsAg in many chronic HBV carriers. Two control groups were used in that study: factory workers unlikely to have been exposed to HBV and those working within the immunology group at that time. The incidence of sensitisation to HBsAg of 30% in the factory workers was almost certainly a reflection of the assay used at that stage where antigen was probably impure. This was further supported by a high positivity rate in the laboratory personnel.

(b) An autoimmune disease/component?

The relation between autoimmune disease and viral infection, including HBV, came under scrutiny at this stage. A cell mediated immune response to HBsAg was found in 62% of patients with HBsAg negative chronic active hepatitis, only a small proportion of whom had serological evidence of previous exposure.⁸⁵ This led to the provocative hypothesis that HBV itself might be a trigger for an autoimmune response that would persist after eradication of HBV.⁸⁶ This view persists, at least in part, and although HBV has been eliminated from the list of candidate triggers, current alternatives include herpes simplex, measles, Epstein-Barr virus, hepatitis D virus and most recently hepatitis C virus and hepatitis A virus infection. This hypothesis has proved an excellent starting point for many research workers.

There is no question, however, that during active HBV infection an autoimmune response

to self antigens is induced at both a T and B cell level; it is simply that after the complete eradication of replicating HBV, these reactions are not sustained. In a further series of HBV carriers, cell mediated immune responses to HBsAg were identified in 25% of asymptomatic patients – and were particularly associated with ongoing liver damage. These reactions correlated tightly with cell mediated responses to liver specific lipoprotein.⁸⁷ The theory that such autoimmune reactions were triggered by HBV received support from a serial study of patients with acute infection.⁸⁸ At the time of entry to the study, 62% of patients were reactive to HBsAg; those that were negative were those with the highest titre of HBsAg (interpreted as immune interference with T cell function). The severity of liver damage correlated closely with the strength of the cell mediated reaction, suggesting that immune clearance of HBsAg was the mechanism of liver cell injury. In this series, T cell recognition of liver specific lipoprotein was detected transiently in 50% of patients, but never after development of immunity to HBV.

This work was supported by parallel studies at the B cell level with the development of a sensitive and specific radioimmunoassay for antibody to liver specific lipoprotein.⁸⁹ Antibody was detected in almost all patients with viral related chronic active hepatitis, including most of those patients positive for HBsAg. Patients with less severe lesions histologically, that is, those with chronic persistent hepatitis, were less frequently positive and when present, these antibodies were present in lower titre. By contrast patients with acute, self-limited infection were positive only transiently (as seen with T cell sensitisation).

(c) Study of the Dane particles and the reactive antibody system

Dane particles were described in 1970, in sera, faeces, urine and synovial fluid. Intranuclear particles and occasional cytoplasmic particles were reported in liver tissue with a diameter of 26 and 42 nm.⁹⁰ Although the HBeAg/anti-HBe system was recognised as early as 1972, the relation between viral antigen expression in liver tissue, viral replication and serum levels of HBV and Dane particles was not finally resolved until recently with the development of assays for serum HBV-DNA and the recognition of the precore mutant, an important cause of HBe negative HBV related liver disease.^{93,94} That there were different patterns even among patients with active HBV replication was recognised in 1978.⁹¹ This was an electron microscopy based study in which Dane particles with or without DNA polymerase (complete or full particles respectively) were sought in sera and the findings related to clinical, serological and histological parameters. HBeAg positive patients were always positive for complete particles, indicating infectivity; and there was no relation to tissue damage. In patients seropositive for anti-HBe, but with ongoing liver damage, Dane particles were also present, but 98% of these were defective. This may have been an early correlate of the precore mutant and suggests a form of packaging disorder in this group.

In the same study there was also the first description of seroconversion from HBeAg positivity to anti-HBe positivity occurring in the natural course of chronic HBV infection. This serologic event was later shown to be of central importance in the understanding of the natural history of chronic hepatitis B, and in particular its relation to the longterm outcome.^{91a} Patients showing seroconversion and remission of liver disease also had termination of virus replication, while those with continuing disease activity developed a detective type of virus replication.

One of the studies that best stands up to retrospective evaluation was the identification of an antibody system reactive with whole Dane particles which was distinct from HBsAg or HBeAg.⁹² These antibodies appeared early in the course of acute infection, long before the appearance of antibody to either HBsAg or HBeAg; carriers were negative. The association between anti-Dane particle and viral elimination indicated that it might be neutralising. Neither pre-S1 nor pre-S2 had been identified then; almost a decade passed before the identification of binding between the pre-S antigens and the plasma membrane of hepatocytes.³²⁻³⁵ Recently, it has been shown that anti-Dane particle is in fact a mixture of anti-preS1 and anti-preS2 antibodies, anti-preS1 being the earliest antibody response to appear in acute infection. Its specificity is directed against the hepatocyte binding sites of HBV^{92a}; being virus neutralising both in vitro and in vivo.

(d) Regulation of the immune system

The presence of circulating antibody with the potential to mediate liver damage triggered the study of suppressor cells. The assay that was used to study the regulation of B cell function used Con A activated T cells to inhibit pokeweed mitogen stimulated B cells; the number of proliferating B cells was then quantified by a reverse haemolytic plaque assay. Although the assay is cumbersome and time consuming, the data obtained were remarkably clear; suppressor cells were defective in HBV related and autoimmune chronic active hepatitis.⁹³ There were differences, however, between the two groups with respect to the response to corticosteroids; suppressor cell activity was corrected by incubation with prednisolone in autoimmune cases but no effect was seen in patients with HBV related disease. This observation parallels the clinical response. Defective suppressor T cell regulation of antibody production was also shown to correlate with disease activity.⁹⁴ In addition transient defects in suppressor cell function were associated with the onset of liver damage in acute infection –

which would be permissive for antibody production.

Two further studies were performed in the 80s that extended and strengthened the contributions on cell mediated immunity to HBV antigens from the 70s. These had the advantages first, of a broader range of antigens being available and second, the antigens, which now included those prepared by recombinant technology, were of superior quality. In a study of chronic HBV infection, T cell responses to both HBcAg and HBsAg were compared⁹⁵ Among those with a history of acute infection or those who had been vaccinated, there was consistent recognition of HBsAg; none of the HBV carriers recognised HBsAg and neither did naive controls. This was the clearest difference noted between these respective groups in any of the studies performed. In contrast, chronic HBV carriers always recognised HBcAg, consistent with the view that this antigen is the target for immune mediated lysis in these patients. In further experiments, it was proposed that the failure to respond to HBsAg was actively mediated by T suppressor cells. In the second study, patients who were vulnerable contacts of those with acute HBV infection were followed serially from the very earliest pre-symptomatic phase, 30 to 70 days before the onset of liver damage, through to recovery.⁹⁶ Cellular immunity to pre-S was the first detectable response and substantially predated liver damage in every case. T cell sensitisation to HBcAg appeared next, just before the detection of IgM anti-HBc. A cellular response to HBsAg was detected 10 days before the onset of liver damage, indicating that this could be pertinent to viral elimination.

(e) The search of the immune viral target

One of the long standing research interests in our Institute has been T cell cytotoxicity. The method used, the autologous hepatocyte micro-cytotoxicity assay, placed reliance on the ability of healthy hepatocytes to adhere to plastic (not a physiological function) and the number of cells available was small and adherent cells were counted manually. It was felt when Mario Mondelli was doing the experiment that it should be called the macrocytotoxicity assay! It did, however, overcome the absolute requirement for HLA compatibility between target and effector cell; as with all experimental models it was established to answer specific questions and it has undoubtedly achieved this. A previous attempt to investigate cytotoxicity in HBV infection using red blood cells coated with HBsAg⁹⁷ illustrated the difficulties of developing an appropriate assay. Increased cytotoxicity was identified in the convalescent phase of acute infection and a smaller proportion of those with chronic HBV infection. This was probably all NK activity because the T cells would not have seen either class I or II antigens on the red cell and even if they had been present, they were unlikely to have been compatible. With the autologous hepatocyte cytotoxicity assay, about 50% of patients exhibited activity.⁹⁸ The figure was higher in patients with active liver disease and in contrast with autoimmune disease in which the

TABLE II *Hepatitis B virus polypeptide/antigens*

HBV Gene	Polypeptide/antigen
S	HBsAg (major protein)
pre-S2+S	pre-S2 peptide (middle protein)
pre-S1+pre-S2+S	pre-S1 peptide (large protein)
C	HBcAg and HBeAg
pre-C+C	pre-core peptide
P	DNA polymerase
X	X protein

effector cells were non-T, effector cells in HBV were both T and non-T. The non-T component was thought to be directed against normal membrane components mediated by an ADCC type reaction. The striking and important observation from this study was that T cell cytotoxicity was restricted to HBeAg positive cases, indicating a relation to replication.

This finding was taken further in experiments to determine whether HBcAg was the target.⁹⁹ The experiments were performed in the presence or absence of antibody to either HBsAg or HBcAg. While it was assumed that these would block the reaction to the relevant antigen, it is now known that T and B cell epitopes are not shared. Experiments in mice, however, indicate that for mice at least the T and B cell epitopes are close and the same is probably true for man. These experiments clearly implicated HBcAg as the target for immune assault; any doubts based on immunological theory were dispelled by a simple study in which it was shown that the hepatocytes which survived exposure to autologous T cells never contained HBcAg, but did contain HBsAg.¹⁰⁰

These studies provide evidence that the pattern of hepatic HBV antigen expression is important in determining the host immune response. A more recent study using double staining for viral antigens has shown the complex course of hepatic HBV antigen expression in chronic infection with active HBV replication.¹⁰² In this study it was demonstrated that the presence of cytoplasmic HBeAg was closely associated with high levels of HBV replication; in contrast, cytoplasmic expression of HBcAg was associated with liver damage. Another interesting observation in this study was an inverse relationship between serum HBsAg titre and hepatic expression of HBsAg, suggesting a variable export of HBsAg in various phase of chronic HBV infection. This was confirmed by a follow up study which demonstrated the export of HBsAg more directly using a primary hepatocyte culture system.¹⁰²

(f) Role of cytokines

The possibility that an interferon-alpha deficiency might be associated with chronic HBV infection has been well aired. In a very recent study patients with acute and chronic HBV infection were compared with respect to interferon production in the liver seeking both protein and gene. In acute infection both gene and protein were expressed; in chronic infection both were rarely detected and a negative correlation with HBcAg positive cells was identified – suggesting that HBV might modify interferon gene activation,¹⁰³ which was in accord with the *in vitro* studies reported by other workers.^{104–108} A further step was taken to determine the expression of interferon- α receptor in chronic HBV infection which showed no difference with both normal and liver disease controls, indicating that HBV had no effect on interferon- α receptor expression.¹⁰⁹

Previous studies had shown a defect of T cell activation in response to a range of stimuli in chronic infection. In particular interleukin-2

production and interleukin-2 receptor expression were reduced.^{110–111} Both were shown to be improved by *in vitro* treatment with interferon alpha¹¹². In the treatment of chronic HBV carriers with interferon alpha, seroconversion was shown to be associated with massive release of a series of cytokine including interleukin 1 β and tumour necrosis factor- α , but whether this was a non-specific consequence of inflammation was impossible to say.¹¹³ In a further study, the production of interleukin 1 and tumour necrosis factor by peripheral blood leucocytes are also shown to be increased in patients with chronic HBV infection.^{110–114}

TREATMENT

The identification of HBV in a substantial proportion of patients with chronic active hepatitis in the mid 70s, in whom autoimmune mechanisms had long been suspected, soon led to the hypothesis that liver damage may be related to an autoimmune reaction against the virus itself. The concept of virus induced autoimmune reactions in general had been widely disseminated by then. It had also been proposed that persistent HBV infection might be the result of a poor immune response to the virus and that immunosuppression with prednisolone and azathioprine would favour evolution of chronic disease.¹¹⁵ Immunosuppression was the mainstay of therapy then and for a further 10 years before the wisdom of this idea became accepted. The identification of the glucocorticoids responsive element in the late 80s further suggested that corticosteroids may have an additional direct proviral effect.^{116–117} This proviral effect of corticosteroids has also been shown more directly using a primary hepatocyte culture system.¹¹⁸

Given that an immune defect had been postulated to account for persistent HBV infection, the move to therapy with hepatitis B antibody in 1973 was logical¹¹⁹; for 1973 it was also inspired. Plasma from blood donors positive for hepatitis B antibody was pooled and given as a single infusion to a small series of patients seropositive for HBsAg. In two of five cases serum was found to become transiently negative for HBsAg and to remain so for nine days. These two cases had lower titres of HBsAg and were almost certainly anti-HBe positive (although this assay was not available). In almost every case serum C3 concentrations fell indicating complement consumption – and by implication antiviral activity. The conclusion, that without repeated long term infusions clearance of HBV was most unlikely, remains valid, particularly as all these patients were maintained on immunosuppression throughout. The approach may have been more correct than was appreciated at the time, HBV specific immunoglobulin now has an established and important role in prophylaxis after transplantation for HBV related chronic liver disease. Anti-HBs (the main constituent of such pooled plasma) would not be the preferred antibody if these experiments were to be performed today. Instead, antibody against either pre-S1 or pre-S2 polypeptides which contain the binding sites for HBV attachment to hepatocytes would be preferred; with the advent of humanised monoclonal

TABLE III Agents that have been studied in the treatment of chronic HBV infection

Anti-virals	Immunosuppressive
Interferons	Corticosteroids
Alpha	
Beta	
Gamma	
Tumour necrosis factor	
Adenine arabinoside (Ara-A)	Immunostimulators
Acyclovir, deoxyacyclovir	BCG vaccination
Zidovudine	Levamisole
Suramin	Interleukin-2
Ribavirin	Interferon-gamma
Phosphonoformate	Thymosin
Quinacrine	Tumour necrosis factor
(+)-cyanidanol-3	
Phyllanthus amarus	

antibodies, such an approach may well be resurrected in the coming decade, with application not just to transplantation, but to therapy of carriers.

The development of an assay for HBV DNA polymerase paved the way within and without our institute for the study of antiviral compounds.¹²⁰ Using this method, it was shown in the mid 70s that leucocyte interferon had antiviral activity in chronic HBV infection.¹²¹ Insufficient interferon meant that controlled trials did not materialise either in our institute or elsewhere. A series of trials were conducted in the search for alternative therapeutic agents (Table III),¹²²⁻¹²⁵ which had two things in common: they were dull to perform and provided a clear negative result (reviewed in 126).

With the advancement in cell culture and recombinant DNA technology, sufficient interferon did eventually become available and a series of controlled trials were performed.¹²⁶ These proved that interferon- α (more than 5 MU/m² thrice weekly for more than three months) was an effective therapy for a proportion of patients with chronic HBV infection. Determinants of a likely positive response were also identified (Table IV) – in particular, those with a short history and those with active liver disease.¹²⁷ It wasn't the answer, but it proved a good start; the fascinating feature was that some patients also cleared HBsAg, a most unusual feature that led to a series of papers investigating how interferon might modulate recognition of HBsAg.^{128, 129} It also provided a valuable line of research: if interferon can reverse the carrier state, does this tell us anything about the mechanism of chronic HBV carriage? Another major but still unanswered question is: what can we offer to those interferon- α non-responders?

For those with HBV related end stage liver disease, liver transplantation offers the only hope. On a theoretical basis, according to the T

cell cytotoxicity story, liver grafts without a class I or II match between donor and recipient should be safe from immune assault. Additionally, there was no evidence that HBV was cytopathic and liver transplantation should have been an excellent operation for HBV carriers even if complicated by recurrence. Practice and theory were a gulf apart; HBV infection in grafts was associated with a novel histological pattern termed fibrosing cholestatic hepatitis, complicated by a fulminant course.^{130, 131} The extraordinary high level of HBV antigen expression, together with the relatively mild degree of inflammatory infiltrate in the liver, suggest that HBV may be cytopathic to the graft livers in this condition.¹³²

The observation that a proportion of patients with chronic HBV infection developed severe and sometimes fulminant hepatitis upon withdrawal of chemotherapy was first reported in 1975.¹³³ Similar observations were also observed by other groups.¹³⁴⁻¹³⁷ It is likely that intense chemotherapy/immunosuppression enhances HBV replication and the immune rebound upon cessation of chemotherapy induce a massive destruction of the infected cells. On a theoretical basis, a rapid reintroduction of corticosteroids followed by slow withdrawal may alleviate the severe life threatening reactivation and save the patient from a liver transplantation. This has been shown to be applicable recently.¹³⁸

IMMUNISATION

The first generation plasma derived HBV vaccines were licensed in 1981. The fear of transmission of blood borne diseases as well as their cost had considerable effects in limiting their acceptance and use. With the second generation yeast-derived recombinant HBV vaccines launched in 1986, much more rapid progress is being made with vaccination of the high risk groups such as health care personnel and babies born to HBsAg seropositive mothers in most developed countries.^{139, 140} In some endemic areas, all newborn babies are routinely vaccinated. The World Health Organisation has recommended routine HBV vaccination for countries that possess the economic capacity to purchase the vaccine and where the HBV carrier rate exceeds 2.5% of the population. Third generation synthetic peptide vaccines have already been developed, their safety, immunogenicity and protectivity against HBV infection are at present being evaluated.

The seroconversion rates of all these vaccines vary from 80 to 95%. The same response rate (82.6% >50 mIU/ml) was shown in our institute in a group of health care personnel.¹⁴¹ Around 35% of healthy HBV vaccine responders will have their anti-HBs titre dropped to below 10 mIU/ml in five years' time. The Immunisation Practices Advisory Committee at present does not recommend booster doses for these subjects. Studies in homosexual men, however, showed that the life table attack rate of new HBV infections in vaccinated responders was 1.8% annually.^{140, 142} Although most of these new infections were subclinical seroconversions, one clinically apparent HBsAg event has been documented.¹⁴² Hepatitis B virus mutants may also be

TABLE IV Patient related determinants in chronic HBV infection that influence the response to IFN α therapy

Determinants of positive response	Determinants of negative response
Acquisition in adulthood	Acquisition in infancy/childhood
Female sex	Male sex
High pretreatment ALT	Low pretreatment ALT
Low pretreatment HBV-DNA	High pretreatment HBV-DNA
Active histology	Inactive histology
HIV antibody negative	HIV antibody positive
Heterosexual	Homosexual
Anti-HDV negative	Anti-HDV positive

ALT-serum alanine aminotransferase; HIV-human immunodeficiency virus; HDV-hepatitis D virus.

TABLE V *Host factors associated with a suboptimal HBV vaccine responsiveness*

• Age
• Alcoholism
• Obesity
• HIV infection
• Immunosuppression
• chronic illness – for example chronic renal failure

HIV – human immunodeficiency virus.

responsible for some of the patients who developed HBV infection after successful vaccination.¹⁴³

Host factors associated with suboptimal HBV vaccine responsiveness have also been identified (Table V). A supplementary dose may help a small proportion of these non-hyporesponders. New HBV vaccines which include additional antigens such as pre-S1, pre-S2 and possibly HBc are being developed.¹⁴⁴

Hepatitis C virus (HCV)

After the isolation of HBV in the 1960s and the HAV in 1970s, it became obvious that there was a proportion of patients with clinically viral hepatitis without a defined aetiology. The majority of these occurred after blood transfusion or in intravenous drug users and led to chronic hepatitis in some individuals.^{145 146} The term non-A non-B hepatitis (NANB) was coined to describe these cases.^{145 146} The clinical diagnosis of NANB hepatitis was similarly imprecise, and was based on the clinical exclusion of other causes of hepatocellular inflammation and the serological exclusion of other hepatotropic viruses. It is now known that a proportion of NANB hepatitis represented infections with cryptic forms of HBV.¹⁴⁷

Approaches used to identify HAV, HBV-antigens and viral particles were all used in the search of NANB virus and multiple reports were published but none stood the test of the well known serum panel in the National Institute of Health.¹⁴⁸ The physicochemical characterised of the major non-A, non-B virus, however, was already well characterised and was consistent with it being a member of a group of small lipid coated RNA virus.^{149–154}

IDENTIFICATION OF HCV

The recent identification of the major non-A, non-B virus, which has been termed HCV, was the result of the major advances in molecular cloning techniques.¹⁵⁵ At around the same time, HCV was also cloned in Japan.¹⁵⁶ Two more HCV genomes from Japanese patients were recently reported and was found to have 70–80% homology with the American HCV nucleotide sequence.^{157 158}

VIROLOGY

Current understanding is that HCV is an approx-

imately 10 000 nucleotide linear, single stranded, positive polarity RNA virus and shares nucleotide and amino acid sequence homology with pestiviruses and flaviviruses as well as two plant virus supergroups (alphavirus-like and picornavirus-like), indicating that HCV may be evolutionary related to plant and animal viruses.¹⁵⁹ Only one ORF has been identified so far. Presumably, there is only one large polyprotein produced that is cleaved post-translationally (Fig 3).¹⁶⁰ Further study showed that the putative nucleocapsid protein gene sequence are highly conserved, suggesting that the core protein may play an important regulatory role in the life cycle of HCV.¹⁶¹

Clinically, antibody to HCV appears in the circulation between one and three months after the onset of acute illness, but in rare cases not for up to a year.¹⁶² Antigenaemia is so limited that circulating viral antigen is beyond the limit of detection with most conventional assay technique.¹⁶⁰

CURRENTLY AVAILABLE SEROLOGICAL ASSAYS

The first generation test, an ELISA using a fusion protein coated plate, passed the National Institute of Health serum panel.^{163 164} With this assay, a gush of papers appeared in the literature within a short time which showed that most patients with post-transfusion NANB hepatitis were seropositive for this antibody by six months. Interestingly, around half of the patients with sporadic NANB hepatitis were also found to be positive at various intervals after the acute infection suggesting a common aetiology in a proportion of cases.¹⁶⁵

This is just the beginning of the story. More reports come up claiming that HCV has an important role in various conditions including cryptogenic liver cirrhosis, hepatocellular carcinoma, autoimmune chronic active hepatitis, as well as in alcoholics, haemophiliacs receiving replacement therapy, intravenous drug users and haemodialysis patients (Table VI).^{166–172} Despite all these epidemiological data, the true significance of the anti-HCV antibodies is still unknown – do these antibodies to the non-structural antigen of HCV indicate infectivity or immunity? Are all those patients seropositive for anti-HCV antibodies by these first generation test genuinely positive – the question of specificity?

In those patients with well documented autoimmune chronic active hepatitis, an excellent linear correlation between high levels of the globulin serum and the readings (optical density) of the ELISA assay was demonstrated, indicating that high globulin levels might produce non-specific reactivity in the ELISA system.¹⁷³ Utilising Western Blotting technique, a second generation test, the recombinant immunoblot assay (RIBA), was established but its specificity remains to be established. Serum HCV RNA was also successfully detected recently using the polymerase chain reaction by various groups.^{174–177} This assay will enable us to test the specificity of the various serological assays and also determine the relationship between HCV viraemia and liver disease.

Figure 3: Schematic alignment of the polyproteins encoded by the putative domains of the hepatitis C virus.

TABLE VI Anti-HCV antibodies in different geographic areas according to risk of hepatitis and presence of liver disease*

Groups	Anti-HCV positive (%)			
	Italy	Spain	United Kingdom	USA
<i>Group I (Normal population)</i>				
Random blood donors		0	0.3-0.6	1-2
Healthy pregnant women	1.8			
Community populations		4		
<i>Group II (High risk population)</i>				
Intravenous drug users	75	92	50-81	76
Haemophiliacs	82	64	85	79
Haemodialysis patients		20	1-3	8
Homosexual men		8	0-26	24
Female contacts of drug users		6		
<i>Group III (High risk patients with liver disease)</i>				
Post-transfusion NANBH	84	85		85
Sporadic NANBH	74	69	29	73
Chronic NANBH	74	62	50	79
Cryptogenic cirrhosis		78		42
Alcoholic cirrhosis		39		
Hepatocellular carcinoma	65	75	60	26
HBsAg+	54	56		
Alcoholic		77		
<i>Group IV (Autoimmune liver disease)</i>				
Autoimmune chronic active hepatitis†	78	44	70	43
Primary biliary cirrhosis		38	0	9

NANBH=Non-A, non-B hepatitis.

*Extracted from references 162, 166-172; these data should be interpreted with caution as most of these positives were not confirmed with serum HCV RNA assay using polymerase chain reaction.

†Note that a positive anti-HCV test is associated with a high globulin level, suggesting that this may be a false positive. See reference 173.

ANTIVIRAL THERAPY

The use of acyclovir in non-A, non-B hepatitis has produced no apparent benefit and corticosteroids has yielded disputed results.¹⁷⁸ The only treatment proven of value is again interferon-alpha. A dose of 3 million units thrice weekly has been shown to be effective in reducing serum transaminases and controlling liver inflammation in chronic hepatitis caused by parenteral non-A, non-B virus infection.¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸¹ Serum transaminases was normalised in around half of these patients and this was associated with histological improvement. This improvement was, however, only sustained in about 50% of the patients after cessation of treatment and hence treatment may have to be lifelong. Predictors of a favourable response seem to be short duration of illness and high transaminases. A positive HCV test however, did not predict a favourable outcome.¹⁷⁹

Hepatitis D virus (HDV)

In 1977 a new viral antigen was found in the nuclei of hepatocytes in patients with chronic HBV infection.¹⁸² Subsequent studies revealed that this antigen was related to a new virus, now termed HDV. Hepatitis D virus infection is endemic in Italy, Middle East, some areas of Africa and South America, but is relatively rare in Western Europe, North America and Asia, despite the existence of susceptible HBV carriers in many of these areas (Table VII).¹⁸³ Family clustering in endemic areas suggests viral transmission by close contacts, whereas intravenous drug use is likely to be the major route of transmission in non-endemic regions of the Western world.¹⁸⁴

VIROLOGY

Hepatitis D virus is an incomplete single stranded circular RNA virus that depends on the helper

function of HBV to replicate.¹⁸⁴ It is encased in HBsAg and the RNA genome, which is around 1700 nucleotides long of minus polarity, contains a very high intramolecular base pairing, similar to the genomes of plant viroids.¹⁸⁵⁻¹⁸⁶ Although several open reading frames (ORFs) have been identified, only one (ORF5) has been demonstrated to code for protein (HDAg). Replication of viral RNA has been shown to proceed by a rolling circle mechanism, specific self-cleavage and self ligation of genomic and anti-genomic HDV RNA strands has also been shown in vivo.¹⁸⁷⁻¹⁹³

Even though HDV appears to require HBsAg for its hepatotropism and propagation, experience in transplanted patients with chronic HDV infection who had HDV recurrence in the liver grafts without evidence of HBV recurrence suggest that HDV does not necessarily rely on HBV for replication.¹⁹⁴

PATHOGENESIS OF LIVER DISEASE

The presence of replicating HDV seems to be invariably associated with liver damage suggesting that HDV may be directly hepatocytotoxic.¹⁸⁴⁻¹⁹⁵ High level expression of HDAg has also been shown to be directly cytotoxic to both HeLa and HepG2 cells.^{195a} Recent studies, however, have shown that immune mediated mechanism may also be involved.¹⁹⁶⁻¹⁹⁷ In a study of 98 liver biopsies from 68 patients seen in seven years, the extent of HDAg expression in the liver had no correlation with the activity of liver disease, indicating that host factor, possibly the immune system, was also important in the pathogenesis of the liver disease.¹⁹⁸ The similarity in the pattern of T cell infiltration in chronic HBV and HDV infection provide further support that immune mediated mechanisms are important.¹⁹⁷ Interestingly, a form of liver kidney microsomal autoantibody similar to that found in a subset of autoimmune chronic active hepatitis has been described in patients with chronic HDV infection, but its significance is unclear.¹⁹⁹

CLINICAL FEATURES AND LABORATORY DIAGNOSIS

Infection with HDV may occur simultaneously with HBV infection (coinfection), or as a superinfection in chronic HBsAg carriers. These two conditions have different clinical courses and outcomes. Coinfection is usually self limiting as acute HBV infection, although morbidity may be higher. A massive infecting dose is sometimes associated with a more severe outcome, either in the form of fulminant hepatitis, or as a biphasic illness with initial improvement followed by relapse. In contrast, in a collaborative study with Italy and France, a higher morbidity was noted in HDV superinfection of HBsAg carriers and this was associated with severe acute hepatitis (sometimes fulminant).²⁰⁰ Other studies have also shown that over 70% of the patients with HDV superinfection who had no history of the severe fulminant form of hepatitis developed chronic active hepatitis and cirrhosis. What favours chronicity in HDV superinfection is not well understood but HDV superinfection is

TABLE VII Prevalence of HDV infection in different geographical areas as evidenced by a high anti-HDV antibody titre

Country	HBsAg carriers + liver disease	Healthy HBsAg carriers	HBsAg positive IV drug users
<i>Europe</i>			
Britain		<1%	42%
Ireland			31%
S Italy	14-28%		20-36%
Greece		2-4%	35%
Spain	9%		25-60%
Portugal	25%		85%
Belgium		2-8%	
Yugoslavia	7%		
Hungary	6%		
Romania	83%		
Poland	6-6%	1-6%	
Turkey	25%	17%	
USSR (Europe)	14-28%	3%	
<i>Africa</i>			
Tunisia	18%	10%	
Algeria	15%		
Ethiopia		5-8%	
S Africa		0-6%	
<i>Asia</i>			
USSR (mid Asia)	41%	15%	
Israel	20%		
Saudi Arabia	53%	11%	
India (Bombay)	25%		
Taiwan	13%	2-2%	
China		1-8%	
<i>America</i>			
USA	25%	1-4-8%	20-53%
Amazon basin	85-100%	23-35%	
Venezuela	91%	33%	
Columbia (S Marta)		29-36%	
Columbia (urban)		0%	
Argentina	2-5%	1-2%	
Chile	10-14%	1-8%	
<i>Australasia</i>			
Australia	19%	0-5-8%	19%
W Pacific		0-31%	

usually accompanied by a decrease in HBV replication markers.²⁰¹

It is also important to note that in chronic HBsAg carriers with HDV superinfection, the suppression of HBV replication may lead to a transient absence of HBV markers in serum and liver^{200 201}; unless HDV markers are sought, the diagnosis of NANB hepatitis may be made erroneously.

Because HDV RNA can only be detected in a few centres, serum IgM anti-HDV has been suggested as an alternative marker for active HDV replication as early reports showed a good correlation between serum IgM anti-HDV and both intrahepatic HDAg and liver inflammatory activities.^{202 203} A recent study, however, showed that serum HDV RNA may also be detected in up to 32% of patients with chronic HDV infection seronegative for IgM anti-HDV.²⁰⁴ The role of IgM anti-HDV has been systematically studied in our Institute which showed only a weak correlation between serum IgM anti-HDV and both hepatic HDAg expression and inflammatory activities, indicating that IgM anti-HDV is not a good serum marker for active HDV replication nor active liver disease.²⁰⁵

A recent study in our Institute showed that serum IgA anti-HAV was almost exclusively associated with chronic HDV infection and was an independent correlate of moderate/severe histological activity with a sensitivity of 82.6% and a specificity of 90.5%.^{206 207} There was, however, no correlation between serum IgA anti-HDV and expression of hepatic HDAg and

serum transaminases. In situ hybridisation and riboprobe assay for the detection of hepatic and serum HDV RNA has also been developed recently and these may prove to be useful tools for detecting active replication and for monitoring treatment.^{208 209}

ANTI-VIRAL THERAPY AND IMMUNISATION

Interferon-alpha has been shown to have an inhibitory effect on HDV replication but beneficial effects appear to be only transient in most cases.²¹⁰⁻²¹² Control of HDV infections is by vaccination against HBV.²¹³

Hepatitis E virus (HEV)

The first massive outbreak of enteric non-A, non-B epidemic was reported in 1955 when drinking water was contaminated by the overflow of an open sewer in Delhi. A total of 29 300 residents developed acute hepatitis, which ran a benign course in the majority and was self limiting.²¹⁴ Ten per cent of women affected in their third trimester of pregnancy, however, died of fulminant hepatic failure.²¹⁵ The disease displayed an unusual histological pattern with no chronic implications in subsequent follow up studies.²¹⁶ These reports confirmed the existence of a faecal-orally transmitted type non-A non-B hepatitis (HEV) with completely different characteristics to blood borne NANB hepatitis.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Of 10 Indian hepatitis epidemics subsequently investigated after the first major outbreak, nine were found to be caused by epidemic/enteric NANB hepatitis.^{217 218} Similar epidemics were reported in various Asian, African, Central and South American countries.²¹⁹ Sporadic imported cases of HEV have also been reported in the USA and it is likely that HEV is responsible for a small proportion of patients with acute sporadic NANB hepatitis seen in the United Kingdom and Europe.^{219 220}

The attack rate (clinically apparent) has been estimated to be around 2% but is up to 19% in pregnant women, with the majority of attacks occurring in young adults.²¹⁸ The pattern of disease is compatible with an infection which is endemic but produces a sustained period of immunity. A reservoir of HEV is therefore required to sustain the infection in the absence of a carrier state. Research workers in the USSR have recently been able to transmit HEV to pigs with induction of an hepatitis illness. In addition, they have also found anti-HEV antibody in rats from areas where the disease is endemic.

IDENTIFICATION OF HEV

In 1983, a 27-32 nm virus like particles were demonstrated by immune electron microscopy in the stools of three of nine cases of HEV in Tashkent, USSR.²²¹ A volunteer then ingested a dilute suspension of stools pooled from the patients and he developed an acute hepatitis, with antibodies detectable to the virus like particle by immune electron microscopy.²²¹ Sub-

sequently, HEV was also transmitted to a number of primates. In the majority of studies, 27–34 nm virus like particles aggregated by autologous acute phase serum have been found in stool samples. Using immune electron microscopy, it was found that sera and virus like particles obtained from patients from different regions of the world cross-reacted, indicating that HEV in various parts of the world is associated with the same non-enveloped 27–34 nm virus like particles.^{222–227} An antigen related to HEV (HEV-Ag) was detected recently in the liver of experimentally infected macaques.²²⁵ It has a granular distribution in up to 90% of hepatocytes in the early phase of experimental infection.

The recent successful molecular cloning of part of the HEV genome represents a giant leap forward.²²⁸ The translated nucleic acid sequence of the isolated clone contains a consensus amino acid sequence consistent with a RNA directed RNA polymerase, an enzyme that is present in all positive strand RNA viruses.

CLINICAL FEATURES AND LABORATORY DIAGNOSIS

The majority of clinical data came from the well characterised Indian epidemics.²¹⁸ The incubation period was between three and nine weeks. The attack rate was higher in young adults (2.9%) than those older than 40 (2.0%). A brief prodrome illness with anorexia, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain is followed by jaundice. The disease is usually benign and self limiting with no chronic sequelae. Fulminant hepatic failure, however, has been reported to occur in up to 2.8% of men and 22% of pregnant women with clinical symptoms, in whom it is usually fatal.²²⁹ This severe form of hepatitis in pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester, is a feature of all HEV epidemics.

Histologically, cholestasis was prominent in around 50% of the patients with marked canalicular and intracellular bile stasis in glandular channels.²³⁰ Moderate inflammatory infiltrates of mononuclear and polymorphonuclear leucocytes occurred in the portal and intralobular regions with prominent lipofuscin pigment in Küpffer cells.²³⁰

With the recent success in identification of HEV-Ag in liver sections of experimental infected primates and the development of fluorescent linked anti-HEV-Ag, an antibody blocking assay was developed as a prototype test for the identification and titration of specific anti-HEV-Ag antibody in the serum samples.²²⁵ Recently, two additional test for HEV was established: solid phase immune electron microscopy to detect the virus and polymerase chain reaction to detect the HEV genome²³¹ (and Dr D Bradley, personnel communication). With these tools, the myth of HEV is going to be revealed in the near future.

TREATMENT AND CONTROL

As is the case with HAV, treatment is purely supportive. Control of the disease relies on the well established primary health objectives of clean water and adequate sanitation.

Hepatitis X virus (X=F, G, . . .)

There are probably some more as yet undiscovered hepatotropic viruses as determined by epidemiology and electronmicroscopic studies. One is the short incubation blood borne non-A, non-B hepatitis virus. It is quite uncommon and may not be epidemiological important. Based upon the limited data available, this second or minor non-A, non-B or non-A, non-B, non-C virus is thought to be smaller than HCV (around 25–30 nm), naked rather than enveloped, and incapable of producing the characteristic cytoplasmic tubular structures found by electron microscopy in the hepatocytes of chimpanzees experimentally infected with HCV.¹⁵⁰ To date, no antibody specific for this second non-A, non-B hepatitis has been detected. A toga-like virus has been recently found in liver tissue from patients with fulminant hepatitis attributed to sporadic non-A non-B.^{232–233} Syncytial giant-cell hepatitis has also been reported to associate with paramyxoviral features²³⁴ (? HGV).²³⁵

All the advancements in the last two decades make us a little wiser – in knowing how ignorant we are. Important questions like the basis of chronic carriage, the mechanism of liver damage, the regulation of viral genes in various phase of the chronic infection, the mechanism by which hepatocellular carcinoma are induced and the precise mode of action of interferon- α are still not clearly answered. Specific therapy for a complete cure of the chronic infections (HBV, HCV, HDV) is still far from scope. Perhaps, the most appropriate way to finish this is by citing Sir Issac Newton:

“I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

Sir Isaac Newton, 1642–1727 AD.
Brewster's Memoirs of Newton, Vol 2, Ch 27.)

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