LETTERS

Fatigue in primary biliary cirrhosis

We would like to take the opportunity to clarify some of the points in response to the recent leading article (Gut 2004;53:475–7) which accompanied our report1 of reduced globus pallidus (GP) magnetisation ratios (MTRs) in patients with fatigue and primary biliary cirrhosis (PBC).

As we stated in the paper, fatigue in PBC is a subjective multidimensional symptom with many potential determinants, including sleep disturbance, depression, and personality, in addition to a potential central neurological cause.1 We therefore wholeheartedly concur with Drs Milkiewicz and Heathcote when they state that brain manganese (Mn) deposition is certainly not the cause of fatigue in all patients with PBC. We certainly do not believe that we drew this conclusion. However, we do believe that our findings of reduced GP MTRs in patients with stage I–II disease, which were associated with hypermanganese-saemia and measured fatigue, do open up a novel avenue of research into a poorly understood symptom in patients with PBC.

In order to control for inter-examination system variability, it is necessary to normalise the raw MTRs against an internal region of interest (ROI). Although it might initially appear easier to analyse the raw MTR data, normalisation to an internal standard allows external sources of variation, unrelated to the patient, to be removed. We followed previously published protocols to calculate GP indices, normalised to the putamen and to the frontal white matter,1 and these were used to test associations with fatigue and Mn levels. The raw MTR data were used for the primary comparison between PBC patients and healthy volunteers. We chose two rather than one internal control ROI because, contrary to the assertion of the editorial, there is evidence for Mn accumulation in brain structures, other than the GP, in patients with cirrhosis.2 Rose et al reported significantly elevated Mn concentrations in the frontal and occipital cortex, pallidum, putamen, and caudate1 while Maeda et al showed elevated Mn concentrations in the GP, putamen, and frontal white matter.2 In both series, the highest Mn concentration was in the GP. Our choice of two standard ROIs was made to maximise the interpretation of the raw data although we accept that the a priori assumption that pathology is absent from these regions in this and all relevant magnetic resonance studies to date, which have used internal controls, may be false. This may explain the unexpected trend towards a positive association between blood Mn and the putaminal index normalised to white matter and blood Mn level. We did not compare the normalised putaminal index against the normalised putamen index.

We are grateful to the two commentators for extending our interpretations and naturally agree that bile duct loss, rather than liver fibrosis, governs the severity of cholestasis and that there may be dissociation between these features in PBC. For the purposes of this study, we chose to examine patients with stage I–II disease to remove the possibility of hepatic encephalopathy or cirrhosis as a cause for the MTR findings. We believe that both this patient selection and the demonstration of normal cerebral magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) in these patients, compared with healthy volunteers, does indeed achieve this. We found reduced GP MTRs in patients with stage I–II disease, which were associated with hypermanganese-saemia and measured fatigue, but we also studied four patients with stage III–IV disease and, as a group, there were no significant differences in GP MTR indices compared with stage I–II patients. Although this may be due to the small number of individuals studied, the lack of clear distinction between stage I–II and stage III–IV disease may also reflect a process that adversely affects the brain long before the development of cirrhosis, owing to early bile duct loss.

The commentators point out that the value of liver biopsy staging of PBC is limited owing to sampling error but, in our view, liver biopsy still remains the gold standard for diagnosing cirrhosis. We disagree with the suggestion that cerebral MRS would have been useful in supporting the histological diagnoses as cerebral MRS abnormalities are only seen in a minority of patients with Child-Pugh A cirrhosis.3 We did not assume that MRS would be abnormal in stage III–IV patients; in fact, there were no significant differences between these patients and stage I–II patients.

Fatigue in PBC merits further research. We hope that we will be able to take further “steps in the right direction”.

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Conflict of interest: None declared.

References


Acute ulcerative colitis during successful interferon/ribavirin treatment for chronic hepatitis

A 54 year old man was treated with pegylated interferon alpha 2a 180 µg weekly and ribavirin 1000 mg daily for chronic hepatitis C genotype 3a (>5×10¹¹ IU/ml). There was no history of gastrointestinal disease or morbidity.

At week 12, hepatitis C virus-polymerase chain reaction (HCV-PCR) was negative and alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and aspartate aminotransferase (AST) levels remained elevated at 2–3 times above the upper limit of normal. Although corticosteroid therapy was initiated, the patient reported a sudden onset of watery and sometimes bloody diarrhoea. Colonoscopy showed continuous pancolitis, macroscopically suggestive of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Histology revealed a severe highly active pancolitis with basal plasmacytosis, crypt abscesses, and crypt distortion, as seen in ulcerative colitis.

The antiviral treatment was stopped and treatment with prednisolone and mesalazine (5-ASA) was initiated. Steroids were tapered over four weeks, which had been ongoing treatment with prednisone and mesalazine (5-ASA) was initiated. Steroids were tapered over four weeks, which had been ongoing for chronic hepatitis C genotype 3a (>5×10¹¹ IU/ml). There was no history of gastrointestinal disease or morbidity.

However, at week 14, the patient reported a sudden onset of watery and sometimes bloody diarrhoea. Colonoscopy showed continuous pancolitis, macroscopically suggestive of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Histology revealed a severe highly active pancolitis with basal plasmacytosis, crypt abscesses, and crypt distortion, as seen in ulcerative colitis.

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PostScript

history of IBD was probably an adverse effect of the antiviral treatment with interferon-rhavirin rather than a concomitant disease. Similar observations have been made by others. To our knowledge, the present case is the fourth reported in the literature. Interferon has immune stimulating properties and may trigger autoimmune diseases and transplant rejections.

Hence, in light of this, the report on interferon treatment in active ulcerative colitis (Gut 2003;52:1728–33) seems interesting and warrants further research.

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References


Author’s reply

As interferon alfa (IFN alfa) suppresses the oncosuppressive proinflammatory cytokines and induces various anti-inflammatory cytokines, it may show efficacy in chronic inflammatory disorders of the gut. In Crohn’s disease, lamina propria cells manifest increased expression of IFN-γ whereas in ulcerative colitis lamina propria cells and natural killer T cells demonstrate increased secretion of the Th2 cytokines interleukin 5 (IL-5) and IL-13.1

IFN alfa has been demonstrated to potently suppress synthesis of both IL-5 and IL-13 in human leukocytes, making it an attractive agent for the treatment of ulcerative colitis. IFN alfa therapy showed no benefit in patients with Crohn’s disease. This may be explained by the fact that Crohn’s disease is thought to be a Th1 linked disease. IFN alfa therapy seems to be more successful in chronic active ulcerative colitis, a more Th2 linked disorder. Sumer and Palabiyikoglu reported that more than 80% of patients with active ulcerative colitis responded to high dose IFN alfa therapy within two weeks of treatment and were in complete clinical and endoscopic remission after six months of therapy.2 Madsen et al recently presented a study comparing systemic IFN alfa therapy and prednisolone enemas in the treatment of left sided ulcerative colitis.3 Ulcerative colitis is accompanied by high levels of IL-5 in colonic tissue and IFN alfa effectively suppresses IL-5 synthesis in leukocytes. IFN beta has been used in a pilot study investigating its role in patients with steroid refractory active UC.4 In this study, a higher responder rate was observed with a mean time to response of three weeks.

Another IFN beta study in ulcerative colitis has been presented recently.5 In this small, placebo controlled, randomised, dose escalating study, clinical efficacy was observed in 50% of IFN beta treated patients compared with 14% in the placebo group. We recently presented data on the first placebo controlled use of IFN alfa in the treatment of active UC in patients with or without corticosteroid and/or immunosuppressive treatment.6 We observed no significant advantage of any IFN group over placebo but did not observe worsening of disease in any IFN treated patient. The mechanisms of action of IFN alfa are probably multiple but the possible interactions of IFN alfa with the cytokine cascade and immune system are usually not considered. Favouring Th1 responses and suppressing Th2 type immune responses could imply that type 1 IFNs may be therapeutic in diseases such as ulcerative colitis or allergic disorders. We agree with the authors that IFN alfa might have the potential to enhance inflammatory reactions and alloreactivity in certain situations but are also convinced that it has strong immunomodulatory and anti-inflammatory properties. Larger controlled trials with IFN alfa in ulcerative colitis are eagerly awaited.

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Conflict of interest: None declared.

References


The toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4) Asp299Gly polymorphism is associated with colonic localisation of Crohn’s disease without a major role for the Saccharomyces cerevisiae mannnan-LBP-CD14-TLR4 pathway

It is with great interest that we read the paper by Franchimont and colleagues (Gut 2004;53:987–92) in which they described a novel association of the toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4) +896 A>G polymorphism with both Crohn’s disease (CD) and ulcerative colitis (UC), supporting the genetic influence of pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) in triggering inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). PRRs are sensors of pattern associated molecular patterns of microorganisms in the intestinal flora. Independently, we performed a similar study. However, special attention to the presence of anti-Saccharomyces cerevisiae antibody (ASCA) was taken, as Tada and colleagues1 have recently reported that the S cerevisiae mannnan-LBP complex is recognised by CD14 on monocytes signalling through TLR4 leads to the production of proinflammatory cytokines in a manner similar to that induced by lipopolysaccharide (LPS).

Patients and controls were recruited from the Outpatient Department of Gastroenterology, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The group consisted of 112 CD patients and 170 unrelated Dutch Caucasian controls. Diagnosis of disease was based on clinical, histopathological, and endoscopic findings. CD patients were categorised using the Vienna classification (general patient characteristics are described elsewhere). ASCA IgA and IgG ELISAs were performed as described previously.1 Genotyping for the CD14-260 C>T and TLR4+896 A>G single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) was performed as described previously by our group.1 The CD14-260 and TLR4+896 genotypes, allele, and carrier frequencies were compared between the different clinical patient groups and controls. In addition, synergism between CD14 and TLR4 genotypes and alleles (carrier trait analyses) was studied. Vienna classification and ASCA status were included in the statistical modelling.

The results are shown in table 1. The frequency of the G allele at position 896 was significantly increased in CD patients compared with controls (19% v 10%; p = 0.049; odds ratio (OR) 2.1 (95% confidence interval (CI) 1.0–4.1)). Disease phenotype was assessed in patients using the Vienna classification. Carriage of TLR4+896 G significantly increased the risk of colonic localisation of CD compared with non-colonic localisation (43% v 12%; p = 0.0017; OR 5.5 (CI 1.9–15.7); probability of clear trend (test for trend; y2 = 16, p<0.0001) when we compared the increasing frequency of the G allele of TLR4+896 in controls (10%) to CD patients (19%) and to CD patients with colonic localisation (43%).

We also assessed if ASCA status was correlated with carriage of the TLR4 G allele. However, there was no difference between

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Several studies have described both TLR4 +896 A→G and CD14 +260 C→T in CD. Klein et al have described a German population and found an increased incidence of CD14 +260 heterozygous and homzygous mutants in CD patients compared with healthy controls. TLR4 G allele carriage in ASCA positive and ASCA negative patients (23% v 14%; p = 0.33) (data not shown) and there was no difference between TLR4 G allele carriage in ASCA positive and negative CD patients with colonic localisation (40% v 46%; p = 1.00) while the frequency of G allele carriage was identical to that of CD patients with colonic localisation (43%) without correcting for ASCA status.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

References


2 Ouburg S, Molland-Hent J, A van Bodegraven, CV J Mulder, R Linskens, Koning MHMT, Groothuismink ZMA, van der Paardt M,v a.o. Laboratory of Immunogenetics and Department of Gastroenterology, VU University Medical Centre, De Boelelaan 1117, 1081 HV Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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Conflict of interest: None declared.

Reparative chemoradiotherapy for oesophageal cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis

Just as the weakest link in a chain determines how much weight the chain will hold, the weakest link in the data used by Fiorica et al will determine whether or not the conclusions regarding neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy for oesophageal adenocarcinoma are strong. Clearly, the weakest link in their data is the materiality of the Walsh trial, and prior to placing any confidence in the conclusions by Fiorica et al, a careful assessment of the reliability of the Walsh data is imperative. Well known criticisms of the Walsh trial include the lack of routine staging with computed tomography scanning that led to five patients undergoing surgery alone for stage 4 disease, the exclusion of a number of patients in the neoadjuvant arm for “protocol violations” when in fact several had evidence of progressive disease and should have been considered treatment failures, and the lack of a uniform surgical technique that led to five different types of operations being performed and what are arguably the worst surgical results for oesophageal adenocarcinoma reported in the literature. However, these criticisms are overshadowed by a greater problem in the Walsh trial related to internal inconsistencies in the survival data. Careful review of the Walsh manuscript reveals that the survival data in the text of the report does not match the data in the Kaplan-Meier survival curves, but remarkably the discrepancy is only for the neoadjuvant arm. In all cases the survival data for the surgery alone arm matches up precisely. For example, in the text of the manuscript, survival by intention to treat for patients in the neoadjuvant arm is reported as 32%, yet on the Kaplan-Meier graph survival by intention to treat in the neoadjuvant arm is approximately 48%. Similar discrepancies occur at essentially every data point for both the intention to treat and the treatment actually received graphs, but only for the neoadjuvant arm, with survival on the Kaplan-Meier graph improving as one moves through the data in the text. Importantly, the statistics for survival are calculated from the Kaplan-Meier curves, raising concern that the difference in survival between groups is in fact not significant. This alarming discrepancy has never been adequately addressed despite a letter to the New England Journal of Medicine and a subsequent reply by Dr Walsh.
Systemic lidocaine and mexiletine for the treatment of a patient with total ulcerative colitis

In basic research, neural modulation in ulcerative colitis has been shown. In clinical settings, local anaesthetics such as lidocaine and ropivacaine were used, administered per rectum, for the treatment of distal ulcerative colitis with a response rate of 83% after long-term treatment (6–34 weeks) for proctosigmoiditis (n = 49). We report a patient with total ulcerative colitis that was ameliorated by continuous intravenous administration of lidocaine followed by oral administration of mexiletine (a congener of lidocaine).

A 24-year-old male patient with ulcerative colitis was admitted to our hospital. Total ulcerative colitis had been diagnosed one year previously. Disease extent was re-examined by barium study to reveal a total type of colitis. Conventional medical therapies, including systemic steroids (prednisolone, and steroid pulse therapy), 5-aminosalicylate, and leucocytophylaxis were not effective. Abdominal pain with bleeding per rectum was very severe at night. We administered continuous systemic lidocaine (1 mg/min on the first day and 1.3 mg/min on subsequent days) only at night, resulting in complete disappearance of abdominal pain and bloody diarrhoea on the first day of treatment. This therapy was given for one week followed by oral mexiletine (300 mg/day on the first two days and 200 mg/day thereafter) administration. Prednisolone was tapered without exacerbation of colitis during this treatment, and the patient left our hospital.

Clinical reports by Kemler and colleagues, who reported on a patient with ulcerative colitis exacerbated by spinal cord stimulation, and by Peck and Wood, who obtained complete remission of a patient with ulcerative colitis after spinal cord injury, support the involvement of neural control in ulcerative colitis. Systemic lidocaine, which has been shown to suppress only spontaneous ectopic discharges without blocking nerve conduction, and mexiletine may modulate central and/or peripheral nerve function. Thus, in this case, the effectiveness of these drugs could be attributed to modulation of nerve function. Björck et al. found that when using a 2% gel (400 mg lidocaine), maximum plasma levels were 0.5–1.9 mg/l in patients with proctitis two hours after application of the gel. In experimental models, plasma concentrations of 1.2–2.1 mg/l of lidocaine has been shown to be effective for neuropathic pain. Therefore, it is possible that in ulcerative colitis, lidocaine administered per rectum could exert its pharmacological effects after being absorbed into blood and has an effect on central and/or peripheral nerves. Another possibility is direct anti-inflammatory effects of these drugs on immune cells. However, it is not known whether systemic administration of lidocaine can achieve adequate concentrations in colonic tissue to have a direct anti-inflammatory effect on immune cells. A prominent feature of this case was the close association between pain and other symptoms such as bloody diarrhoea. Systemic lidocaine caused prompt symptomatic relief followed by amelioration of ulcerative colitis which was assessed by sigmoidoscopy and blood inflammatory parameters (data not shown), suggesting that pain or pain inducing substances could be a cause of exacerbation of ulcerative colitis as well as a result of the disease.

Lidocaine and mexiletine therapy could be useful for the treatment of the subgroup of patients with ulcerative colitis that are refractory to conventional medical treatments. While we do not know how to select responders to this treatment, pain could be one of the indicators. Y Yokoyama, S Onishi Kocki Medical School, Kocki, Japan

References


Conflict of interest: None declared.

New treatment for bile salt malabsorption

Currently available binding resins used for symptomatic bile salt malabsorption are generally poorly tolerated because of unpalatability and associated gastrointestinal side effects. We suggest that there is a very early alternative, colesevelam hydrochloride (WelChol, Sankyo Pharmaceuticals Inc., Japan).

A 30-year-old man presented with steatorrhea, progressive weight loss, marked abdominal bloating and lethargy after a right hemicolectomy following a road traffic accident in 1966.

Physical examination, relevant blood tests, barium follow through, colonoscopy, and microscopic examination of colonic biopsies were normal. A trial of cholestyramine in preference to a SeChAT scan caused cessation of diarrhoea on one sachet per day. However, his abdominal bloating continued unabated and he found the treatment unpalatable.

Cholestyramine was therefore changed to colesevelam 2.5 g/3.75 g on alternate days. This was well tolerated, with complete cessation of his steatorrhea and lethargy, and no side effects. In addition, he rapidly gained weight.

A further four patients with markedly symptomless bile salt malabsorption resistant to anti diarrhoeal agents and intolerant of cholestyramine were subsequently commenced on colesevelam (table 1). In all of these cases colesevelam was well tolerated with no side effects.

Colesevelam is a non-absorbed water insoluble polymer which sequesters bile acids. It has been approved for usage by the US FDA, and has been received as a valuable alternative for lowering cholesterol. Colesevelam has high affinity for dihydroxy and trihydroxy bile acids in the intestine which causes increased faecal bile acid secretion, reducing the enterohpatic circulation of bile acids. This allows 7-hydroxylase, the rate limiting enzyme in bile acid synthesis, to increase the conversion of hepatic cholesterol to bile acids. It has not yet been approved for use in the UK. One abstract suggests that colesevelam may be beneficial for patients with diarrhoea who have undergone small bowel resection for colour disease. The published data to support its role in bile salt induced diarrhoea. Colesevelam is reported to be 4–6 times as potent as traditional bile salt sequestrants, possibly due to its greater binding affinity for glycocorticosteroid. It is administered in tablet form, and in one study the rate of compliance with colesevelam was 93%.

Table 1: Characteristics of four patients with markedly symptomatic bile salt malabsorption resistant to antidiarrhoeal agents and intolerant of cholestyramine given colesevelam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (y)</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Reason for bile salt malabsorption</th>
<th>Outcome with colesevelam</th>
<th>Duration of colesevelam treatment (months)</th>
<th>Current dose of colesevelam (g/day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Idiopathic</td>
<td>Diarrhoea improved but not tolerated because it induced severe dyspepsia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.75 g/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Right hemicolectomy</td>
<td>Diarrhoea improved but not tolerated due to unpalatability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75 g/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Radiation enteritis and right hemicolectomy</td>
<td>Diarrhoea improved although suffered intractable vomiting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5 g/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Radiation enteritis</td>
<td>Diarrhoea improved although suffered intractable nausea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25 g/day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTICES

The national register of hepatitis C infections with a known date of acquisition

A new call for study proposals.

In 1998, a national register of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections with a known date of acquisition was established. The register was set up to help inform the natural history of HCV related disease in the UK and now contains anonymous data for one of the largest cohorts of individuals with known date HCV infections, with over 1120 registered patients. The majority of infections in the register are those that were acquired following transfusion of HCV infected blood that was issued before the introduction of routine screening of the blood supply for HCV, but other routes of acquisition are represented.

In order to get maximum benefit from this national resource, the register steering group would like to invite clinical and epidemiological researchers to submit proposals to access data held in the register. It is envisaged that a variety of studies might benefit from linkage with or access to the register, and proposals from all specialties and institutions are welcomed. Such studies are urgently needed to help determine the current and future burden of HCV related disease on healthcare services, and to assess the impact of currently available treatments as well as those that may become available in the future.

Any researchers interested in applying for access to information held within the national register should contact Dr Helen Harris (Register Co-ordinator) or Ms Shirley Cole (Research Assistant), Immunisation Department, CDSC, Centre for Infections, Health Protection Agency, 1 Colindale Avenue, London. NW9 6EQ, UK (tel: +44 (0)20 8200 6868 ext. 7676 (Wednesday to Friday) or ext. 7906 (Monday to Friday); fax: +44 (0)20 8200 7868; email: helen.harris@hpa.org.uk or shirley.cole@hpa.org.uk).

No data will be released that could identify individual patients directly or via linkage to other data. Any study proposals should then be submitted to the register co-ordinator for consideration by the steering group by Thursday 31 March 2005 (deadline).

6th International Symposium on Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders

This symposium is co-sponsored by the Office of Continuing Medical Education, University of Wisconsin Medical School, and the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). It will take place on 7–10 April 2005 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, at The Pfister Hotel, 424 E. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202 (tel: +1 414 273 8222; toll free: +1 800 538 8222; fax: +1 414 273 5025; email: info@thepfisterhotel.com; web: http://www.iffgd.org/symposium2005.html).

CORRECTIONS

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In reference 38 of the paper by C Gasche and P Grundtner, published in the January issue (Genotypes and phenotypes in Crohn’s disease: do they help in clinical management? Gut 2005;54:162–7), the page span is incorrect, it should read 1658–64.

In the paper by Sheu et al in the July 2003 issue of Gut (B-S Sheu, S-M Sheu, H-B Yang, A-H Huang, and J-J Wu. Host gastric Lewis expression determines the bacterial density of Helicobacter pylori in babA2 genopositive infection. Gut 2003;52:927–932), the B and C slides of figure 1 have been transposed and the arrow on D should be labelled Le" not Le".