Myositis associated graft-versus-host-disease presenting as respiratory muscle weakness

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Abstract

Myositis associated with graft-versus-host-disease (GVHD) typically presents with proximal muscle weakness, myalgias, and a raised creatinine phosphokinase (CPK) level. We report a case of a 51 year old man who developed respiratory muscle weakness five years after an allogeneic bone marrow transplant for multiple myeloma. His symptoms included tachypnoea, abdominal paradox, and orthopnoea. Pulmonary function tests revealed diminished vital capacity and maximal inspiratory and expiratory pressures. Serum CPK levels were raised and a peripheral muscle biopsy specimen was consistent with GVHD. He improved with immunosuppressive therapy.

Case report

A 51 year old man who was a non-smoker was admitted to the hospital with a three month history of progressive orthopnoea and cough. He had undergone an allogeneic BMT from a matched sibling donor for multiple myeloma in 1993. His course was complicated by GVHD involving the skin, bronchiolitis obliterans of the lungs, pulmonary embolism, and central nervous system toxoplasmosis. On admission his medications included prednisone 20 mg alternating with 15 mg daily, trimethoprim-sulphamethoxazole 20 ml twice daily Saturday and Sunday, clindamycin 300 mg three times daily three times per week, pyrimethamine 25 mg three times per week, leucovorin 5 mg daily, fluticasone 250 µg twice daily, and salbutamol four times daily. Clinically he was tachypnoeic, using accessory muscles of respiration as well as having abdominal paradox, particularly in the supine position. He was noted to have slightly decreased peripheral muscle strength in the upper extremities. The deltoid, triceps, and biceps muscles were graded 4/5 while the muscle groups in the lower limbs were normal strength. A chest radiograph did not show evidence of active pulmonary disease. Arterial blood gas tensions showed evidence of hypoventilation with pH 7.39, PaCO2 6.4 kPa, PaO2 10.5 kPa, and HCO3 29 mmol/l on room air. Nocturnal nasal BIPAP was initiated in hospital with symptomatic improvement of his orthopnoea.

Blood tests showed markedly raised CPK levels and pulmonary function tests revealed significantly decreased vital capacity and severely reduced maximum inspiratory and expiratory pressures (table 1) consistent with respiratory muscle weakness. The vital capacity was performed in the upright position and hence probably overestimated the supine vital capacity by at least 30%. Chest fluoroscopy showed severely diminished (virtually absent) bilateral diaphragm motion. No increase in diaphragmatic excursion was seen during the sniff test. A computed tomographic scan of the neck and mediastinum did not show any lesion along the expected course of the phrenic nerve to explain his diaphragmatic weakness. Electromyography (EMG) showed positive sharp waves and fibrillation in the left biceps, triceps, infraspinatus, right biceps, diaphragm, and the paraspinal muscles consistent with either...
myositis, axonal degeneration, or neuromuscular junction dysfunction. A muscle biopsy of the left triceps showed evidence of acute and chronic inflammation with associated muscle fibre necrosis (fig 1). The actively necrotic areas were infiltrated by both polymorphic leukocytes and mononuclear cells. Gram stain and culture of the tissue failed to reveal any infectious aetiology.

The results of the investigations were interpreted as indicating an inflammatory myositis involving not only the proximal muscles, but both the inspiratory and expiratory respiratory muscles, particularly the diaphragm. His prednisone was increased to 60 mg daily and one day later he was started on cyclosporin 50 mg twice daily and mycophenolate mofetil (MMF) 1 g twice a day. His symptoms improved dramatically over the following week and his CPK level normalised. Repeat pulmonary function testing showed improved muscle strength with increased vital capacity and normal inspiratory and expiratory pressures. Lung volumes measured on 27 August (table 1) revealed total lung capacity of 5.51 l (77% predicted), residual volume of 2.47 l (117% predicted), and normal transfer factor. One month after starting treatment he no longer had complete resolution.

### Discussion

Inflammatory myopathy has been seen with chronic GVHD, although involvement of the respiratory muscles is rare with only one case report found in the literature. Five years after BMT our patient developed orthopnoea, general muscle weakness, and increased CPK levels with evidence on clinical examination, pulmonary function testing, and EMG studies of respiratory muscle weakness, particularly of the diaphragm. Although the EMG results are non-specific, they can be seen in inflammatory myopathies caused by GVHD. He responded dramatically to prednisone, cyclosporin, and MMF with resolution of his symptoms, normalisation of his CPK, and improvement of his vital capacity and respiratory muscle strength to the normal range. Interestingly, the spirometric parameters, as well as the inspiratory and expiratory pressures, improved between 22 July and 11 August before his immunosuppression was increased. His corticosteroid inhaler dose was increased during that period as well as his use of β agonists, which may have contributed to an improvement in his forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) and forced vital capacity (FVC). Respiratory muscle strength may have improved following the institution of nocturnal BIPAP which began on 24 July. BIPAP is known to decrease the work of breathing which may have allowed the respiratory muscles to recover partially and hence improve their function.

The muscle biopsy specimen showed evidence of muscle necrosis and an inflammatory infiltrate. The inflammatory cells seen were both neutrophils and monocytes which is somewhat atypical of GVHD myositis. Reported cases have documented a lymphocytic/myocytic predominant infiltrate on the muscle biopsy specimen. The presence of neutrophils in this case raised the possibility of an infectious process although no organism was cultured. Toxoplasma infection is a recognised risk in the immunocompromised host. Increased toxoplasma IgM levels suggestive of an active infection have been reported in idiopathic polymyositis but not in GVHD myositis. Our patient had a history of CNS toxoplasmosis and was on suppressive therapy with clindamycin, pyrimethamine, and leucovorin. No toxoplasma organism was cultured in blood, cerebrospinal fluid, or muscle biopsy, making active infection very unlikely in this patient. In addition, increasing the steroid dose would have worsened infection if present, but instead his clinical picture improved. Other possible causes for his weakness include steroid myopathy, but this seems unlikely given his clinical response to augmented steroids.

In conclusion, myositis associated with GVHD typically affects the proximal muscles, but it can also affect the respiratory muscles and cause significant morbidity in this population. The one published case report of GVHD involving the respiratory muscles resulted in respiratory failure and death soon after a donor leucocyte transfusion. It is possible that the donor T cells were responsible for causing severe GVHD. Our case illustrates that BMT patients are at risk for respiratory muscle weakness.

### Table 1 Sequential values for blood tests and pulmonary function tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blood tests</th>
<th>July 22</th>
<th>Aug 11</th>
<th>Aug 20</th>
<th>Aug 27</th>
<th>Oct 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPK (U/L)</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FVC (l)</td>
<td>2.06 (41)</td>
<td>2.39 (47)</td>
<td>3.04 (60)</td>
<td>3.24 (58)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁ (l)</td>
<td>1.40 (35)</td>
<td>1.81 (45)</td>
<td>1.92 (48)</td>
<td>2.03 (50)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁/FVC (%)</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIP (cm H₂O)</td>
<td>32 (31)</td>
<td>49 (48)</td>
<td>59 (58)</td>
<td>99 (99)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP (cm H₂O)</td>
<td>64.5 (42)</td>
<td>81 (52)</td>
<td>114 (74)</td>
<td>145 (94)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CPK = creatine phosphokinase; FVC = forced vital capacity; FEV₁ = forced expiratory volume in one second; MIP, MEP = maximum inspiratory and expiratory pressures; CSA = cyclosporin; MMF = mycophenolate mofetil.

Values in parentheses are % predicted.

**Figure 1** Muscle biopsy specimen of left triceps showing evidence of acute and chronic inflammation associated with muscle necrosis.
involvement with GVHD and that this can be an insidious process occurring many years after the BMT. Furthermore, once muscle atrophy occurs, it has been suggested that the muscle may not recover despite increased immunosuppression and control of the inflammatory process. For this reason, a high clinical index of suspicion is needed for accurate diagnosis so that appropriate treatment can be instituted promptly.


CT scanning in lung cancer

We read with interest the article by Laroche et al on the cost effectiveness of performing computed tomographic (CT) scanning before fibreoptic bronchoscopy (FOB) in patients with suspected endobronchial carcinoma.1 Compared with the group in which FOB was performed blind to the result of the CT scan, in the group in which the CT result was available before FOB was performed the FOB was obviated in 24% of patients, a higher probable before FOB was performed the FOB was in the group in which the CT result was available blind to the result of the CT scan, compared with the group in which FOB was performed.

We have recently performed a complementary study evaluating the ability of CT scanning to predict in which patients with an abnormal chest radiograph and high clinical suspicion of bronchial carcinoma FOB is likely to provide a positive histological diagnosis. In distinction to Laroche et al, we excluded patients with pulmonary collapse but included patients with peripheral lesions.

We identified four CT features which predict a positive FOB. In descending order of accuracy these were: (1) a segmental or larger airway leading to the mass; (2) an endobronchial component; (3) situation of the mass within 4 cm of the origin of the nearest lobar bronchus; and (4) an ill defined edge to the mass. A “gestalt” assessment of the likelihood of positive FOB was slightly more accurate than any individual factor. When two or more predictive factors were present, FOB was positive in >70% of our selected series. Of interest, proximity of the lesion to the hilum per se was a poor predictor of positive FOB.

We agree with Laroche et al that CT scanning should be performed before FOB in most patients with an abnormal chest radiograph and a high clinical suspicion of bronchial carcinoma. Our study clarifies how the CT appearances can be used to select those patients in whom FOB is unlikely to be diagnostic and should probably not be performed.

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[Editors’ note: The authors of the paper were given the opportunity to respond to this letter but declined to do so.]

“Opportunist” mycobacterial infection

With reference to the letter by Drs Davies and Grange in the August edition of Thorax and the response to this by Drs Campbell and Ormerod representing the committee that prepared the guidelines to which this letter refers,2 and despite the hope of Drs Campbell and Ormerod that arguments about the nomenclature of mycobacterial grouping would have been laid to rest by now, I believe I can see why this issue remains topical.

Drs Davies and Grange argue that the term “environmental mycobacteria” is the preferred term and should be universally adopted. However, as recently as 1994 Dr Davies3 suggested that, in recognising it is time the world agreed on what to call these mycobacteria, the term “non-tuberculous mycobacteria” as he now suggests in his letter.4 With high profile, expert clinicians changing their minds and advice, it is hardly surprising that guidance is somewhat unreliable and continuously being sought, especially by more junior members of the staff. I suspect that, in view of this, it will be some time before this issue is finally laid to rest.

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Tuberculosis in Cuba

I congratulate Dr Marrero and colleagues on the excellent paper published recently in Thorax about their experience with tuberculosis in Cuba from 1962 to 1997 and consider that many developing countries, together with some developed countries like ours, should imitate their methods and their political commitment to a national tuberculosis programme. However, I wish to raise some questions and to comment on some points.

I was pleasantly surprised at the considerable improvement in the case finding from 1993 onwards. From 1983 to 1993 the number of new cases of tuberculosis per year ranged from 514 to 789 with 85.5–91% smear positive patients (similar to the period since 1962). In 1994 there was a sudden increase to 1617 cases (from 789 cases in 1993) with a significant decrease in the percentage of smear positive patients to 56% (from 91% in 1993). This sharp fall was maintained up to 1997. The authors consider that this change was the result of improved case finding through expansion of the programme and that “clinical symptoms and radiological features suggestive of tuberculosis but with negative sputum smears and negative culture” may have been a significant factor, but in my opinion this is already included in the study.

Letters to the editor

Hyperventilation syndrome

The editorial by Dr Gardner1 on controversial aspects of the hyperventilation syndrome (HVS) refers to our study2 in the same issue of Thorax. This study showed that patients with HVS have an accentuated increase in ventilation in response to changes in body position or to hyperventilation and may be responsible for the symptoms typical of HVS and documented respiratory alkalosis (with concomitant hypocapnia) in the arterial blood during such an episode. We consider this to be close to the original definition by Geisler et al.3 The approach to the definition of HVS was therefore physiological and unambiguous. As this is clearly described in the study, it is difficult to understand the confusion by Dr Gardner who erroneously concluded that the diagnosis was based on the presence of normal PaCO₂. The measured orthostatic response which was the object of investigation is another matter and should not be confused with the process of diagnosis.

Finally, we would point out that the main purpose of our paper was to describe the accentuated breathing response to orthostatic changes in patients with HVS. We hope that this finding will add to the knowledge of the pathophysiology of HVS and that the classification of the disorder has been objectively documented. In contrast to Dr Gardner, we also believe that the finding of hyperventilation may be of importance when the initiating cause is known, since not all patients with cardiovascular diseases have such a tendency. The disproportionate compensatory mechanisms of ventilation and the resulting hypocapnia may therefore be a sign of inherent susceptibility to hyperventilation and may be responsible for part of the patients’ symptoms.

In our study2 the organic causes of dyspnoea were excluded as far as possible by specialist care in a university hospital. For the assessment of the ventilatory pattern we used the same issue of Thorax as defined by Geisler et al.3 The approach to the definition of HVS was therefore physiological and unambiguous. As this is clearly described in the study, it is difficult to understand the confusion by Dr Gardner who erroneously concluded that the diagnosis was based on the presence of normal PaCO₂. The measured orthostatic response which was the object of investigation is another matter and should not be confused with the process of diagnosis.

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is much more complicated. Instead, we stated that measurements of pulmonary gas exchange during the orthostatic test “are/may be useful in the clinical evaluation of patients with hyperventilation disorders”. However, based on our results and clinical experience over 15 years, we believe that this test is, indeed, helpful as part of the diagnostic evaluation of HVS.

AUTHORS’ REPLY We are grateful for the comments by Dr Ringbaek but, unfortunately, he has confused the data from two separate tables published in our paper. Test 1 concerns baseline data which was not included in the analysis. Test 2 (176.4 and 149.1) concerns the results of the shuttle walking test (SWT) with an oxygen cylinder and air cylinder in the group as a whole and not separate oxygen training (OT) and air training (AT) groups. This was clearly stated in the legend.

The study was concerned with the additional effect of oxygen on a training programme in patients with severe COPD. We take the point that the results depend on the method used to compare the two groups, as is often the case with statistical analysis. However, change was chosen as a more sensitive outcome as it enables one to take account of baseline variables.

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BOOK REVIEW


This excellent book, written by one of the pioneers of sleep disordered breathing in the UK, provides a broad coverage of disorders of sleep that is especially relevant for respiratory physicians. The particular strength of this book is that it provides fascinating background information on the physiology and pathophysiology of sleep which ideally complements the chapters on more specific respiratory problems such as obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome and disorders of respiratory drive and mechanics. Respiratory physicians who see patients with obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome will invariably get involved in trying to assist those with clear evidence of a sleep disorder but without any apparent common respiratory problems. This book will provide such physicians with a background working knowledge of the differential diagnosis in these circumstances, together with some especially helpful summaries and breakdowns of the investigation and management of abnormal sleep cycles.

The book is also well laid out. I found the layout of the book in twin columns to be physically very accessible, and my only criticism is the frequent use of abbreviations in tables and text which, for the unfamiliar reader, is the only interruption to the flow of ideas in the book. Overall, however, I think this is a highly informative text which I imagine will provide a valuable resource to anyone seeing patients who complain of sleepiness.—JB
Supplemental oxygen in COPD

T RINGBAEK

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