Short reports

Occupational asthma due to heated freon

JL MALO, G GAGNON, A CARTIER

From the Department of Chest Medicine, Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur, Montreal, Canada

We describe a subject who developed an increase in symptoms of asthma at work, where he was exposed to heated fluorocarbon (freon). Specific inhalation challenges confirmed the diagnosis.

Case report

A 46 year old asthmatic man reported an exacerbation of symptoms over the previous two years. He had first developed asthma when he was 15 years of age. After the age of 20 asthma was present only on exercise and he never required regular bronchodilator treatment. He had no previous history of rhinitis, infantile eczema, migraine, or urticaria. He was a non-smoker. He had started working in the maintenance department of a refrigeration company eight years before, and had noticed asthmatic attacks at work in the past two years. His work consisted of soldering with acetylene and wire made of copper, silver, and phosphorus (without flux) on copper pipes. During this process freon circulating in the pipes was heated and released into the air. After a few minutes of soldering the man experienced dyspnoea and wheezing. These symptoms persisted during the afternoon and on the day after leaving work. He used an isoprenaline inhaler if needed but took no other treatment. Skinprick test responses to a battery of 15 commonly inhaled allergens were all negative.

Investigations were begun after the patient had been away from work for three weeks. His initial FEV₁/forced

vital capacity (FVC) ratio measured on a Collins spirometer (W E Collins Incorporated, Braintree, Mass) was 3.5 l/5 l (71%) (82% of the predicted value¹). Histamine phosphate inhalation challenges were performed according to a standardised procedure.² The concentration of histamine causing a 20% change in FEV₁ (PC₂₀) was 0.14 mg/ml. The following specific inhalation challenges were carried out in a large (15 × 20 ft) soldering room in the hospital workshop (results are shown in the figure):

1 A 17 minute exposure to soldering with acetylene and wire on a copper wire with release of the heated freon circulating in the pipe produced a 66% fall in FEV₁ 10 minutes after the end of exposure. The FEV₁ improved thereafter and was back to 23% below baseline three hours later. Subsequently, FEV₁ again fell progressively and was at 60% below baseline six and a half hours after the end of challenge. On a previous control day (not included in the figure) there was no significant change in FEV₁ for a similar period.

2 One week later, when baseline FEV₁ was back to ±10% of the challenge day baseline and PC₂₀ was 0.19 mg/ml, the subject was exposed on two different days to soldering with acetylene and wire—without freon on one day and with unheated freon on the other day. There were no significant changes in FEV₁ after these challenges.

3 On a different day the subject used the same acetylene torch to heat for 5 minutes a copper pipe through which freon circulated and was released. An asthmatic reaction

Address for reprint requests: Dr Jean-Luc Malo, Department of Chest Medicine, Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur, 5400 W, Gouin Blvd, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H4J 1C5

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similar to the one induced by the first challenge, though somewhat weaker, was documented.

Discussion

Acute airway obstruction after inhalation of a fluoro-propellant contained in commercial pressurised bronchodilator aerosols³ and hair sprays^{4,5} have been described. This effect is short term and is generally thought to be due to a direct effect on irritant receptors of the bronchial tract. The bronchoconstriction described in our patient was of a different type. A dual (immediate and non-immediate) temporal pattern was observed. Such a reaction has been described after antigenic inhalation challenges⁶ and, more recently, after exercise.⁷ Although the exact mechanism of the reaction seen in our patient is uncertain, we consider that the dual temporal pattern excludes non-specific bronchial irritation. An irritant mechanism can also be ruled out on the ground that exposure to soldering with acetylene with the release of fumes did not cause bronchoconstriction. The fact that unheated freon did not produce bronchoconstriction whereas heated freon did is interesting. This suggests that freon can be activated by heating and cause bronchoconstriction in a specific way, either alone or when combined with acetylene.

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