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Pulmonary candidiasis in cystic fibrosis

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SUMMARY A child with cystic fibrosis and asthma developed pulmonary candidiasis. Predisposing factors in this patient were prolonged antibiotic therapy, high-dose corticosteroids, and intravenous catherisation. A diagnosis was made by lung puncture and confirmed by rapid response to 5-fluorocytosine.

Pulmonary candidiasis is an invasion of viable lung tissue by Candida species. It has long been known that this occurs in patients with impaired host resistance—such as those with Hodgkin’s disease or leukaemia, and those on cytotoxic therapy. In 1844 Bennett commented: ‘it is indicative of great depression of the vital powers and impairment of the nutritive functions of the economy’ (Winner and Hurley, 1966).

Candida colonisation is seen in the tracheobronchial tree of children with cystic fibrosis on long-term antibiotics. Pulmonary candidiasis, however, has not been reported in such children.

This is a report of a child with cystic fibrosis and asthma requiring corticosteroids, who developed pulmonary candidiasis and responded to treatment with 5-fluorocytosine.

Case report

A 6½-year-old girl had cystic fibrosis diagnosed in the first year of life and associated bronchial asthma. She was initially well maintained on standard antibiotic and physical therapy for cystic fibrosis lung disease, with intermittent bronchodilator treatment for the asthma.

At age 5 years she required continuous bronchodilators and, subsequently, three intermittent courses of corticosteroids to control the wheeze. At 6 years more prolonged courses of high-dose prednisolone were necessary to control quite severe airways obstruction but these were reduced to a maintenance dose of 4 mg daily. During a course of high-dose prednisolone for an acute exacerbation of airways obstruction she became increasingly lethargic, lost weight, and developed a fever which reached 39°C daily. She developed rapid shallow breathing with fine inspiratory crepitations. Chest x-rays showed increased reticulonodular markings (Figure).

Intravenous cloxacillin and gentamicin, and later chloramphenicol and carbencillin, were given for nearly 4 weeks without response. On several occasions sputum cultures grew Escherichia coli, Streptococcus species, Haemophilus influenzae, and Achromobacter species, but moderate to profuse growth of Candida species, not C. albicans, was always present. Multiple blood cultures were negative. Immune function tests were normal. Tuberculosis, autoimmune disease, and sepsis elsewhere were excluded.

A lung puncture was performed with instillation of 2 ml saline into the lung and aspiration of alveolar fluid. This fluid was smeared and cultured. A pure growth of Candida species, not C. albicans, was obtained.

She was started on 5-fluorocytosine orally; within
blood culture does not exclude invasive candidiasis (Mirsky and Cuttner, 1972). Sputum culture does not indicate invasion. The most reliable method of diagnosis is demonstration of the fungus in lung tissue histologically. Lung puncture is next best, but even so, Candida can be cultured from lung fluid without invasion (Klein, 1969; Bandt et al., 1972).

Treatment of pulmonary candidiasis with 5-fluorocytosine appears to be effective (Kohlschütter and Pelet, 1974). There are few side effects with this drug, those described being predominantly anorexia, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea. There have been some reports of haemopoietic depression as well as renal and hepatic toxicity. Candida has been noted to develop resistance to 5-fluorocytosine. Amphotericin B has also been used for the treatment of candidiasis but it was not used in this instance because of its known toxicity. The combination of these two drugs in extremely ill patients has been recommended (Montgomerie et al., 1975).

Pulmonary candidiasis, although a rare complication, should be considered in children with cystic fibrosis who develop a febrile illness not responding to antibiotics. This complication may become an increasing problem with the use of corticosteroids and long-term intravenous catheters in a small group of children with cystic fibrosis in whom this type of treatment appears warranted.

References


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