High plasma urea concentrations in collodion babies

D W BEVERLEY AND D WHEELER

Bradford Children's Hospital, Bradford, and St James's University Hospital, Leeds

We describe two infants born with a collodion membrane; both were treated with a product containing 10% urea and 5% lactic acid and as a consequence were found to have a raised plasma urea concentration.

Therapeutic and toxic transdermal absorption of drugs is now well documented.1-6 We describe two infants with collodion baby syndrome who developed a high plasma urea concentration during treatment with Calmurid (10% urea, 5% lactic acid) when it was used as a skin hydration and keratolytic agent.
Case reports

Case 1. This girl was the fifth born child of unrelated Asian parents and weighed 2470 g at term. The third child in the family had been previously noted to be a collodion baby at birth, to have had lamellar ichthyosis, and to have died as a cot death at the age of 8 months. The index patient had a collodion membrane at birth with pronounced ectropion. For the first few days of life she was treated with simple emollient creams but subsequently Calmurid was applied liberally four times a day for her skin condition. A test for plasma urea concentration was not performed at this time. She required continued treatment with Calmurid as, on shedding the membrane, she was found to have lamellar ichthyosis like her sibling. On day 60 she developed an intercurrent chest infection and was found to have a raised urea concentration on routine testing. On stopping the treatment with Calmurid the plasma urea fell to normal concentrations only to rise again on recommencing treatment. Treatment with Calmurid was therefore stopped (Figure).

Case 2. This first born girl was born to unrelated white parents at 34 weeks’ gestation, weighing 2550 g. At birth it was noted that she was coated with a collodion membrane and had short tapering fingers and ectropion. The skin was initially treated with emulsifying ointment and subsequently with Calmurid applied liberally four times a day. After this treatment the membrane began to peel and revealed normal underlying skin. Treatment with Calmurid had to be stopped, however, because of a precipitant rise in the plasma urea concentration despite a normal creatinine concentration (Figure).

Throughout this time the child was clinically hydrated and passed plenty of urine.

Discussion

We believe that both infants described developed a raised blood urea concentration as a consequence of treatment with the keratolytic agent Calmurid, which contains 10% urea. It is known that the skin of preterm infants is more permeable than that of the term infant, though this increase in permeability decreases within two to three weeks of birth. The skin of the term infant is impervious to the absorption of many drugs and in this respect is similar to the skin of adults.

It has been recognised, however, that many substances such as hexachlorophene, alcohol, topical corticosteroids, and iodine can be absorbed through the skin with toxic effects. Therapeutically, several drugs are now marketed for transdermal use in adults (nitroglycerine, scopolamine, and clonidine), and the percutaneous administration of theophylline in preterm infants with apnoeic spells has recently been described by Evans.

Neither a search of the published reports nor contact with the manufacturers and the Committee of Safety of Medicines have revealed any reports of a high blood urea concentration associated with this product. It is known that the damaged skin of a neonate is more permeable to drugs than normal skin, which may account for the reasons why our two infants developed a high blood urea concentration. Although we contacted our dermatological colleagues, we were unable to find any other children who were receiving treatment with Calmurid. It would be interesting to know whether this was only a problem of the newborn period or whether it extends into older childhood. The fact that there was a fall in the peak plasma urea concentration with age (35 mmol/l on day 2 in case 2, 15 mmol/l on day 60 in case 1) might suggest that transcutaneous absorption of urea becomes less of a problem as the skin matures. This theory would be further supported by the lack of reports of this side effect in the adult studies. We would be interested to hear from other paediatricians to determine the possible extent of this problem. Fortunately, there were no apparent side effects in our two patients, though potentially they could have become dehydrated through an osmotic diuresis. Other side effects of urea include gastric irritation and vomiting when given by mouth and headache, nausea, vomiting, confusion, and a fall in the blood pressure when
given intravenously. Continued administration may lead to hyponatraemia and hypokalaemia through excessive loss of sodium and potassium.

We report these cases for two reasons; firstly, to re-emphasise the fact that the skin is not a completely impermeable barrier and, secondly, as a reminder that although urea itself is not a particularly toxic substance, other drugs that are used in the treatment of ichthyotic skin conditions—for example, salicylates and retinoids—are potentially more toxic, especially when absorbed systemically.

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References


Correspondence to Dr D W Beverley, St James’s University Hospital, Leeds, West Yorkshire, England.

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Inadequate humidification of respiratory gases during mechanical ventilation of the newborn

W O TARNOW-MORDI, P SUTTON, AND A R WILKINSON

Neonatal Unit, Department of Paediatrics, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford

SUMMARY Proximal airway humidity was measured during mechanical ventilation in 14 infants using an electronic hygrometer. Values below recommended minimum humidity of adult inspired gas were recorded on 251 of 396 occasions. Inadequate humidification, largely due to inadequate proximal airway temperature, is commoner than recognised in infants receiving mechanical ventilation.

Little is known about actual values of inspired gas humidity during mechanical ventilation of infants. The British Standard recommends as adequate a minimum of 33 mg H2O/l of inspired gas in adults and older children receiving ventilatory help. 1 Previously described methods for measuring gas humidity have included the use of chemical absorptive agents, estimation of dew point, wet and dry bulb thermometry, gravimetry, 2 and mass spectrometry. 3 None has proved easy to use in clinical practice. Electronic hygrometry is a recent technique that seems more suitable for clinical use. 4 We describe the first experience with a small, commercially available, electronic hygrometer in monitoring gas humidity in the proximal airway of mechanically ventilated infants.

Methods

The device is a battery operated hygrometer (Rotronics Hygroskop GTL, Centronics Sales Ltd, Croydon) measuring 25×6 cm. Temperature is determined by a heat sensitive thermocouple and relative humidity by a capacitative sensor. This is an organic polymer dielectric whose capacitance varies linearly with ambient moisture content between 0–100% relative humidity. Its response is non-linear in supersaturated atmospheres, tending to overestimate relative humidity above 100%. 4

The sensor and thermocouple were most conveniently placed in the patient manifold of the ventilator circuit 3–6 cm distal to the temperature probe of the humidifier. At this site the device estimated the average humidity of inspired and expired gas, not that of inspired gas alone. Absolute humidity was calculated from relative humidity using values of saturated water vapour pressure in standard tables. 5 No attempt was made to correct for daily variations in atmospheric pressure, the rise in pressure in the circuit due to positive pressure ventilation, or the variation in estimation of relative humidity between air and 100% oxygen.

Humidity measurements. The humidity sensor was