Growth and endocrine function in steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome

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SUMMARY  Longitudinal height data and physical development were assessed in 29 boys and 12 girls taking long term steroid treatment for steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome. Growth in both boys and girls, assessed by changes in height standard deviation score (ΔHt SDS), worsened significantly with chronological age. There was a significant negative correlation between ΔHt SDS and duration of treatment in boys, but not in girls. There was no correlation between ΔHt SDS and relapse rate or the use of cyclophosphamide. In the boys, Ht SDS decreased significantly only after the age of 10 years and was associated with delay in the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics.

Eight adolescent boys were assessed endocrinologically by an overnight hormone profile. Blunting of the pulsatility of growth hormone and gonadotrophins was seen in six. Normal profiles were seen in two subjects who were both off steroid treatment at the time of study.

Abnormal endocrine function in adolescent boys treated long term for steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome corresponded with the clinical picture of delayed onset of puberty, which accounted for severe growth retardation in a substantial proportion of subjects.

The adverse effects of steroid treatment on growth have been related to both dosage and duration of treatment.1–3 Many children with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome receive steroid treatment for several years and in many cases treatment continues throughout adolescence.4 Current practice for long term treatment is to use a single dose of prednisolone on alternate mornings. This regimen has been suggested to minimise growth retardation and to leave final height unaffected5–7; ‘catch-up’ growth has been reported after treatment is stopped.8

We have observed, however, several adolescents taking long term alternate day steroids for steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome who were significantly short or whose sexual maturation was delayed, or both, and who, as a result, were severely emotionally disturbed. Retrospective analysis of the longitudinal growth patterns of subjects currently attending our paediatric renal clinic with this syndrome, suggested that after the age of 10 years maturational delay was a prominent clinical feature. We therefore investigated the endocrine function of boys with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome in an attempt to determine the site of action of steroids on the hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal axis, which may account for delayed puberty and subsequent short stature.

Patients and methods

All the subjects with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome who were steroid dependent and attended Guy’s Hospital paediatric renal clinic between July 1984 and January 1986 were included in the study (total 41: 29 boys, 12 girls). Relapses of proteinuria were treated with prednisolone (60 mg/m²/day) and maintenance steroids were given on alternate days at the dose found to be necessary to keep the urine protein free. An eight week course of cyclophosphamide (2.5–3 mg/kg/day) was given to children who required unacceptably high doses of maintenance steroids to prevent relapse. All subjects had normal plasma creatinine concentrations.

The following were obtained from the notes and at examination:

(1) Chronological age (year) at diagnosis, at first clinic visit to Guy’s Hospital (14 boys and four girls were seen initially at other hospitals)
and at most recent height measurement (table 1).
(2) First available height measurement at Guy's Hospital (first Ht) and subsequently at yearly intervals until the most recent examination or at the time of stopping steroid treatment (last Ht). Height was measured by the clinic nurse using a Harpenden stadiometer. For each height (cm) the height standard deviation score (Ht SDS) was calculated according to the formula, Ht SDS = \( x - \bar{x} / SD \), where \( x \) and SD are the age matched population mean height and standard deviation respectively and \( x \) is the patient's height (population data according to Tanner et al\(^9\)).
(3) Duration of treatment calculated as the number of years on steroid treatment between first and last height measurements (table 1).
(4) The number of relapses between first and last height measurement. A relapse was defined as an episode of proteinuria treated with an increase in prednisolone treatment to 60 mg/m\(^2\)/day.
(5) The number of courses of cyclophosphamide treatment.
(6) Pubertal staging (according to Tanner\(^10\)) in those patients still attending Guy's Hospital.

Statistical differences between first and last Ht SDS were analysed by comparison of 95% confidence intervals. The change in Ht SDS from first to last measurements (ΔHt SDS) was correlated with age at final examination, duration of treatment, and the relapse rate by Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare ΔHt SDS in those children treated and those not treated with cyclophosphamide; to compare both the relapse rate and the change in Ht SDS before and after the age of 10 years; and to compare ΔHt SDS in boys age less than 8 years at final examination with boys who began treatment after the age of 8 years. Results are expressed as mean (SD).

An overnight hormone profile study was performed in eight adolescent boys who were short or delayed in puberty, or both. Three boys were off steroid treatment and clinically well with no proteinuria. Each study commenced at 1800 hours, when an indwelling cannula was inserted into a forearm vein. Adequacy of sleep was analysed using a portable continuous electroencephalograph (Oxford Medilog System).\(^11\) Blood samples were taken every 20 minutes from 2000 hours through to 0700 hours (3 ml blood per sample). Plasma was subsequently stored at -20°C until assay. Growth hormone (mU/l) and gonadotrophins (luteinising hormone and follicle stimulating hormone IU/l) were measured in each sample and testosterone (nmol/l) and insulin like growth factor I (IGF–1, U/ml) in intermittent samples throughout the night. All samples from each profile were batch analysed.

Growth hormone was measured by radioimmunoassay using the first International Reference Preparation (IRP) reference 66/217, with intra-assay coefficient of variation of 5-0% and 2-4% at 10-8 and 20-4 mU/l respectively and interassay coefficient of variation of 10-1% at 7-5 mU/l. Gonadotrophins were measured by radioimmunoassay using the first IRP reference of luteinising hormone, 68/40 and follicle stimulating hormone, 78/549, with an intra-assay coefficient of variation of (a) luteinising hormone, 8-3% and 10% at 2-4 and 15-0 IU/l, respectively and (b) follicle stimulating hormone, 10-3% and 7-3% at 2-8 and 14-9 IU/l; testosterone was measured by radioimmunoassay using a standard kit method (Diagnostic Products Corporation). Serum IGF–1 was measured by radioimmunoassay after acid-ethanol extraction.\(^12\) Antiserum R557A and \(^{125}\)I–IGF–1\(^13\) were kindly provided by Dr D J Morrell (Institute of Child Health, London). Intra-assay and interassay coefficients of variation were <8% and <10% respectively. IGF–1 values are expressed as potency relative to pooled normal adult human reference serum defined as 1 unit IGF–1/ml.

Growth hormone and gonadotrophin hormone peak analysis was performed both visually and using the 'Pulsar' programme which was modified locally to include a calculation of area under the curve by summation of trapezoids. Statistical comparison of the association of overnight profile measurements

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Table 1  Median (range) age at diagnosis and at first and last examination and duration of treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys (n=29)</th>
<th>Girls (n=12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis (years)</td>
<td>3.1 (1.3–13.5)</td>
<td>3.0 (1.6–9.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at first height measurement (years)</td>
<td>4.3 (2.0–13.6)</td>
<td>3.5 (1.6–7.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at last height measurement or on stopping steroids (years)</td>
<td>13.1 (3.5–18.6)</td>
<td>7.3 (4.1–12.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of treatment over which heights known (years)</td>
<td>6.2 (0.2–11.5)</td>
<td>3.6 (0.6–9.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with other hormone values and staging of puberty was made by calculation of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.

**Results**

The mean Ht SDS for the first and last examination compared with normal population data is shown in table 2.9 There was a significant fall in the Ht SDS for the boys (ΔHt SDS -0.47, 95% confidence intervals -0.84 to -0.11, df 28, t -2.66, p<0.02) but not for the girls (ΔHt SDS, -0.10, 95% confidence intervals -0.44 to 0.24, df 11, t -0.66, p=0.5).

There was a significant negative correlation between ΔHt SDS and age at final examination (boys, r=-0.50, p<0.01, girls r=-0.61, p<0.05); (fig 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No of patients</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>95% Confidence intervals</th>
<th>Normal population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys: first</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-0.39 (1.20)</td>
<td>-0.84 to 0.07</td>
<td>-2.10 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-0.86 (1.20)</td>
<td>-1.31 to -0.41</td>
<td>-4.63 &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls: first</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-0.39 (0.74)</td>
<td>-0.86 to 0.08</td>
<td>-1.83 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-0.49 (0.73)</td>
<td>-0.96 to 0.02</td>
<td>-2.34 0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also a significant negative correlation between ΔHt SDS and duration of treatment (fig 2) for the boys (r=-0.64, p<0.01) but not the girls (r=-0.24, p=0.5). Only three girls, however, had been treated for more than five years.

To attempt to clarify the relative effects of age and duration of treatment we examined the data longitudinally. The ΔHt SDS from first height at roughly yearly intervals is shown in fig 3. The mean fall in Ht SDS after the age of 10 years until final examination was significantly greater than the fall in Ht SDS from first height measurement until the age of 10 years for the boys (F=10.25, p<0.01), but the difference was not significant for the girls (F=4.06, p<0.1). Only five boys developed steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome over the age of 8 years (mean 11.0 years, range 8.1-13.6) and required treatment until they were over 13 years; their mean age at final examination was 14.6 years (range 13.3-16.4) and mean ΔHt SDS was -0.6 (range -0.3 to -1.1).

There were seven boys who were less than 8 years

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**Fig 1** Relation between age (in years) at last examination and change in height standard deviation score (ΔHt SDS) in boys (●) and girls (○).

**Fig 2** Relation between duration of treatment (in years) and change in height standard deviation score (ΔHt SDS) in boys (●) and girls (○).
old at final examination (mean 4.9 years, range 3.5–7.9) who had been treated for a mean of 1.9 years (range 0.5–4.0). Their mean ΔHt SDS was +0.3 (range −0.4–2.1). ΔHt SDS was significantly less for those diagnosed under 8 years of age than for the boys diagnosed after the age of 8 years (F=6.24, p<0.05).

There was no relation between ΔHt SDS and the relapse rate for the boys (r=0.26, p=0.5) or the girls (r=0.23, p=0.5). The relapse rate was significantly greater before the age of 10 years for the boys (F=6.44, p<0.05) but was unchanged in the girls (F=0.01, p>0.1). There was no difference between the mean ΔHt SDS for boys treated with cyclophosphamide (−0.79 (1.03), n=12) compared with those treated only with steroids (−0.10 (0.78) n=17), (F=2.67, p<0.01).

Puberty was assessed in all the subjects and a comparison was made with the expected age at the appearance of secondary sex characteristics.10 Nine boys were delayed (mean age 15.2 years, range 14.1–16.7) with pubic hair and genital stages at less than the third centile, and testicular volume was between 4 and 10 ml in seven. The three girls over the age of 12 years were progressing normally through puberty.

Demographic data and hormone profile analysis of the eight boys is given in table 3. All subjects slept throughout the study with normal electroencephalographic sleep patterns.11 Data of hormone profiles from a control group were lacking. Various studies over the last 15 years, however, have suggested a noticeable increase in pulsatility of growth hormone and gonadotrophins during the age range associated with normal puberty.15–19 Visual comparison with these documented hormone profiles suggested that six of the eight subjects had an abnormal blunting of their overnight profiles, with a decrease in pulse amplitude but not pulse number. A typical example of a blunted profile is shown (fig 4a). Two of the boys not receiving steroids had higher concentration of hormones during the night as assessed visually and by pulse analysis (table 3). One of the boys, the subject who had been off steroids for two years, had exceptionally high concentrations of growth hor-

Table 3 Demographic data and overnight hormone analysis of growth hormone, luteinising hormone, testosterone, and insulin like growth factor–1 (IGF–1) from eight boys treated with long term steroid treatment for nephrotic syndrome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Puberty* (genitalia stage)</th>
<th>ΔHt SDS</th>
<th>Growth hormone (mU/l)</th>
<th>Luteinising hormone (nmol/l)</th>
<th>Mean testosterone (nmol/l)</th>
<th>Mean IGF–1 (U/ml)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Area† Mean Puls n amplitude</td>
<td>Area Mean Puls n amplitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15-4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>−2.01</td>
<td>326 5.4 5 7.2</td>
<td>159 2.7 5 2.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14-8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>−2.44</td>
<td>457 7.5 3 22.2</td>
<td>335 5.5 5 4.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>17-2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>−3.06</td>
<td>327 5.4 3 16.7</td>
<td>275 4.6 6 3.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15-8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>−1.01</td>
<td>2450 40-4 5 69.9</td>
<td>325 5.4 6 4.6</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18-6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>297 5.1 4 12.4</td>
<td>284 4.7 5 3.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14-1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td>237 4.0 4 8.0</td>
<td>410 6.7 6 5.5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>13-3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>−2.41</td>
<td>480 7.8 4 13.8</td>
<td>124 2.1 1 1.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>15-1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>−2.60</td>
<td>529 9.4 5 21.5</td>
<td>289 4.2 3 2.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*According to Tanner.10
†Units of area under the curve = mU/l min per hour of study.
Cases 2, 4, 6 were off steroids for 0-5, 2-0, and 0-2 years, respectively.
mone and gonadotrophins and his profile is also shown (fig 4b).

Mean testosterone concentration was significantly associated with genital stage \( (r=0.82, p=0.013) \), as was growth hormone area under the curve \( (r=0.74, p=0.037) \). Mean growth hormone amplitude correlated with genital stage but this failed to reach significance at the 5% level \( (r=0.68, p=0.063) \). Mean growth hormone amplitude was associated positively with mean testosterone concentration, but this again failed to reach significance \( (r=0.66, p=0.076) \). Mean IGF–1 concentration was within our accepted normal range for this age with no association between IGF–1 concentration and with measurements of growth hormone or with testosterone concentration.

Discussion

We have shown that long term steroid treatment given through adolescence has an adverse effect on the rate of growth in boys with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome despite the use of a low dose alternate day regimen for the major part of the treatment course. We cannot say if this is also true for girls, who have a lower incidence of the syndrome and who, in our experience, require shorter treatment periods.

In boys, Ht SDS was significantly lower after several years of treatment, confirming data from previous studies.\(^2\ 3\) Other studies have found the effect on growth to be dose related.\(^1\ 2\ 3\ 6\) We were unable, in retrospect, to calculate accurately total steroid dose received by each child. If we make the assumption (although we have no statistical data) that the relapse rate reflects the total annual steroid dose, we can find no relation between this and growth retardation.

With increasing chronological age Ht SDS calculated at yearly intervals decreased (fig 3). Obviously it is difficult to disentangle duration of treatment and total steroid dose from an age dependent effect.

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Fig 4  Overnight hormone profile in two adolescent boys with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome: (a) patient 1, table 3, on continuous treatment since 2-3 years of age; (b) a boy (age 15-8 years) treated from 3-4 years of age, the steroids had been stopped two years previously.
as many of the peripubertal children will have been
taking steroids for longer. The beginning of a fall in
growth velocity at the age of 10 years, however, and
its sudden and sharp decline in all the boys at the age
of 13 years, combined with the high incidence of
delayed appearance of secondary sex characteristics,
is strong evidence in favour of an independent effect
of steroids on the onset and progression of puberty
and the pubertal growth spurt. The pubertal delay is
unlikely to be due to the steroid sensitive nephrotic
syndrome itself as the children remain free from
disease as long as they are having steroid treatment.
Furthermore, we have been unable to show a
relation between the relapse rate (which we believe
is a reflection of the severity of the syndrome) and
the ΔHt SDS. In fact, over the age of 10 years the
relapse rate is significantly less than before that age,
wheras the major effect on growth was seen after 10
years. 

We showed no relation between cyclophospha-
mide and growth problems. Foote et al found no
effect of cyclophosphamide on growth,8 but it is
recognised that it may cause gonadal damage,
particularly in boys.20 Low plasma androgens but
normal gonadotrophins have been reported after a
standard single course for steroid sensitive nephrotic
syndrome.21 Children given cyclophosphamide,
however, are usually those showing severe steroidal
side effects, so it may be possible to attribute these
findings to either drug.

We do not know whether the boys will ultimately
reach their genetic height potential. Kerrebijn and
De Kroon reported slow and variable catch up
growth after stopping steroid treatment in six
prepubertal children with asthma.23 Trompeter et al
found the mean height to be between the 10th and
25th centiles respectively in six males and four
females with steroid sensitive nephrotic syndrome
who continued to relapse into adult life.4 Foote et al
found no significant difference in Ht SDS between
28 postpubertal and 52 prepubertal subjects treated
with steroids for the syndrome and the general
population, although there were six subjects with Ht
SDS of less than −2 SD.8 No information was given
as to the number taking steroids during the peri-
pubertal period and the data were not analysed
longitudinally. Even if catch up growth was ulti-
mately to occur this is of little consolation to many
older boys who may be severely emotionally
turbated by loss of height and physical immaturity
relative to their peers.

Overnight profile analysis suggested that steroid
treatment considerably affects physiological secre-
tion of hormones, with reduction in pulse amplitude
of growth hormone and gonadotrophins. Stopping
steroid treatment increases the growth hormone and
gonadotrophin concentrations with an increase in
the hormone pulse amplitude. The parameters of
pulse analysis correlated with mean testosterone
concentration and the clinical staging of puberty. No
effect was seen on IGF–1 concentration. Men taking
long term steroids for asthma have been shown to
have significantly reduced levels of testosterone22;
however, gonadotrophin concentrations have been
reported either as normal23 or increased.22 Our data
appear to be the first where physiological patterns of
gonadotrophin secretion seem to be abnormally
blunted during long term steroid treatment,
although blunting of growth hormone pulsatility has
been described.24 25 It has been suggested that the
mechanism of growth failure in steroid treatment is
through a peripheral action of steroids at the level of
the chondrocyte.26 Our data from adolescents on
long term steroid treatment for nephrotic syndrome
suggest that central effects of steroid treatment on
the hypothalamic–pituitary axis may be as important
in this condition and certainly warrants further
investigation.

In summary, we observed that boys with steroid
sensitive nephrotic syndrome, who were treated
with an alternate day steroid regimen for several
years, do not maintain a normal rate of growth. As
the growth delay occurs after the age of 10 years and
is associated with delayed appearance of secondary
sexual characteristics, we suggest that steroids inter-
fere with the onset and progression of puberty
and the pubertal growth spurt. Despite the evidence
in the literature that final height is usually acceptable,
this is a definite clinical problem with associated
emotional difficulties. Overnight hormone profile
analysis suggests that there is a disturbance of the
hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal axis with blunting
of the expected overnight pulsatility of growth
hormone and gonadotrophins. A disturbance of
hypothalamic–pituitary function may be the major
factor in the development of maturational delay and
in severe cases may be amenable to therapeutic
agents such as luteinising hormone releasing hor-
mine or anabolic steroids.

This study was supported by the Children’s Nationwide Medical
Research Fund. SAG is supported by the Wellcome Foundation,
PA by grants from Serono Laboratories (UK) and the Child
Growth Foundation, and JJ by a grant from the Adint Trust. We
are grateful for Dr C Buchanan for performing the IGF–1 assay, to
Mrs Jenkins and Miss G Wilson for the electroencephalography
recordings and the sister and nursing staff of Peter Bishop medical
ward. We thank Mrs Catherine Bryant for typing the manuscript.

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Accepted 8 December 1987