detected cells with eccentric nucleus, basophilic cytoplasm with the appearance of tissue paper, suggestive of Gaucher cells (GC) (Fig. 1). The GBA enzyme activity was determined in leukocytes by spectrofluorometry, which confirmed that it was lacking. The molecular genetic study showed double heterozygosity for the L444P and p.Tyr244Cys mutations.

This observation constitutes a representative example of the clinical, biochemical and genetic characteristics of type 1 GD. The fact that our patient had a history of years of bone pain can make diagnosis more difficult, when these manifestations are associated with other signs of the disease like cytopenias or organomegaly. Extra-articular manifestations are useful for reaching a correct diagnosis, avoiding incorrect diagnoses of inflammatory and/or autoimmune diseases. The BMA confirmed GD, which is accountable for an accumulation that generates substances responsible for bone resorption, producing pain, deformity and functional disability. Radiographic examination reveals manifestations such as abnormal bone remodeling (disclosing the Erlenmeyer flask deformity, which was not found in our patient), spontaneous fractures, osteopenia, osteonecrosis and osteolysis. However, the development of osteoporosis of unknown cause, whether or not it is associated with thrombocytopenia and splenomegaly, should lead us to suspect GD. These findings were significant and enabled the quantification of GBA activity, and led us to request a genetic study to confirm the disease. A high index of suspicion and initial biochemical studies are needed to verify the diagnosis and begin enzyme replacement therapy to revert, establish and improve the clinical prospects of the patient.

The Great Unknown, Whipple's Disease

Enfermedad de Whipple, la gran desconocida

To the Editor,

Whipple’s disease was first described by George Hoyt Whipple in 1907. It is a multisystem infectious disease, produced by Tropheryma whippelii, which was identified for the first time in 1991. The name is of Greek origin (trophe nutrient + eurya barrier) and is related to the defective absorption of nutrients characteristic of this disorder. The clinical signs include arthralgia, weight loss, diarrhea and abdominal pain, although the clinical manifestations can vary widely. Thus it may take up to 6 years to be diagnosed. We report 2 cases in which the final diagnosis was Whipple’s disease.

Case no. 1

The patient was a 47-year-old man, a farmer, who had a 15-month history of polyarthritis in knees, ankles and hands. He was admitted by the gastroenterology department because of abdominal pain, vomiting and fever. Physical examination revealed pain in left abdomen and there appeared to be a mass on palpation. Ancillary tests showed an erythrocyte sedimentation rate of 100 mm/h and normochromic anemia, and thoracoabdominal computed tomography (CT) disclosed mesenteric infiltration and lymph nodes in the jejunal loops. Explorative laparotomy was performed, as was biopsy of the lymph nodes and bowel mesentery. The pathological study resulted in a diagnosis of Whipple disease, with the presence of periodic acid Schiff (PAS)-positive macrophages with intracellular inclusions. The patient was treated with cotrimoxazole for 2 years, accompanied by tetracycline for the first 3 months. Twenty years later, the patient is asymptomatic.

References


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Please cite this article as: Moreno García MS, Casorran Berges M, del Río-Martínez PS, Bosque Peralta MT. Enfermedad de Whipple, la gran desconocida. Reumatol Clin. 2017;13:243–244.
associated with the digestive tract prior to initiating biological therapies, since the use of the latter can have a negative effect on the disease course.

The improvement of the symptoms with the administration of antibiotics taken for another reason, as well as the lack of improvement or clinical deterioration with immunosuppressive therapy should lead to the suspicion of Whipple’s disease.

Biopsy of the synovium and intestinal mucosa may reveal a PAS-positive monocytic infiltrate. The development of the technique of polymerase chain reaction has made it possible to identify the genetic material of the bacteria in different tissues and body fluids, which suggests that the cause of the arthritis in this disease is septic. It is also possible to culture the bacteria once isolated from synovial fluid. On occasion, the study of the joints may be diagnostic, even if the examination of the intestine is negative.

Although the genetic material of T. whipplei has been demonstrated in the joints of healthy individuals, there is no clear consensus regarding the treatment of Whipple’s disease. The most widely accepted approach is the administration of intravenous ceftriaxone or another broad spectrum β-lactam antibiotic for 2 weeks, followed by oral trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole over a variable period of time, which is usually 1 year. A recent study recommends the combination of doxycycline and hydroxychloroquine for 1 year, and the maintenance of doxychlorezone for life, to avoid relapses that can occur with the preceding regimen. The clinical improvement is sweeping, the gastrointestinal recovery takes place before changes are observed in the joints, and the neurological findings are less predictable.

In short, Whipple’s disease is an uncommon disorder that should be taken into account because of its potential fatal outcome in the absence of treatment and because of its wide variety of clinical manifestations. We wish to stress the importance of the rheumatic signs because they develop quite frequently, as well as the need to establish the correct differential diagnosis with regard to other rheumatic diseases, to avoid therapeutic measures that can be detrimental to the patient.

References


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