Lipid-laden macrophages in bone marrow of leprosy patients

R SEN, P K SEHGAL, V DIXIT, UMA SINGH, S D CHAUDHARY, R SIKKA & V K JAIN
Department of Pathology, Skin and Venereology, Medical College and Hospital, 9J/18 Medical Enclave, Rohtak 124 001, Haryana, India

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Summary While conducting a study to observe bone marrow cytomorphological changes in multibacillary leprosy, lipid laden macrophages as seen in sphingolipidoses were noted. The present study was planned to observe the occurrence and morphological characterization of these macrophages in various types of leprosy. Bone marrow records from 48 cases of paucibacillary and 72 cases of multibacillary leprosy were analysed. The macrophages accounting at the most for 3.5% of marrow cells were observed in 5 cases of paucibacillary and 43 cases of multibacillary leprosy with a maximum incidence being observed in patients with ENL (16/17). The lipid present in the cytoplasm of these cells could be derived from the lipid of the cell wall of Mycobacterium leprae. To the best of our knowledge, these cells have not been reported in leprosy so far.

Introduction

A variety of cytomorphological changes have been described in bone marrow (BM) of leprosy patients. These include megaloblastic erythropoiesis, increased percentage of plasma cells, large reticulum cells and epitheloid granulomas and histiocytes with lepra bacilli in ghost areas.1-4 We observed large sudanophilic macrophages which showed on Romanowsky stains ample sky blue cytoplasm and small central nuclei in the bone marrow of these patients. While collections of lipid containing macrophages are seen in sphingolipidoses (Gaucher's disease, Niemann–Pick’s and Sea-blue histiocyte syndrome), cells with similar morphology have been described in many other conditions including chronic granulocytic leukemia (CML), thalassaemia major, vitamin E deficiency, idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP), hyperlipoproteinemia and sickle cell anemia.5 To the best of our knowledge, so far, their presence has not been described in leprosy. The present study was planned to observe the occurrence of these macrophages in various types of leprosy and their morphological characterization.
Material and methods

We studied 120 cases of leprosy in patients attending the leprosy clinic, irrespective of age and sex. While 48 patients had paucibacillary leprosy (PB), 72 patients had multibacillary (MB). In the former group 15 patients were new and in the latter, 17. All the other patients were receiving multidrug therapy (MDT) for a variable period. Erythema nodosum leprosum (ENL) was observed in 17 out of 55 MB patients receiving MDT. These patients were also receiving steroids to control the reactional state. The bone marrow (BM) was aspirated from the sternum/posterior superior iliac spine taking precaution to avoid contamination by the lepra bacilli present in the overlying skin and several smears were prepared. The BM smears were stained with Ramanowsky's stains including May–Grunwald–Giemsa (MGG), and Leishman, Ziehl–Neelsen's, Sudan black B, Prussian blue and periodic acid Schiff reaction (PAS).

Observations

Lipid containing macrophages were observed in the BM smears of 48 patients out of the 120 patients investigated. The percentage varied from occasional to 3-5% of all the marrow cells. The size of these cells varied from 20 to 50 μ. The nuclei were vesicular and central in location. The cytoplasm was ample and sky blue to deep blue in colour on MGG staining. Cytoplasmic granularity and foamy appearance as observed in sea-blue histiocytes5 were noted in some of these cells. Cytoplasm was strongly positive for Sudan black B staining and a variable, generally weak positivity was observed for Prussian blue and PAS stains. Ziehl–Neelsen's staining revealed a diffuse faint pink coloration of the

Figure 1. Bone marrow aspirate Leishman stain 400×. Centre of the field shows big macrophage, cytoplasm shows coarse granularity.
cytoplasm in some of the macrophages. However, definite structures identified as lepra bacilli were not observed in any of these macrophages. In this regard, it is interesting to note that such faint diffuse acid fastness may also have been seen with lipofuscin, the age pigment which is also derived from lipids.

These macrophages could be differentiated from the foamy macrophages on the basis of their distinct sky blue to deep blue, and at times granular, ample amount of cytoplasm.

**Figure 2.** Bone marrow aspirate PAS stain 400×. The macrophage shows PAS positivity.

**Figure 3.** Bone marrow aspirate Sudan black stain 280×. Lipid-laden macrophage in the centre shows cytoplasmic positivity for Sudan black.
Lipid-laden macrophages in leprosy

in Romanowsky stains that showed prominent bluish-black granularity on Sudan black staining, whereas the foamy macrophages did not show Sudan black positive granules and the foamy appearance was imparted by the presence of lepra bacilli with all of its morphological features demonstrated on Z–N staining. Similarly, the histiocytes with lepra bacilli in ghost areas may be considered a variant of foamy macrophages and can be differentiated from lipid-laden macrophages.4

As shown in Table 1 these macrophages were observed with a greater frequency in MB leprosy than PB. In both groups a higher frequency was noted in those receiving treatment compared with new patients, while 94% of 17 patients with ENL had these macrophages in bone marrow. Table 2 depicts the relationship of these macrophages with the bacillary load in bone marrow. It was observed that with an increasing bacillary load, an increasing percentage of patients had macrophages in the bone marrow.

Associated cytomorphological changes in bone marrow are shown in Table 3. The marrow with lipid-laden macrophages revealed a higher incidence of acid-fast bacilli, megaloblastic erythropoiesis, collections of foamy macrophages, collections of epithelioid cells and collections of plasma cells compared with the marrow which did not reveal lipid-laden macrophages.
Table 3. Associated changes in bone marrow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Bone marrow with lipid macrophages (48)</th>
<th>Bone marrow without lipid macrophages (72)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFB</td>
<td>45 (93.7%)</td>
<td>13 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megaloblastic erythropoiesis</td>
<td>38 (79.1%)</td>
<td>5 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of foamy macrophages</td>
<td>12 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of epithelioid cells</td>
<td>4 (8.3%)</td>
<td>6 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of plasma cells</td>
<td>21 (43.7%)</td>
<td>8 (11.1%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Inherited enzymatic deficiencies seen in sphingolipidoses (Gaucher’s disease, Niemann–Pick’s disease and sea-blue histiocytosis syndrome) result in storage of lipids in macrophages and their accumulation in reticuloendothelial (RE) organs. However, the appearance of these cells is nonspecific and similar histiocytes in smaller numbers have been described in the spleen or BM in many different hereditary and acquired conditions without any primary defect in enzymes. These conditions include CML, thalassaemia, major ITP, hyperlipoproteinaemia and sickle cell anaemia. Such cells have been referred to as Gaucher-like cells and if the cytoplasm is blue, granular and foamy appearing on a Giemsa stain, as sea-blue histiocytes. The lipids which accumulate in these cells are sphingolipids that have major structural functions in many cells and are found in cell membranes, including those of erythrocytes, leukocytes and platelets amongst others. The blue–black staining of granules on Sudan black B suggests the presence of phosphatide or cerebroside. In the hereditary lipoidoses, clear-cut deficiencies in specific catabolic enzymes have been well documented. On the other hand, in the acquired conditions, overloading of normal lipid catabolic mechanisms seems likely, however, the mechanism of presence of these cells in secondary conditions is not precisely defined. In CML and thalassemia major, increased catabolism of myeloid and erythroid cells giving rise to glucocerebroside accumulation may be responsible. In ITP, the accumulation of these cells may be related to the therapeutic use of steroids or the breakdown of platelets in macrophages. Steroids facilitate the effect of adipokinetic agents in eliciting lipolysis of triglycerides of the adipose tissues.

We observed these cells in all types of leprosy patients. The incidence was higher in MB leprosy compared with PB. In both groups the macrophages were discovered in a higher proportion of patients who were receiving treatment compared with new patients. The incidence was highest in patients with ENL who were receiving steroids as well. The percentage of such cells was in a range which indicated that these cells did not cause a significant reticuloendothelial overload. The associated findings in bone marrow included a higher incidence of demonstration of lepra bacilli, megaloblastic changes, collections of foamy macrophages, and collections of plasma cells in the marrow that showed these macrophages compared with negative marrow smears of such cells.

The observations suggest that lipid-laden macrophages in the bone marrow of leprosy patients may appear as a result of one or more of the following mechanisms:
Lipid-laden macrophages in leprosy

1. Incomplete metabolism and degradation of lipids, phosphatides and lipopolysaccharides which are present in the cell wall of lepra bacilli.14
2. Treatment with steroids for a long period in patients having ENL.
3. Rapid cell turnover associated with megaloblastic erythropoiesis.

A high incidence of megaloblastic erythropoiesis in lepromatous leprosy has been documented.15 Also, in the present study megaloblastic erythropoiesis was observed in association with these macrophages in most of the marrow samples.

References

Les macrophages chargés en lipides dans la moelle osseuse des lépromateux

R Sen, P K Sehgal, V Dixit, Uma Singh, S D Chaudhary, R Sikka y V K Jain

Résumé  Au cours d’une étude des changements cytomorphologiques de la moelle osseuse dans le cas de la lépre multibacillaire, on observa des macrophages chargés en lipides semblables à ceux qui avaient été notés dans les sphingolipidoses. La présente étude fut réalisée pour observer l’apparition et les caractéristiques morphologiques de ces macrophages dans différents types de lépre. Les résultats de l’examen de la moelle osseuse de 48 lépreux paucibacillaires et de 72 lépreux multibacillaires furent analysés. Les macrophages représentant tout au plus 3,5% des cellules de la moelle osseuse, furent observés chez 5 lépreux paucibacillaires et chez 43 lépreux multibacillaires. La plus forte incidence fut observée chez les patients souffrant d’ENL (16/17). Les lipides dans le cytosol de ces cellules pourraient provenir des lipides de la paroi du Mycobacterium leprae. Pour autant que nous le sachions, jusqu’à présent, ces cellules n’ont pas été rapportées dans le cas de la lépre.

Los macrofagos cargados con lipidos en la medula osea de los pacientes leprosos

R Sen, P K Sehgal, V Dixit, Uma Singh, S D Chaudhary, R Sikka y V K Jain

Resumen  Durante un estudio en la que se observaban cambios citomorfológicos de la médula ósea, se notaron macrofagos cargados con lipidos como las que se observan en casos de esfingolipidosis. El estudio actual fue planificado para observar la ocurrencia y caracterización morfológica de estos macrófagos en varios tipos de lepra. Se analizó la información sobre las médulas óseas de 48 casos de lepra paucibacilar y 72 casos de lepra multibacilar. Los macrófagos, que representaban un máximo del 3,5% de las células óseas, fueron observados en 5 casos de lepra paucibacilar y en 43 casos de lepra multibacilar, con una incidencia máxima en los pacientes con ENL (16/17). Es posible que el lipido presente en el citoplasma de estas células derive del lipido de la pared celular de Mycobacterium leprae. Somos del parecer que hasta ahora no se ha informado este hecho en conexión con la lepra.