Dematiaceous fungal keratitis
Clinical isolates and management

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Dematiaceous fungi are darkly pigmented, filamentary moulds and are common in the environment as plant saprophytes and pathogens.

Incidental reports of corneal ulcers that have been caused by species of this group have appeared in the literature, but the relative importance of this species as potential corneal pathogens has not been appreciated.

As a group, second to Fusarium solani and other moniliaceous fungi, we find that dematiaceous fungi comprise the next most common cause of fungal ulcers in south Florida.

The successful treatment of Fusarium solani keratitis with Natamycin (Pimaricin) has been reported by Jones, Forster, and Rebell (1972), and we have examined the management of other non-Fusarium solani moniliaceous fungal ulcers. The purpose of this communication is to report our study of 16 isolates of dematiaceous fungal keratitis, their features, and management including nine cases that were treated with Natamycin, and to stress their relative clinical importance.

Material and methods

PATIENTS

We have studied 16 cases of keratitis caused by dematiaceous fungi. Ten cases were referred to the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute; three were examined before 1969 and reported by Jones, Sexton, and Rebell (1969), and seven were included in the 53 isolates seen during the last 44 years. Three cases were examined in Augusta, Georgia, by one of us (LAW) and the isolates were identified and studied at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. Three additional isolates from Florida were sent to us; two of the patients received Natamycin, and a third was treated with topical Amphotericin B and was examined by us on completion of treatment.

CLINICAL-LABORATORY DIAGNOSIS

All the patients had scrapings performed; microscopical examination by KOH preparation, Gram or Giemsa stains; and positive cultures on at least one medium including Sabouraud's agar, blood agar at 26°C and 37°C, and liquid brain-heart infusion (BHI). In one case keratoplasty fragments were cultured on Sabouraud's agar, and histopathology performed by Gomori's methamine silver nitrate technique (GMS), periodic acid-Schiff (PAS) reaction, and haematoxylin-eosin stain (H and E).

Isolates were identified and speciated by sporulation from the original or lyophilized cultures. Ten of the 16 isolates were confirmed taxonomically by Dr M. B. Ellis, at the Commonwealth Mycological Institute, and the others by Ellis's manual (1971) and Von Arx (1970).

MANAGEMENT

Nine patients were treated topically with Natamycin (Pimaricin) 5 per cent suspension. Two received only Gentamicin topically. One was treated with topical Amphotericin B. A patient seen before 1969 received topical Amphotericin B, Thiabendazole, and Merthiolate and later required a conjunctival flap operation. Two other patients seen before 1969 received topical Amphotericin B, including Case 3, who also received topical Natamycin ointment and Thiabendazole. A therapeutic keratoplasty was necessary in a patient whose eye perforated before fungal diagnosis.

Results

IDENTIFICATION

Before 1969, three of 38 isolates at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute were identified as dematiaceous fungi. These included a Curvularia sp. (originally identified as C. lunata, but not confirmed), a case of Phialophora verrucosa reported by Wilson, Sexton, and Ahearn (1966), and a Lasiodiplodia theobromae, previously diagnosed and reported as Macrophoma sp. by Jones and others (1969) (Table I: Cases 1, 2, and 3).

In 53 cases of fungal keratitis which have been personally examined by the author (RKF) since 1969, seven have been identified as dematiaceous fungi. These include Curvularia senegalensis (2); C. pallescens, and a non-speciated Curvularia; and one each Drechslera...
halodes, Alternaria state of Pleospora infectoria, and Lasiodiplodia theobromae (Table I: Cases 4–10).

One of us (LAW) diagnosed three dematiaceous fungal ulcers in Augusta, Georgia, including Alternaria alternata, Drechslera state of Cochliobulus specifer, and Cladosporium oxysporum (Table I: Cases 11–13). Three other Florida isolates included two Curvularia senegalensis and a case of Curvularia verruculosa which was examined by us after treatment (Table I: Cases 14–16), see Figs 1 to 5.

CLINICAL-LABORATORY DIAGNOSIS

The characteristic features of fungal ulcers in a group of 53 cases have been described, and this series of dematiaceous fungal ulcers was not significantly different (Table i). Ages ranged from 7 to 64 years; 10 of 16 had sustained definite foreign body trauma; and 7 of 16 had already been treated, two with antibiotics alone, and five with antibiotics and steroids.

The severity varied, some of the ulcers were superficial and mild (Fig. 6), but others were deep (Fig. 7). One needed keratoplasty because of perforation, (Case 6).

Microscopical examination of scrapings or corneal fragments was positive for fungal elements in ten cases on one or more preparations using KOH, Gram, Giemsa, or histopathological stains. These included five positive KOH preparations, four positive Giemsa stains, and one positive Gram stain. Corneal fragments were positive histopathologically in Case 6.

Sixteen positive isolates grew on one or more media including 14 on Sabouraud’s, two on blood agar at 26°C, four on blood agar at 37°C, and five on BHI liquid broth.

MEDICAL AND SURGICAL MANAGEMENT

Seven of 16 cases retained a visual acuity of 20/40 or better; four were 20/50 to 20/70; three 'healed' with no final vision determined; and two resulted in 20/400 acuity (Table II).

Nine of 16 cases were treated with Natamycin,. Table I Dematiaceous fungal keratitis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Isolate</th>
<th>Trauma*</th>
<th>Antibiotics</th>
<th>Steroids</th>
<th>Management**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Curvularia sp.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>NI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Amphotericin B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Phialophora verrucosa</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Amphotericin B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lasiodiplodia theobromae</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Amphotericin B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Curvularia sp.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alternaria state of Pleospora infectoria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Curvularia senegalensis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>TPK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Curvularia pallecens</td>
<td>NI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Gentamicin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lasiodiplodia theobromae</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Drechslera halodes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Gentamicin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Curvularia senegalensis</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Alternaria alternata</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Drechslera-state of Cochliobulus specifer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Cladosporium oxysporum</td>
<td>POST-KE</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Amphotericin B, Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Curvularia senegalensis</td>
<td>NI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Curvularia senegalensis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Natamycin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Curvularia verruculosa</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Amphotericin B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* + = positive, 0 = negative, NI = not indicated
** TPK—therapeutic penetrating keratoplasty
*** Cornea clinically better than 20/400
Including five of the seven with 20/40 or better visual acuity.

Only one patient required therapeutic keratoplasty. A 46-year-old woman sustained a mild injury from a splinter of old wood while redecorating the inside of her home, and was treated with a multitude of medications including topical steroid-antibiotics before referral with a perforated cornea, 2 1/2 months after injury. She did not receive Natamycin, but she had culture and histology positive corneal fragments, and after keratoplasty the visual acuity was 20/40+ (Case 6).

Table II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final visual acuity</th>
<th>Natamycin</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20/40 or better</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/50-20/70</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Healed'</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cases</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two patients were treated with only topical Gentamicin 3 mg/ml; one attained 20/50 vision, and...
Dematiaceous fungal keratitis

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FIG. 6 Dematiaceous fungal ulcer due to Curvularia species (Case 4)

FIG. 7 Dematiaceous fungal ulcer due to a Drechslera species (Case 12).

the other 'healed' without returning for a final test of visual acuity. In both cases scrapings were negative on microscopical examination, and after 36 hours, when the cultures were positive for Curvularia pallescens and Drechslera halodes, the ulcers had improved, and therefore, Gentamicin was continued without instituting Natamycin (Cases 7 and 9).

Case 16 was treated with Amphotericin B, 2 mg/ml topically, and achieved a cure and a visual acuity of 20/60.

The three additional cases were seen before 1969. Case 1 attained 20/70 vision with Amphotericin B treatment, and Case 3 attained 20/30 + visual acuity after topical Amphotericin B, Thiabendazole, and Natamycin ointment. A final case due to Phialophora verrucosa (Case 2) reported by Wilson and others (1966) was treated with Amphotericin B (0.3 per cent), thiabendazole (0.3 per cent), thiomersal, and subsequently required a conjunctival flap operation.

Discussion

The term dematiaceous fungi is a convenient designation for the major pigmented fungi implicated in keratitis, including the Dematiaceous Hyphomycetes (Moniliales) and other pigmented isolates such as Lasiodiplodia theobromae (Sphaeropsidales).

Case reports of keratitis caused by these fungi are infrequent, and vary in clinical presentation and course. Keratitis caused by Curvularia species has been
reported in single cases by Nityananda, Sivasu-
bramaniam, and Ajello (1962, 1964) (2 species),
Anderson, Roberts, Gonzalez, and Chick (1959),
Anderson and Chick (1963), Georg (1964), Llamoza,
Suprani, and De Albornoz (1966), Salceda, Nievera,
and Abendaño (1969), and Wind and Polack (1970).
*Alternaria* species have been reported by Orlow (1914),
and Halde and Okumoto (1966). *Drechslera* and
*Helminthosporium* case reports are probably lacking.
There are reports of *Phialophora verrucosa* by Wilson
and others (1966), of *P. gougerotii* and *Lasiodiplodia
theobromae* by Laverde, Vera, Moncada, Restrepo,
and Diaz (1972), Laverde, Moncada, Restrepo, and
Vera (1973), and of *Cladosporium* (*Hormodendrum*)
by Suie and Havener (1963), and François and Rysselera (1972).

Whereas, keratitis due to *Fusarium solani* has been
recognized as progressive and destructive, the
dematiaceous ulcers are more variable and less
predictable. If neglected or augmented by steroids
the ulcers may become deep and lead to perforation
such as Case 6. On the other hand, debridement alone
or treatment with non-antifungal antibiotics may
lead to a self-limited infection and healing, such as
in Cases 7 and 9.

Dematiaceous fungal keratitis presented in similar
age groups to those ulcers due to monilaceous fungi;
were usually preceded by outdoor trauma; and often
occurred as primary infections, not necessarily
aggravated by topical steroids or antibiotics. Three of
the five cases that had already been treated with
steroids, however, had the most complicated course
(Cases 2, 6, and 11). Case 15, due to *Curvularia
seneleensis*, had the same fungus cultured from a piece
of garden plant, from which the injurious foreign
body came.

This series serves to alert the ophthalmologist to the
relative frequency of keratitis due to pigmented
fungi, and it stresses the importance of prompt,
careful diagnostic, and therapeutic debridement of
the ulcer. If recognized early and not aggravated
by steroids, the diagnosis should not be so discouraging
as it has been with most fungal keratitis. However, it
should be noted that one of the fungi, *Phialophora
verrucosa*, is a recognized pathogen causing chromo-
mycosis. Prompt therapy with available antifungals,
particularly Natamycin, should be instituted upon
culture identification.

Although many variables alter the reproducibility
of antifungal sensitivity studies, 12 stains of demati-
aceous fungi tested in *vitro* have in general been more
sensitive to antifungals such as Natamycin and
Amphotericin B than 19 strains of *Fusarium solani*
tested.

**Summary**

Clinical and laboratory features of 16 cases of keratitis
that were caused by dematiaceous pigmented fungi
are reported. Management, including the treatment
of nine cases with Natamycin (Pimaricin), resulted in
corneal healing in 14 cases, and therapeutic surgery
in two cases.

We should like to acknowledge the help of M.B. Ellis
PhD, Principal Mycologist, Commonwealth Mycological
Institute, Kew, for identifying many of these fungal
isolates.

We should like to thank Roy Bresky MD, of Pompano,
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Gonzalez, RSP, FBPA, Joe Goren, and Barbara French for
photography.

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