Diffuse retinal pigment epitheliopathy complicating systemic corticosteroid treatment

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Abstract

**Aims/Background**—This study was undertaken to confirm the association between diffuse retinal pigment epitheliopathy (DRPE) and systemic corticosteroid therapy. This finding can be of help in determining an aetiological factor in DRPE and associated diseases. Corticosteroids may contribute to the development of leakage in the presence of a retinal pigment epitheliopathy or central serous chorioretinopathy.

**Methods**—Cases of DRPE were collected from the files of members of the European Fluorescein Angiography Club. There were 34 who developed their ophthalmic symptoms while being treated with corticosteroids.

**Results**—DRPE developed in 34 patients from 10 European eye clinics during systemic treatment with corticosteroids. Thirteen patients were treated with corticosteroids after allotransplantation, 21 other patients developed ocular symptoms while treated with steroids for serious systemic disorders. Symptoms occurred in some patients when the daily corticosteroid dosage was elevated, and the visual complaints ameliorated or even disappeared sometimes on discontinuation of the corticosteroid therapy.

**Conclusion**—Corticosteroids can damage the retinal pigment epithelial barrier and predispose a patient to serous retinal detachment, whereas psychological stress may play a role in the development of central serous chorioretinopathy. A decrease of the daily corticosteroid dosage may help to diminish the visual symptoms.

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Diffuse retinal pigment epitheliopathy (DRPE) or chronic central serous retinopathy resembles both acute central serous chorioretinopathy and pigment epithelial detachment, but can be differentiated by the following characteristic features: widespread distribution of small pigment epithelial detachments, only a few funduscopically pig-ment epithelial alterations in the presence of more extensive pigmentary changes with variable leakage on the fluorescein angiogram, chronic course with exacerbations and remissions, often bilateral in appearance, fair visual outcome in most patients usually with remaining disturbance of colour vision and troublesome metamorphopsia.1 2

Differential diagnosis can only be made fluorographically, whereas borderline cases do occur. The differences between diffuse retinal pigment epitheliopathy on the one hand and pigment epithelial detachment and acute central serous chorioretinopathy on the other are quantitative rather than qualitative. The major distinction between chronic and acute disease is the fact that chronic disease has widespread pigment epithelial changes without overt detachment in most cases, whereas in acute disease there is focal pigment epithelial abnormality and marked detachment.

The disorders may be asymptomatic if the fovea is not involved or if the disease occurs in the non-dominant eye. In most patients major visual symptoms resolve after a few months, but small funduscopically visible pigment epithelial alterations usually remain as well as complaints of metamorphopsia, micropsia, colour vision changes, and/or darkening of the central visual field. Central serous chorioretinopathy following systemic corticosteroids has been recorded previously.3 Several authors reported the occurrence of central serous chorioretinopathy or serous retinal detachment after organ transplantation, when stress factors in combination with immunosuppressive therapy are present and may play a role in the development of the ocular symptoms.4 5

These findings were discussed within the European Fluorescence Angiography Club together with similar observations by one of us in patients with systemic disorders and therapy with corticosteroids. We collected as many patients as possible with these ophthalmic findings complicating systemic corticosteroid treatment.

Patients and methods

The members of the European Fluorescein Angiography Club agreed to collect from their clinical files and photographic and fluorescein-angiographic documentation patients with the diagnosis of DRPE, who developed their ophthalmic symptoms while being treated with corticosteroids: 10 Belgian patients, 18 Dutch patients, five French patients, and one German patient could be diagnosed as such.

The diagnosis was made according to the following criteria, based on the clinical manifestations as described by Zweng and Little: widespread distribution of small pigment epithelial detachments, extensive pigmentary changes, chronic course with exacerbations and remissions.1
Two eyes within the transplanted group and four eyes within the other group of patients reached a final visual acuity of 0·1 or less (Table 3).

**Discussion**

Diffuse retinal pigment epitheliopathy or chronic central serous chorioretinopathy complicating systemic corticosteroid treatment was found in the patients collected by the members of the European Fluorescein Angiography Club. Since the cases have been derived from a very large European population, we cannot exclude the fact that the finding is by chance alone.

Several patients however developed visual complaints when the daily corticosteroid dosage was elevated and recovery accompanied a reduction in steroid treatment to a low level, as could be confirmed by the observations in some of our patients (see cases 1, 7, 12, and 20; Table 2). These findings suggest a possible relation between DRPE or chronic central serous chorioretinopathy and treatment with systemic corticosteroids.

The fact that the form of central serous chorioretinopathy is different from that seen most commonly – namely, acute disease, may reinforce the argument that there is a causal relation between the steroids and the fundus changes. Three out of 60 patients with endogenous Cushing's syndrome had one or more episodes of central serous chorioretinopathy while plasma cortisol levels were high. Furthermore, the disease has been modelled experimentally in primates using prolonged infusions of intravenous noradrenaline. Two of our patients were treated with oral prednisone because of symptoms of a neuritis retrobulbaris and also developed a DRPE (Table 2). Similar findings have been described by other authors, and in one patient the central serous chorioretinopathy recurred three times during three separate courses of treatment.

Central serous chorioretinopathy is a recognised complication of pregnancy. A possible effect of endogenous corticosteroids...
during pregnancy on the posterior blood-ocular barrier has been suggested, since two attacks of central serous chorioretinopathy developed in one patient during two successive pregnancies and even four attacks in another patient during four pregnancies, each attack resolving spontaneously after delivery or spontaneous abortion. The multifocal nature of the leakage, as has been found in our patients, was indeed also seen in pregnancy.

The possible aetiological role of hyperactivity of the adrenomedullary system is sustained by the development of central serous chorioretinopathy especially in patients with a Type A behaviour pattern, associated with increased catecholamine secretion. There is doubtless a strong genetic factor which decrees that some subjects respond to either pleasurable or unpleasant stress in an inappropriate way, thus displaying pathological anxiety or
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stress.\(^5\) DRPE and central serous chorioretinopathy seem also to be genetically related, since in one family one brother had a DRPE, one sister had a typical central serous chorioretinopathy and the other brother had DRPE in one eye with recurrent central serous chorioretinopathy in the other eye.\(^2\) Furthermore, central serous chorioretinopathy has also been described in a pair of identical twins.\(^6\)

Until now several authors have suggested that corticosteroids can damage the retinal pigment epithelial barrier and predispose a patient to serous retinal detachment, but convincing evidence that any of these drugs directly contributes to the development of central serous chorioretinopathy and associated diseases was lacking so far.\(^3\) \(^7\) \(^8\) Psychological stress may have played a key role in the development of a DRPE or chronic central serous chorioretinopathy in our patients, but the simultaneous administration of prednisone may certainly have influenced the final visual outcome, especially since the ophthalmic symptoms decreased in some patients when the daily prednisone dosage was diminished.

Each of our transplanted patients – except one – also used other immunosuppressive agents such as azothioprine and cyclosporin, whereas some other drugs were used as well by the other patients treated for systemic disorders. None of these drugs, however, is known so far to be involved in the development of chorioretinal changes.

The findings in our patients differ from the leopard-like geographical areas of disruption and coarse clumping of the pigment epithelium in the posterior fundi, observed in some post-transplant patients.\(^9\) Localised choroidal intravascular coagulation is the suspected but unproved cause of the pigment epithelial changes in those patients. However, choroidal vascular changes have been described before in haemodialysis and kidney transplantation patients, which changes may promote the development of pigment epithelium defects.\(^9\) \(^10\) Pigment epithelial alterations are seen in some patients with hypertension, and the fact that 12 of our patients were hypertensive might have promoted the development of a DRPE or chronic central serous retinopathy. In these 12 patients the use of corticosteroids also may have worsened their hypertension, so the pigment epithelial alterations in these patients can be directly as well as indirectly attributed to the corticosteroid treatment.

Both β blocking agents propranolol and atenolol modify type A behaviour, and the use of these drugs has been mentioned as a useful therapy in patients with a central serous chorioretinopathy.\(^5\) Five of the 12 patients who were treated with antihypertensives did actually get betalitic agents as well as corticosteroids when they developed a DRPE or chronic central serous chorioretinopathy (Tables 1 and 2). In many diseases the steroid treatment may be life saving and the possible susceptibility of the patient to central serous chorioretinopathy does not represent a contra-indication for therapy.

Corticosteroid therapy has been widely used for the treatment of central serous chorioretinopathy and associated disorders. The findings in our patients in contrast make clear that caution should be exercised when corticosteroids are used in certain patients susceptible to develop these diseases. Corticosteroids may give rise to symptoms of DRPE or chronic central serous chorioretinopathy instead of diminishing them, whereas recovery may occur when the daily dosage is lowered.

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**Notes**