Conjunctival tumour as the primary manifestation of infectious mononucleosis in a 12 year old girl

EDITOR,—Infectious mononucleosis (IM), a common disease in childhood, is an acute lymphoproliferative disease caused by Epstein–Barr virus (EBV),1 a member of the herpes virus family. The association of EBV infection with benign and malignant lymphoproliferative diseases, as well as its role in the pathogenesis of nasopharyngeal carcinoma, is well known.2,3 The course of IM is usually self limiting but can be extremely variable, ranging from asymptomatic to a fatal outcome. Fever, pharyngitis, lymphadenopathy, and hepatosplenomegaly are typical systemic manifestations. Essential for the diagnosis is an increase in relative and absolute numbers of lymphocytes and monocytes, including 20–40% atypical forms. Occasional involvement of IM is unusual and occurs often as a mild unilateral follicular conjunctivitis simultaneously with these other symptoms.4 We describe a girl with a conjunctival tumour as the first manifestation of IM: systemic symptoms of the disease occurred some days later.

CASE REPORT
A previously healthy 12 year old girl with a 10 day history of a painless red left eye was treated with antibiotic eye drops. Despite these, a unilateral conjunctival swelling developed, and the girl was admitted for further ophthalmological consultation. On examination, a 5 × 5 mm red coloured mass in the upper nasal conjunctiva of the left eye was observed. The globe was not displaced, the ocular motility and visual acuity were normal, and funduscopic examination was unremarkable. At this time, there were no palpable cervical lymph nodes. The peripheral blood count revealed a relative and absolute lymphocytosis (WBC 13 ×10⁹/L, 76% lymphocytes) with 33% atypical lymphocytes, in particular of the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) present, aspartate aminotransferase (79 U/L), alanine aminotransferase (151 U/L), and bilirubin (1.1 mg/dL) were also detected. Serological tests confirmed the clinical diagnosis of an acute EBV infection.

Re-evaluation of the pathological findings by a lymphoma referral centre was undertaken. An extensive lymphocytic infiltrate and large necrotic areas were seen below an ulcerated conjunctival epithelium. The infiltrate mainly consisted of large polyclonal B immuneblasts, smaller mixed lymphocytes and polytypical plasma cells. Occasional immunoablasts, particularly those close to necrotic areas, expressed the latent membrane protein and the detection of EBV-associated antigens on the surface and within the nucleus of the infiltrating cells. The subsequent clinical progression with a self limiting course and the positive serology for EBV support the diagnosis of a lymphoproliferative process associated with an acute EBV infection and infectious mononucleosis. In conclusion, infectious mononucleosis should be considered in the differential diagnosis in patients with conjunctival lymphoid tumours.

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Accepted for publication 8 December 1999

Figure 1 Conjunctival tumour of the left eye (after excisional biopsy).

Figure 2 Epstein–Barr virus infection detected by antibodies against the latent membrane protein (C1–4) (A2A5, original magnification ×40).

unremarkable. Abdominal ultrasonography showed mildly enlarged para-aortal lymph nodes. The peripheral blood count revealed a relative and absolute lymphocytosis (WBC 13 ×10⁹/L, 76% lymphocytes) with 33% atypical lymphocytes, in particular of the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) present, aspartate aminotransferase (79 U/L), alanine aminotransferase (151 U/L), and bilirubin (1.1 mg/dL) were also detected. Serological tests confirmed the clinical diagnosis of an acute EBV infection. Re-evaluation of the pathological findings by a lymphoma referral centre was undertaken. An extensive lymphocytic infiltrate and large necrotic areas were seen below an ulcerated conjunctival epithelium. The infiltrate mainly consisted of large polyclonal B immuneblasts, smaller mixed lymphocytes and polytypical plasma cells. Occasional immunoablasts, particularly those close to necrotic areas, expressed the latent membrane protein and the detection of EBV-associated antigens on the surface and within the nucleus of the infiltrating cells. The subsequent clinical progression with a self limiting course and the positive serology for EBV support the diagnosis of a lymphoproliferative process associated with an acute EBV infection and infectious mononucleosis. In conclusion, infectious mononucleosis should be considered in the differential diagnosis in patients with conjunctival lymphoid tumours.


Ultrasound biomicroscopy in the diagnosis of a foreign body simulating iris melanoma

EDITOR,—Several lesions of the iris can clinically resemble melanoma.1 Failure to recognise a simulating condition could lead to misdirected therapy. The most common iris pseudomelanomas include primary iris cyst,
An iris foreign body can occasionally pose a diagnostic challenge, especially in the absence of a history of ocular trauma. We present a case of an iris foreign body that resembled a melanoma, in which ultrasound biomicroscopy (UBM) was instrumental in the diagnosis.

CASE REPORT

In June 1999, a 70 year old man was found on routine examination to have a brown lesion in the inferior part of his left iris. Two months later the lesion showed a possible increase in size, prompting a referral to the oncology service of the Wills Eye Hospital to rule out iris melanoma.

His visual acuity was 20/20 in both eyes and the intraocular pressures were normal. There was no melanocytosis, heterochromia, corneal pigmentation, corneal scar, endothelial defect, cells in the anterior chamber, or pupillary abnormalities. There was an irregular brown lesion in the left iris inferiorly, measuring 2 x 1 mm in diameter (Fig 1A). There were a few light brown refractile deposits on the surface of the lesion. Gonioscopy showed the lesion extending onto the trabecular meshwork with out trabecular seeding but with adjacent peripheral anterior synechiae (Fig 1B). There was no intrinsic vascularity, feeder vessel, iris or angle neovascularisation, or pigment dusting. The lens was clear and the fundus in each eye was normal.

Although the lesion superficially resembled a melanoma, we felt it could be a foreign body based on the presence of focal brown deposits over the lesion, which resembled rust particules. On repeated specific questioning, the patient recalled trauma to the left eye over 50 years ago, while hammering metal.

Ultrasound biomicroscopy demonstrated a highly reflective structure in the iris and anterior chamber angle, with absence of echoes posterior to the lesion, characteristic of a foreign body (Fig 2A). In addition, a defect in Descemet's membrane was noted in the upper part of cornea just off the pupillary axis (Fig 2B). Subsequent slit lamp biomicroscopy with high magnification confirmed the minute defect in Descemet's membrane. Electroretinography was not performed because there was no clinical evidence of siderosis.

COMMENT

Several conditions can simulate iris melanoma.\(^1\) A study from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Ferry reported 24 pseudomelanomas among 69 eyes that were enucleated for suspected iris melanoma, a diagnostic error of 35%.\(^2\) The lesions that most commonly simulated iris melanoma in his series included anterior staphyloma, inflammatory mass, iris stromal atrophy, and corneal perforation.\(^3\) Additionally, he noted one enucleated eye with a metallic foreign body misdiagnosed as an iris melanoma. In a clinical study of 200 patients referred for an iris lesion suspected to be melanoma, Shields and associates found that 76% were pseudomelanomas.\(^4\) Iris foreign body accounted for 4.5% of pseudomelanomas in that series, and in each instance, the patient was unaware of the foreign body and could not recall ocular trauma. However, a defect in Descemet's membrane was detected on slit lamp biomicroscopy in each case.

Diagnosis of a foreign body may sometimes be difficult in the absence of a history of injury, especially when slit lamp biomicroscopy of the anterior segment does not reveal any sign of ocular trauma. Imaging modalities such as computed tomography and ultrasonography may help in such situations. However, magnetic resonance imaging is contraindicated in cases where a ferromagnetic foreign body is suspected. Standard B-scan ultrasonography has been replaced at many centers by UBM for the evaluation of anterior segment foreign bodies.\(^5\)\(^6\) We used UBM to confirm our clinical impression of an iris foreign body in this case. In addition to characterising the foreign body, UBM detected a subtle irregularity in Descemet's membrane.

It is of interest that a seemingly metallic foreign body could remain inert for 50 years without causing ocular inflammation, siderosis or secondary glaucoma, which prompted us to observe this patient rather than to intervene surgically.

When the ophthalmologist is confronted with a dark iris lesion, an intraocular foreign body is a possibility, irrespective of a negative history of trauma. Slit lamp biomicroscopy coupled with gonioscopy provides excellent diagnostic clues. We believe that UBM is a sensitive imaging technique for confirmation of the diagnosis.

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Accepted for publication 21 January 2000


Optical coherence tomography findings in early solar retinopathy

EDITOR,—Visual deterioration caused by watching a solar eclipse has been recognised from the time of Plato. The aetiology of solar retinopathy has been attributed to photochemical effects, which may be enhanced by elevated tissue temperature.\(^1\) Typically, a small yellow spot may be noted in the foveolar area immediately after exposure. Histopathological studies of solar retinal lesions revealed retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) and photoreceptor damage.\(^1\)\(^2\) We present two patients with acute, severe solar retinopathy after observation of the total eclipse on 11 August 1999. Fundusscopic findings were accompanied by optical coherence tomography (OCT) investigation of the macula.

CASE REPORTS

Case 1

An 18 year old man presented 24 hours after watching the total eclipse without appropriate protection. Total exposure time was approximately 20 minutes. During direct viewing the patient kept his right eye closed. One hour after observation he noted blurred vision and a central scotoma on the left eye. Best corrected visual acuity was 0.8 in the right and 0.1 in the left eye. Fundus examination of the right eye did not show any pathology. Funduscopy of the left eye revealed a yellow lesion in the fovea, surrounded by a circular red area

Figure 1 (A) Anterior segment photograph showing a dark brown lesion in the iris inferiorly (white arrow). (B) Gonioscopy showing the lesion in the iris with superficial rust coloured deposits. Note the adjacent peripheral anterior synechiae.

Figure 2 (A) Ultrasound biomicroscopy image showing a highly reflective intraocular foreign body over the peripheral iris and extending into the angle recess (white arrow). The foreign body shadows the underlying iris. (B) Ultrasound biomicroscopy image showing a discontinuity of Descemet's membrane (white arrow).
area in the centre of the fovea was demonstrated in both eyes. Similar to case 1, all layers of the fovea were affected. Retinal thickness (110 µm/118 µm) was within the normal range.

COMMENT
Solar retinopathy is characterised by a yellow foveolar dot and a central scotoma. For the first time we describe OCT findings of patients suffering from solar retinopathy. The main finding was a hyperreflective area involving all foveolar retinal layers without showing any sign of retinal oedema. It correlated in size and location with the characteristic fundoscopically visible yellow dot. At present, the origin of this well delineated area of hyperreflectivity is still uncertain, but delamination increasing pathology in the RPE and choriocapillaris layer is probable.

In addition, macular oedema, which has been described in the literature before, could not be demonstrated by OCT. On OCT examination, no significant increase in retinal thickness could be observed when comparing affected and unaffected eye (case 1) or absolute value of both affected eyes (case 2). To the best of our knowledge, none of these OCT findings have been published by other investigators.

The authors do not have any commercial or proprietary interest in any of the products mentioned in this article.

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Accepted for publication 8 December 1999

CASE REPORT
A 26 year old woman complained of blurred vision and central scotoma after watching the eclipse without eye protection. Total exposure time was 5 minutes. Forty eight hours after exposure visual acuity was 1.0 in the right and 0.8 in the left eye. Fundus examination showed a small yellow round lesion in the fovea of both eyes. On OCT, a hyperreflective area was demonstrated in both eyes. Similar to case 1, all layers of the fovea were affected. Retinal thickness (110 µm/118 µm) was within the normal range.

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Accepted for publication 8 December 1999
COMMENT
In PBC, CREST, and uveitis abnormalities of the humoral and cellular immune systems are common. These include increased levels of serum immunoglobulins, the presence of circulating autoantibodies, increased turnover of complements, the presence of activated T and B cells in the peripheral blood and impaired T cell regulation. Despite the high frequency of these immunological abnormalities, a definite immunopathogenetic mechanism has not yet been clearly established for any of these disorders. Furthermore, no single mechanism seems to provide a link between these clinical entities. A mouse model for the development of liver damage through the intrahepatic inoculation of mycoplasma-like organisms, which cause human chronic uveitis, has recently been developed, but it remains a hypothetical concept. Our case report illustrates an association between ocular and hepatic diseases, which may be entirely coincidental but could, nevertheless, encourage further investigation for a common immunological pathway.

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Vitreous basket sign in dislocation of the lens

EDITOR—We describe a new ultrasonographic sign dubbed “vitreous basket sign” (looks like a basketball caught at the bottom of a basket) found in eyes with posteriorly dislocated lenses. Identifying this pattern can contribute to the diagnosis and differential diagnosis of dislocated lenses.

We used the Acuson 128x p/0 linear array 7 MHz probe instrument.

CASE REPORT
The patient was 65 years old white woman with a painful traumatic blind eye and a large leukoma adherens. Ultrasonographic examination demonstrated a hyperechogenic mass on the retina at the posterior pole, with a posteriorly dislocated lens nucleus simulating choroidal melanomas.

Visual acuities were right eye 6/5 and left eye 6/60. Right intraocular pressure (IOP) was 22 mm Hg. There was a left relative afferent pupillary defect. Gonioscopy showed open angles. Blood pressure was 140/90 mm Hg.

We believe this particular ultrasonographic sign can be ascribed to the following process. The lens detaches, encounters the anterior vitreous face, and pushes it posteriorly by its weight towards the retina. The anterior vitreous face, vitreous gel, and collagen fibres within the vitreous are pushed back by the lens creating the wall of an aqueous filled tunnel with the lens at its bottom (Fig 1B).

In most cases this sign is easy to demonstrate, and we recommend it as a useful new clue to the ultrasonographic diagnosis of dislocation of the lens.

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Accepted for publication 4 January 2000


Combined central retinal vein occlusion and cilioretinal artery occlusion in a patient on hormone replacement therapy

EDITOR—Combined occlusion of the central retinal vein and the central retinal artery or a cilioretinal artery is unusual. There have been many previously reported systemic and ocular associations. The pathogenesis of this condition, however, is not established and the associations controversial. Whether the venous obstruction or the arterial blockage acts as the initiating event is unknown. We describe a patient with combined central retinal vein occlusion (RVO) and cilioretinal artery occlusion occurring 6 weeks after starting hormone replacement therapy (HRT). We observed the evolution of the arterial occlusion. This suggests that the initiating event was the RVO.

CASE REPORT
A 46 year old patient presented with a 2 day history of decreased vision in the left eye noticed on waking. She reported no previous visual disturbances. She had been started on cyclical combined HRT 6 weeks before presentation. She was taking no other medication and had previously used the combined oral contraceptive pill with no adverse effects. She was a non-smoker. There was no past or family history of venous thromboembolism.

Visual acuities were right eye 6/5 and left eye 6/60. Right intraocular pressure (IOP) was elevated (22 mm Hg). There was a left relative afferent pupillary defect. Gonioscopy showed open angles. Blood pressure was 140/90 mm Hg.

A similar ultrasonographic pattern has been seen in seven eyes of six patients. Dislocated lens or nucleus should always be in the differential diagnosis of an intracocular mass. Alward et al described three cases of pseudophakic patients with dropped nuclei during extracapsular cataract extraction suspected to be choroidal melanomas later.

There are several ultrasonographic signs cited as characteristic of dislocated lenses: a hyperechogenic mass with an oval shape, which can become highly reflective as cataract develops, and vitreal strands adherent to the mass which is mobile and changes location with eye movements.

Figure 1 (A) B scan of the case presented. Dragged anterior vitreous face (white arrows) creating an empty tunnel above an oval-shaped hyperechogenic mass (black arrow). (B) Schematic representation of the process of lens dislocation. The anterior vitreous surface is dragged by the dislocated lens towards the retina creating an empty tunnel above it with the dragged anterior vitreous face acting as the wall of the tunnel.
Hg. Pulse rate was 72 beats per minute and regular. There was no cardiac murmur and no cyanotic fields. On the right there was patho-
logical cupping of the optic disc and venous dilatation (Fig 1). Examination of the left fundus showed dilated, tortuous retinal veins in all four quadrants, with scattered retinal haemorrhages and a swollen, haemorrhagic optic disc. There was retinal whitening in the territory of a cilio-retinal artery. No intra-
artrial embolus was seen (Figs 1 and 2). She was diagnosed, on clinical grounds, with left combined central retinal vein and cilio-retinal artery occlusion and right primary open angle glaucoma.

One week later, the cilio-retinal artery had become narrow and irregular in calibre, with frazzled branching of the blood columns (Fig 2). Two months after presentation, the per-
rivous haemorrhages and optic disc swelling had resolved, the calibre of the cilio-retinal artery had returned to normal (Fig 2), and visual acuity had improved to 6/12.

She had no identifiable risk factors for venous thromboembolism. Laboratory studies consisting of full blood count, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, blood glucose, urea and electrolytes, liver function tests, serum pro-
tein, serum protein electrophoresis, serum lip-
ids, angiotensin converting enzyme, rheuma-
toid factor, double stranded DNA, antinuclear antibody, antimitochondrial antibody, anti-
smooth muscle antibody, antineutrophil cyto-
plasmic antibody, antineutrophil factor, anti-
cardioliopin antibody, lupus anticoagulant, VDRL, TPHA, serum urate and throm-
boplaxia screen including protein C, protein S, activated protein C resistance (Factor V
Leiden), DNA analysis for a genetic variation in the prothrombin gene (prothrombin 20210A), thrombin time, antithrombin III, fibrinogen, factor VIII, and plasma homo-
cysteine were normal. Chest x ray was also

normal. Hormonal profile confirmed the patient’s postmenopausal status.

She was managed with timolol 0.25% drops to the right eye. She was advised to discon-
tinue the HRT since a causal relation with the retinal vascular disease could not be excluded. Low dose aspirin was commenced.

COMMENT

The pathogenesis of combined retinal venous and arterial occlusion is not established. Whether the venous obstruction or the arterial blockage acts as the initiating event is unknown.² Carotid artery disease has never been described as a cause of simultaneous retinal arterial and venous occlusion. Evolu-
tion of the arterial occlusion has been documented in this case. This suggests that the initiating event was the RVO, with subsequent stagnation of blood flow, elevation of intraluminal capillary pressure caused by a patent central retinal artery and ultimately cilio-retinal artery occlusion secondary to the high intravascular pressure.

There have been many reported systemic and ocular associations of combined retinal arterial and venous occlusion including tem-
poral arteritis,² migrane, systemic lupus erythematosus,² lupus anticoagulant, syphilis,² optic neuritis,² and various causes of retinal vasculitis. Relevant investigations excluded any of these as an underlying cause. Elevated IOP probably plays some part in the develop-
ment of some central RVOs.² Left IOP was normal at presentation but elevated IOP may have preceded the RVO. RVO has been reported in association with the oral contra-
ceptive pill.² In one study,² five of 588 patients who had sustained RVOs were HRT users, but four of the five had other potential risk factors. With the ever increasing use of HRT, it is important that any possible adverse effects be reported. To the best of our knowl-
edge, this is the first report of combined reti-
al arterial and venous obstruction associated with HRT.

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Accepted for publication 14 January 2000

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12.
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42.

Histological examination of the pigmen
t epithelium-Bruch membrane-chorio-
capillaris complex after macular
translocation

EDITOR,—Macular degeneration is the leading
cause of blindness in the older population, and it is becoming more and more prevalent.¹ At present there is no treatment for the dry type of macular degeneration; for treatment of the wet form, several medical and surgical thera-
pies have been tried, with varying results.²³

Photodynamic therapy with verteporfin had a significant treatment benefit in predomi-
nantly classic choroidal neovascularisation (CNV) lesions.²

Surgical removal of the subretinal mem-
brane is a promising method. But in many cases the visual acuity does not improve. A new technique has been proposed by Machemer and Steinhorst, where after surgi-
cal removal of the subretinal membrane the fovea is translocated to an area with a healthier pigment epithelium, Bruch’s membrane, and choroid.²

Variants have been described where only the temporal part of the retina was detached, or the retinal detachment was created in the temporal side through the sclera, without reti-
notomy. Here the scleral resection will ulti-
mately shift the relation of the pigment epithelium to the fovea.

CASE REPORT

In this case we performed a macular transloca-
tion using the Machemer and Steinhorst tech-
nique, with some modifications from Eckardt (personal communication, 24 October 1997), and from our experience. After surgery usually we see a retinal fold starting from the optic disc and extending to the periphery, but this fold usually disappears after 5–7 days.

Our patient died (from intracranial haemor-
rhage) on the fifth day after the operation, and it was possible to examine the operated eye pathologically.

At gross examination we found that rotation had been achieved through an angle of 20–30 degrees. The next step was to perform
sections of the translocated macula and in the region of the former subretinal membrane, and our findings are discussed below.

COMMENT
As we expected we found a thickened Bruch’s membrane, few points of calcification, some remnants from the surgically removed subretinal membrane, and our findings are discussed below.

We hypothesise that this is because a significant part of the pigment epithelium has been translocated along with the retina.

From our histological sections, we see that some part of membrane remains in place even after surgical “removal” and from the membrane remaining we were able to see that this is a mixed membrane with extension underneath and above the pigment epithelium.

We tentatively believe that this may be connected with the fact that the pigment epithelium remained attached to the retina in such a drastic manipulation; in a type 1 subretinal membrane situated only above the pigment epithelium this will not occur. We think that more research is needed to discover if there is any connection between the type of membrane, related to the condition of the pigment epithelium, and the apparent stronger adhesion between the pigment epithelium and retina (or relatively weaker adhesion to the Bruch’s membrane).

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Accepted for publication 13 January 2000


Optic neuropathy as the presenting feature of HIV infection: recovery of vision with highly active antiretroviral therapy

EDITOR,—We describe a rare case of bilateral optic neuropathy caused by HIV which responded to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART).

CASE REPORT
In March 1996, a 52 year old man presented with a 6 month history of slowly deteriorating vision in both eyes. By the time he sought medical help he had difficulty reading the newspaper and watching television. He was otherwise well except for a chronic productive cough.

He had worked for many years as a teacher in Botswana. He was heterosexual. His only risk factor for HIV transmission was a single encounter with an African woman in the mid 1980s. In 1988 he had dengue fever and malaria. The latter was treated in the UK with quinine and Fansidar. In 1995 he was treated in Botswana for a pneumonic illness. He was known to be hypertensive and was taking
evoked responses were seen on the ERG. The small amplitude on the left. No pattern distinguished on the right and was delayed and of visual evoked response was virtually extin-

vation was otherwise normal. Higher mental function was normal. Visual acuities were normal. Eye movements were normal. His pallor (Fig 2). Intraocular pressures were showed a marked concentric constriction (Fig

cesses. General examination was otherwise normal. The remainder of the neurological examination was normal.

nifedipine, bendrofluazide, and atenolol. There was nothing else of relevance in his history.

On examination he was clubbed and had bilateral coarse crepitations. General examination was otherwise normal. Higher mental function was normal. Visual acuities were 6/18 on the right and 6/9 on the left. He had marked colour desaturation being able to see 21.76 dB in the left and right eyes respectively.

The mean deviations show a marked improvement from −21.76 dB and −22.60 dB to −8.98 dB and −12.48 dB in the left and right eyes respectively.

CSF protein was 0.73 g/l (normal <0.4 g/l) and glucose of 2.5 mmol/l (plasma 5.5 mmol/l). No organisms were detected. CSF cryptococcal antigen test (latex agglutination) was negative.

The lymphocyte subsets showed a T helper cell count (CD4) of 100 cells ×10⁶ (normal 700–1100) and T suppressor cell count of 2232 cells ×10⁶ (normal 500–900). In view of his history he was counselled and consented to HIV testing. HIV-1 antibody test was posi-

tive.

He was commenced on triple therapy zido-
vudine 200 mg three times daily, lamivudine 150 mg twice daily, indinavir 800 mg three times daily (HAART or highly active antiretroviral therapy) with co-trimoxazole prophylaxis for Pneumocystis carinii. He responded well clinically and on review at 6 months his vision had improved to 6/9 and 6/6 in his right and left eyes respectively with a concomitant improvement in his visual fields at 24 months (Fig 2B). His CD4 count rose to 170 cells ×10⁶ (normal 500–900). In view of his history he was counselled and consented to HIV testing. HIV-1 antibody test was posi-

tive.

Visual deterioration in HIV is a common problem. Ocular manifestations of HIV include retinal microangiopathy, opportunistic retinal infections, Kaposi’s sarcoma of the conjunctiva and eyelids, and herpes zoster ophthalmicus. Retinal disease occurs fre-

cuently, sometimes in association with optic nerve disease. Occasionally the optic nerve is selectively involved. The commonest aetiology is opportunistic infection. Most case reports have focused on the role of opportunistic infections such as syphilis or toxoplasmosis. CMV papillitis, varicella zoster optic neuritis, or cryptococcal retrobulbar neuritis. Other causes include toxoplasmosis and tuberculosis. Indeed, a search for these aetiological agents is the priority when faced with an HIV positive patient with an optic neuropathy. However, sometimes no opportunistic infection is found and the HIV virus itself is assumed to be causing the optic neuropathy.

COMMENT

Visual deterioration in HIV is a common problem. Ocular manifestations of HIV include retinal microangiopathy, opportunistic retinal infections, Kaposi’s sarcoma of the conjunctiva and eyelids, and herpes zoster ophthalmicus. Retinal disease occurs fre-

cuently, sometimes in association with optic nerve disease. Occasionally the optic nerve is selectively involved. The commonest aetiology is opportunistic infection. Most case reports have focused on the role of opportunistic infections such as syphilis or toxoplasmosis. CMV papillitis, varicella zoster optic neuritis, or cryptococcal retrobulbar neuritis. Other causes include toxoplasmosis and tuberculosis. Indeed, a search for these aetiological agents is the priority when faced with an HIV positive patient with an optic neuropathy. However, sometimes no opportunistic infection is found and the HIV virus itself is assumed to be causing the optic neuropathy.
In our case funduscopia excluded CMV and toxoplasma retinopathy. The other infective aetiologies were excluded by serological testing. Magnetic resonance imaging excluded a compressive lesion. It is possible that our patient had idiopathic bilateral optic neuropathy with spontaneous improvement. However, it is exceedingly rare for simultaneous, rather than stepwise, bilateral visual deterioration to occur with progressive deterioration for months and then a slow delayed recovery. One of the best series of bilateral worsening for months and then a slow delayed recovery. One of the best series of bilateral optic neuropathy remains that by Hierons and Lyle in 1959.3 They reported 47 cases of bilateral optic neuritis, seven of which developed simultaneous bilateral visual disturbance. Two of these seven patients regained their vision over 6–12 months. Therefore, given the rarity of such an idiopathic presentation and the temporal relation of the improvement to HAART it is very likely that our patient had a primary HIV related optic neuropathy.

Primary HIV infection is well known to cause neurological disease. However, there has only been one case report of bilateral retrobulbar optic neuropathy in whom the presumed aetiology was the HIV virus itself.4 Newman and Lessell reported two patients who were already known to be HIV positive. The first patient was a 39 year old man who awoke with bilateral blurred vision and slight retrobulbar pain. His vision continued to deteriorate to 5/200 right eye and hand movement perception in the left eye. Funduscopia was normal. Four weeks into his illness he was commenced on AZT. Within 10 days his vision was beginning to improve. Eight months later his acuity was 20/70 right eye and 20/40 left eye. He was left with bilateral optic atrophy. The second patient did not improve with AZT but did show improvement with prednisolone. The only other case of optic neuropathy due to primary HIV infection was of a man with sudden monocular blindness.5 This was clinically due to an anterior ischaemic optic neuropathy, presumed to be secondary to an optic nerve microangiopathy.

What is the mechanism of the optic neuropathy? There is a significant loss of cortical neurons and optic nerve axons in patients with AIDS.6,7 Also far fewer AIDS patients have ocular signs than have ocular lesions discovered on post mortem. Therefore, it is not surprising that changes were noted in the optic nerves of eight AIDS patients who did not have visual signs or symptoms before death as well as those who did. Patchy axonal degeneration, oligodendrocyte, and myelin degeneration were noted in association with mononuclear cell infiltration, suggesting that optic nerve degeneration may be mediated by HIV infected macrophages.1 The HIV virus infects mononuclear phagocytic cells rather than neurons or oligodendrocytes so the neuronal losses must occur through a secondary mechanism. A more recent study has shown that optic nerve astrocytes in four patients with primary HIV related optic neuropathy stain strongly for tumour necrosis factor α (TNFα). No comparable staining was seen in control optic nerves.8 TNFα, an immunomodulatory agent, thus appears to be a major player in HIV induced neuronal apoptosis.

In conclusion, HIV may directly cause an optic neuropathy. The improvement of our patient’s vision with HAART is suggestive that much of the optic nerve failure is due to a reversible dysfunction of the optic neurons rather than their death.

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Accepted for publication 13 January 2000

Histological examination of the pigment epithelium-Bruch membrane-choriocapillaris complex after macular translocation

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Br J Ophthalmol 2000 84: 546
doi: 10.1136/bjo.84.5.546f

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