Treatmen of amoeboid herpetic ulcers with adenine arabinoside or trifluoro-thymidine

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SUMMARY In previous studies adenine arabinoside and trifluoro-thymidine were found to be equally effective treatments for dendritic ulcers of the cornea, but a trend emerged which suggested that in amoeboid ulcers trifluoro-thymidine was more effective. The collection of additional cases confirms the superiority of trifluoro-thymidine in such cases.

Despite extensive research 5-iodo-2'-deoxyuridine (DID) has remained until recently the only antiviral agent generally available to clinicians for treating ulcerative herpetic keratitis.

Adenine arabinoside (Ara-A) and trifluoro-thymidine (F3T) (Wellings et al., 1972; Pavan-Langston, 1975; Coster et al., 1976) are both highly effective in treating herpetic corneal ulceration. In a large series of herpetic ulcers treated with one or other of these agents no difference could be found in the dendritic ulcer group (Fig. 1), but a trend emerged which suggested that F3T had some advantage over Ara-A in treating the less common but more severe amoeboid ulcers (Coster et al., 1976).

Not only are amoeboid ulcers less common than dendritic ulcers, they have often been treated with steroids before referral to an ophthalmologist, and many have associated stromal disease and uveitis. They constitute the most difficult therapeutic challenge for antiviral drugs used for ulcerative epithelial herpetic keratitis. Cases of this type are therefore more likely to show a difference in effectiveness between 2 highly active antiviral compounds than the less challenging cases of dendritic ulcer.

In the initial trial 102 patients were treated—87 with dendritic ulcers, 15 with amoeboid ulcers (Coster et al., 1976). A further 15 amoeboid ulcers were treated under the same protocol in an effort to clarify the trend which seemed to be emerging in the initial study. This paper reports the results.

Patients and methods

Thirty unselected patients with typical amoeboid ulcers who consented to enter the study were included. All completed the course of treatment; 17 were treated with Ara-A and 13 with F3T.

The coded treatments were randomly allocated by the pharmacist within closely matched strata. The stratification was based on the features considered to be related to poor prognosis. These were: the size of the epithelial defect, whether the patient had been treated with steroids before coming to hospital, and whether or not the patient was atopiac.

All patients were treated as an outpatient basis. The coded preparations consisted of either 3-3% Ara-A ointment or 1% F3T drops, which were

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Fig. 1 Cumulative frequency graph of times for healing of dendritic ulcers under treatment with 3% adenine arabinoside ointment or 1% trifluoro-thymidine eye drops 5 times daily
Treatment of amoeboid herpetic ulcers with adenine arabinoside or trifluorothymidine

applied topically 5 times a day. In addition to the coded antiviral substance the patients received atropine drops 1% once daily. If they were already receiving topical steroids, these were gradually reduced over the first 3 days of the treatment programme and then stopped. The coded antiviral substance was given 5 times a day until the epithelial defect had healed, as indicated by the absence of staining with fluorescein. The frequency of administration was then reduced to 3 times a day for an additional 3 days.

Patients were reviewed on alternate days, and at each attendance a comprehensive examination of the external eye was performed. The ulcer was drawn and measured with an attachment to the Haag-Streit 900 slit lamp, the extent of the stromal disease was assessed and recorded, and attention was paid to structures likely to show signs of antiviral toxicity—the cornea, conjunctiva, and lacrimal puncta.

Treatment was considered to have failed when the epithelial defect had not healed after 21 days, had failed to decrease in size, or had enlarged over 3 successive visits.

Fig. 2 (a) At presentation, a large amoeboid ulcer with underlying stromal infiltrate and oedema; (b) 5 days after beginning treatment with adenine arabinoside ointment 3% the epithelial defect is smaller, but the stromal involvement appears more marked; (c) after 12 days of treatment the epithelial healing is very slow and there has been a further deterioration in the state of the underlying stroma.
Results

In 6 patients the ulcers failed to heal. Four were treated with Ara-A and 2 with F₃T. The pattern of failure was different in the 2 treatment groups. The failures on Ara-A treatment showed epithelial healing initially, but the stromal disease progressed with failure of the epithelium to continue healing (Figs. 2a, 2b, and 2c).

One patient treated with F₃T showed good healing initially, developed punctate epithelial staining with Bengal rose after 10 days, and despite the absence of stromal disease failed to heal until the antiviral treatment was withdrawn (Fig. 3). The other failure on F₃T had severe stromal disease when entered into the trial. This gradually improved, and the epithelium healed on the twenty-fourth day, 3 days after the arbitrary ‘closing date’ beyond which treatment was considered to have failed.

Standard actuarial survival curves, or cumulative distribution curves, provide the most accurate and easily assimilated statement of the time taken to heal by ulcers in each group. The logrank test is the most appropriate for assessing differences between groups as displayed on the survival curves. The test is the most powerful available, being effective when dealing with quite small samples (Peto and Peto, 1972). In addition it can be used to assess differences between groups of patients when the groups are defined not only by treatment schedule but by any factor thought to influence prognosis such as size of ulcer and extent of stromal disease (Mantell and Haenszel, 1959). An additional advantage is that it is not a parametric test and does not assume that the healing times follow a normal distribution. The distribution of healing times is set out in Fig. 4, and clearly does not follow such a distribution.

A logrank analysis was performed on the data set out above. It indicates that the difference between the 2 treatment groups is likely to be significant (P = 0.05). The results are displayed in Fig. 5.

Complications and Drug Reactions

Apart from failure to heal, complications were few. The only recurrence in the immediate post-treatment
Treatment of amoeboid herpetic ulcers with adenine arabinoside or trifluorothymidine

This compound against stromal virus. The compounds may differ in their transepithelial absorption into the corneal stroma, or alternatively the large epithelial defect of amoeboid ulcers may allow greater stromal uptake of the more-water-soluble F₃T than with the less-water-soluble Ara-A.

The results of this trial have obvious implications for the clinician. They also indicate the need for stratifying, randomising, and ranking the nature of the epithelial defect and the extent of deep disease of the corneal stroma and uvea when planning clinical trials of antitherpetic agents.

Herpetic corneal ulceration has provided an important proving ground for antiviral compounds with clinical potential, the disease providing a wide range of therapeutic challenges. After debridement, ulcers, with their reduced viral load, provide the opportunity to demonstrate antiviral activity in low-potency agents (Jones et al., 1976). Dendritic ulcers are appropriate for showing differences in more active compounds, and amoeboid ulcers provide the highest order of clinical challenge, capable of sorting out clinically important differences in activity between highly active compounds.

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References


