CORRESPONDENCE

y8 T cells in aqueous humour from untreated idiopathic uveitis patients

EDITOR—It is now well established that many lymphocytes are present in the anterior chamber secondary to a blood–ocular barrier breakdown, that most of them are of the T cell lineage, and that in some instances they are activated, as shown by the expression of membrane bound high affinity interleukin 2 receptors. To the best of our knowledge, however, no studies have determined whether cells bearing the y8 T cell receptor heterodimer populate the anterior intraocular fluid in both normal and pathological conditions. By using an immunofluorescence staining technique and two direct enumerating monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) [a phycoerythrin conjugated anti-CD3 mAb (BD; Coulter Immunology, Hialeah, FL) and a fluorescein conjugated panreactive y8 T cell reagent (anti-TCR81; T Cell Sciences, Cambridge, MA)] we carried out two colour cytofluorimetric analyses, on Becton Dickinson, Mountain View, CA) to evaluate the percentage of y8 T lymphocytes in the aqueous humour in 10 untreated adult patients with idiopathic anterior uveitis and in eight patients with idiopathic panuveitis. Ocular diagnoses were made on the basis of history, clinical examinations, and results of routine laboratory tests. The diagnosis was confirmed by no clinical evidence of uveitis syndromes, or occurrence of laboratory abnormalities. Aqueous samples for y8 T cell quantitation were obtained by aqueous paracentesis using a plastic tubeculin syringe and a 27 gauge needle. The percentage of circulating y8 T lymphocytes calculated after density gradient centrifugation of heparinised venous blood from 12 of our patients, as well as from 10 healthy control subjects was assessed in parallel and used for comparison in statistical analyses. Despite similar proportions of CD3+ lymphocytes (data not shown), the number of cells bearing the y8 T cell receptor for antigen (CD3+/TCR81+) was significantly higher in aqueous humour, than in either the autologous or heterologous bloodstream (Table 1). Although the biological significance of y8 T cells in ocular fluids during the clinical course of idiopathic uveitis remains unclear, increased levels in the blood of subjects with some infectious diseases and autoimmune disorders, as well as in the vitreous from a patient with acute sympathetic ophthalmia suggest these cells may be involved in immune surveillance and/or autoreactivity. In most cases treated with uveitis were treated with local or systemic steroid therapy. We have recently demonstrated that the y8 T lymphocytes are strongly susceptible to apoptosis induced by glucocorticoids. If intracellular y8 T cells play a role in the pathogenesis of idiopathic uveitis, then apoptotic signals may be one of the mechanisms by which these drugs lead to partial or complete remission of the symptoms. Support for this is provided by the occasional observations in three patients with ocular complications of toxoplasmosis (two cases) and syphilis (one case) showing that y8 T lymphocytes were virtually absent in their ocular fluids.

ALBERTO BERTOTTO
FABRIZIO SPINOZZI
RENA TO VACCARO
Instituto di Pediatrica y Clinica Medica 1, Università degli Studi di Perugia, Polieonico-Montecchio, I-06100 Perugia, Italy

Chronic lymphatic leukaemia in the elderly

EDITOR—We recently encountered an 82-year-old woman with stage one chronic lymphatic leukaemia (CLL) who presented 3 days after an uneventful cataract surgery, with endocarditis. Streptococcus pneumoniae was cultured from the aorta.

These patients are susceptible to bacterial infections and pneumococcal infection is known to be a particular problem. CLL is the common leukaemia of the elderly which means patients are likely to present for cataract surgery. We believe consideration should be given to anti-pneumococcal antibiotic prophylaxis or to the use of an antibiotic in association with surgery for the prevention of endocarditis with such a virulent organism. Subconjunctival vancomycin before surgery would be a suitable choice as it will achieve therapeutic aqueous levels and is active against the pneumococcus.

We believe that in patients who have had endocarditis in the first eye or who have hypogammaglobulinaemia (IgG <50% of the lower limit of normal) additional antibiotic prophylaxis need to be taken for the second eye. Consultation with an immunologist may be helpful as these patients can benefit from intravenous immunoglobulin. This has been shown to decrease the likelihood of infection in at risk patients.

A HAIDER
P HASSETT
Oxford Eye Hospital, Radcliffe Infirmary, Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6HE

Table 1: y8 T cell concentrations (CD3+/TCR81+) in aqueous humour (AH) from 18 untreated adult patients with idiopathic uveitis (IU), 10 with anterior (A) and eight with panuveitis (P). Peripheral blood samples from 12 uveitis patients (six with IU and six with IP) (autologous blood=AB) and 10 healthy controls (heterologous blood=HB) were assayed, parallel and used for comparison in statistical analyses

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*Relative percentages expressed as mean (SEM). Data obtained by direct immunofluorescence followed by two colour cytofluorimetry.

Reply

EDITOR—I thank John P Lee for his comments. I myself am fascinated by the detailed reports which can be found on all aspects of medical history, particularly where they give a hint of the personalities and attitudes behind them.

John P Lee
62 Wimpole Street, London W1M 7DE

Xerophthalmia in Rwandan refugees

EDITOR—In July 1994 the influx of Rwandan refugees into the Ngara district of Tanzania forced the closure of a clinic which the newcomers were in worse general condition than previous waves of refugees. During the same period a case of

corneal ulcer was detected. These events prompted a xerophthalmia survey in the six feeding centres of the camps. In each feeding centre all children present on the day of the survey were examined clinically by the author. Risk factors were also investigated. One thousand five hundred and six children were examined. Bitot's spot was seen in four children, conjunctival xerosis in seven, corneal xerosis in one, and corneal ulcer in two. The children attending the two feeding centres serving the population of newcomers had a significantly higher risk of xerophthal-mia (prevalence ratio 4.8, p<0.01), as did the children with history of diarrhoea in the previous month (prevalence ratio 1.7, p<0.05).

The 0.9% prevalence of Bitot's spot and 0.2% temporary corneal lesions indicate that this condition is an important health problem in the refugee population investigated, not only because of the risk of blindness but also because vitamin A deficiency is associated with increased mortality mainly from diarrhoea,1 2 the major cause of death in the camps. The absence of cases of corneal scar suggests that xerophthalmia is a recent event in this population associated with refugee life, otherwise this permanent lesion would be about five times more frequent than the temporary corneal lesions, because of accumulation.3 Therefore, the prevalence of this condition should increase over time unless corrective measures are taken. Vitamin A distribution associated with vaccination of children was strengthened. The history of risk factors for this condition was introduced in the feeding centres for newly admitted children and the at risk population examined for signs of vitamin A deficiency. The Nigra refugee camps are well organised together, but xerophthalmia may well affect other refugees and displaced Rwandan people in other camps.

G DE SOLE 1 Passos Avenue, BP 6988, Harare, Zimbabwe

Serious eye injury caused by rotating wire brushes

EDITOR,—Hassett1 reported a series of cases highlighting the risk of ocular injury from rotating wire brushes. We wish to emphasise this risk and also remind colleagues that such injuries may lead to serious intraocular injury.

A 37-year-old man sustained a corneoscleral perforation by a piece of wire from a rotating brush. He immediately removed the 3 cm long fragment before presenting to the casualty department. At presentation, visual acuity (VA) was 6/12 in the affected eye. Funduscopy and x-ray investigations revealed no evidence of retained intraocular foreign body (IOFB). The anterior chamber (AC) was formed, and slit-lamp examination showed a microhyphema. The wound was not self sealing and primary repair was performed within 24 hours of the injury.

On the first postoperative day a hypotonia on developed, accompanied by a fibrinous pupillary membrane and intense AC activity. Vitreous biopsy and AC tap provided samples from which a heavy growth of coagulase negative Staphylococcus aureus was shown. An intratemporal injection of vancomycin and gentamicin was given, and intensive topical administration of these antibiotics commenced. The signs of infection settled, but a mature cataract developed after 2 weeks.

Six weeks after the injury, he underwent further surgery, combining complete vitrectomy with cataract extraction and capsular fixation posterior chamber lens implantation. After 8 weeks the visual acuity had returned to 6/36.

The overall rate of endophthalmitis secondary to infection following penetrating injury is less than 10%.4 Penetrating eye injuries caused by high velocity projectiles such as hardened steel fragments from bike chains are thought to carry a low risk of infection. This is because the particles attain very high temperatures before penetration and therefore sterilise themselves.

Wire brushes are not necessarily at a high temperature when they disintegrate, and, as demonstrated in our case, may introduce infection. Therefore we recommend that injuries resulting from the use of rotating wire brushes should be treated with caution, as there is a definite risk of subsequent endophthalmitis.

H Y CHAN N R HAWKSWORTH Department of Ophthalmology, c/o Ward A4, University Hospital of Wales, Heath Park, Cardiff CF4 4XW

Automated ESR analysis in 20 minutes

EDITOR,—Significant benefits to patients and staff can be obtained by performing erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) analysis in 20 minutes in the eye department. Faster sedimentation is possible because of the Boycott phenomenon. Erythrocytes sediment more quickly when streaming down the wall of an angled tube than when falling vertically. This property is utilised in the Ves-Matic system (Biomen diagnostics, Crosby, Surrey CR0 2BN). Premanufactured tubes containing a standard diluent concentration are vacuum filled directly from the venepuncture site and placed into individual holders in the measuring device which maintains the tubes at an angle of 18° to the vertical. A photoelectric cell records the height of the column of erythrocytes before and after sedimentation. The time remaining for the analysis to be complete is displayed, followed by the result, until the next measurement is initiated.

We compared the performance of this portable machine with our laboratory's 'Seditracer' (Beckton Dickinson Vacutainer systems, Cowley, Oxford). ESR method. Seventy patients who required ESR estimation had two blood samples taken from a single venepuncture, for analysis by the above methods. The two measurements showed excellent correlation (r=0.986, p<0.03).

Three Ves-Matic measuring devices are available: Mini, Junior, and Senior, holding 4, 20, and 60 samples respectively, plus facility for hard copy printout and connection to the laboratory computer. The apparatus is portable, gives a quick accurate result, is simple and convenient to use, and uses a closed system for venepuncture and analysis. It offers a significant time saving to both staff and patients.

Ophthalmoscopy sign of early keratoconus

EDITOR,—I read with interest the recent letter by Pathmanathan et al,1 about the ophthalmoscopy sign of early keratoconus. This sign is known to some ophthalmologists and optometrists who use it regularly in the assessment of suspected cases of keratoconus at Moorfields Eye Hospital, London, as 'the oillrop sign', because of the disruption of the red reflex by a circular, dark or reddish-brown central shadow which looks like an oil drop.

The sign is best seen through a dilated pupil with a +5 lens in the direct ophthalmoscope held at 33–30 cm from the observer to the patient's eye1 and is almost diagnostic of keratoconus.

Since, however, changes in the refractive index of the lens or early nuclear cataract can be confused with keratoconus when the sign is elicited, it would be desirable to evaluate the cornea from the temporal side also, to eliminate any reflex coming from the lens.

N NARTEY Moorfields Eye Hospital, City Road, London EC1V 2PD