Incidence and severity of keratoconus in Asir province, Saudi Arabia

A A Assiri, B I Yousuf, A J Quantock, P J Murphy

**Aim:** To assess the incidence and associated signs and symptoms of patients with keratoconus in Asir Province, Saudi Arabia.

**Methods:** 125 new keratoconus patients (51 male, 74 female; mean age 18.5 (SD 3.8) years; range 8–28 years) were recruited from referrals to the department of ophthalmology, Asir Central Hospital, over a 1 year period. Age, visual acuity, and keratometry were recorded along with clinical signs and symptoms.

**Results:** The incidence of keratoconus in Asir Province is 20 cases per 100 000 population. Also, the disease severity is high, as indicated by an early mean age (17.7 (3.6) years) with advanced stage keratoconus. Visual acuity, with either spectacles or rigid contact lenses, was 6/12 or better in 98% of eyes measured. Just over half (56%) of patients had atopic ocular disease. 16% of patients had a positive family history of the disease and 16% had atopic dermatitis (eczema and/or vitiligo).

**Conclusion:** The incidence and severity of keratoconus in Asir Province, Saudi Arabia, is high with an early onset and more rapid progress to the severe disease stage at a young age. This might reflect the influence of genetic and/or environmental factor(s) in the aetiology of keratoconus.

**RESULTS**

The incidence of keratoconus in Asir Province was calculated using the area population for those aged between 5 and 29 years (654 163), because the disease usually develops within this age range, and because the study's age range was also of this order (8–28 years). With this calculation, the incidence was 20 cases per 100,000. Mean age at diagnosis was 17.7 (3.6) years for males (range 8–24 years) and 19.0 (3.8) years for females (range 12–28 years) (fig 1).

Visual acuity measurements indicated that uncorrected vision decreased with increasing disease severity and was classified on the basis of average keratometry reading (table 1). As corneal astigmatism and curvature increased vision decreased. However, visual acuity (VA) values were variable even for patients at the same disease stage. The data also show that the overall steepening of the cornea produces a greater change in VA than does any increase in astigmatism (fig 2).

Depending on the stage of the disease, VA was improvable for 108 eyes with spectacles, and 132 eyes with rigid contact lenses (table 2). With spectacles, 33% of eyes achieved a corrected VA of 6/6 or better, with 100% achieving 6/12 or

Figure 1. Age distribution of the patients enrolled in the study at the time of ophthalmological diagnosis.
better. With rigid contact lenses, 93% of eyes achieved 6/6 or better, and 97% 6/12 or better.

The severity of keratoconus was assessed from keratometry reading, in the worse affected eye, and patients’ age at diagnosis. Based on the keratometry results, the keratoconus population was divided into three groups: early <48D, moderate 48–54D, and advanced >54D (fig 3).

Twenty of 125 (16%) patients had eczema, asthma, and/or vitiligo. Another 20 patients had a family history of keratoconus. There was no evidence of tapeto-retinal degeneration or Reiger’s anomaly. Further, we encountered no systemic diseases such as Down’s, Marfan’s or Ehlers-Danlos syndromes. Seventy of 125 (56%) patients had a positive ocular history for one or more of the following keratoconus associated factors: eye rubbing, ocular allergy, tearing, ocular redness, or vernal keratoconjunctivitis (fig 4). Five patients between the ages of 6 and 12 years reported all five symptoms, and three of these also had a family history of keratoconus.

DISCUSSION
The ability to describe the incidence of a disease is important for predicting current and future clinical needs, and for establishing disease characteristics in a particular population. This study found an incidence of keratoconus in Asir Province, Saudi Arabia, to be 20 per 100 000 based on referrals to the provincial, tertiary level specialist clinic. This compares with 1 per 100 000 in the United Kingdom, 2 per 100 000 in Minnesota (USA), 2.2 per 100 000 in Finland, 2.5 per 100 000 in Holland, and 50 per 100 000 in New Zealand.

The incidence of keratoconus in our cohort is comparable to that of 20–25 per 100 000 in Asian populations living in the United Kingdom but higher than for British white people. Environmental influences for these groups will presumably be similar and the higher number of consanguineous marriages among Muslims has been proposed as a cause of the increased incidence. Previous reported incidences for a family history of keratoconus in white populations are 6%, 8.8%, and 23.5%, compared to 16% in this study. In one

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<th>Table 1 Vision varies with severity of keratoconus, but is influenced by the degree of astigmatism and myopia</th>
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<tr>
<td>Visual acuity</td>
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<td>≤ 6/24</td>
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<td>&gt; 6/24 ≤ 6/12</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 6/12 ≤ 6/60</td>
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<td>Overall</td>
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**Figure 2** Scatter plot illustrating vision against keratometry measurements. (A, B) Vision decreases with increasing corneal curvature ($r^2 = 0.28$). (C, D) Vision decreases with increasing corneal astigmatism, although with only a weak relation: right eye ($r^2 = 0.04$) left eye ($r^2 = 0.05$).
family reported here, of seven children, four had keratoconus in at least one eye.

We should consider the possibility that environmental or geographical factors may have contributed to the incidence and severity of keratoconus found in this study. Asir Province is a mountainous region and the majority of patients in our study (95%) live at an altitude of 3000 metres on average. Here, people are likely to have a greater exposure to ultraviolet, given that levels increase with altitude by approximately 10% for every 1000 metres of elevation. Ultraviolet light has previously been linked to keratoconus. Some investigators have proposed that keratoconic corneas have underlying defects in their ability to process accumulated reactive oxygen species, and that this might have a role in the disease pathogenesis. The effect of ultraviolet light has also been used to explain the high incidence of keratoconus in New Zealand, which has a white population similar to the United Kingdom, but, because the ozone layer is thinner, a greater ultraviolet background. This link, however, could not be proved definitively since it was not possible to assess actual ultraviolet dosage. Thus, the role of ultraviolet requires further study before it can be determined as a risk factor for keratoconus in patients from Asir Province, Saudi Arabia.

An early age of onset was recorded in this study (18.5 years) with approximately three quarters of our patients (74.4%) presenting before the age of 20 years (in the Collaborative Longitudinal Evaluation of Keratoconus (CLEK) study only 4% presented by this time). Investigations in white populations have reported a higher age at the time of study (mean 27 years) suggesting a later disease onset. Our results are comparable to the mean presentation age in Asian keratoconus patients of 20.2 years, 21.5 years, and 22.5 years. Increased disease severity in our subjects is revealed by average keratometry readings, with 94 eyes (39.2%) in the early stage, 102 eyes (42.5%) in the moderate stage, and 44 eyes (18.3%) in the advanced stage. Moreover, 37 eyes in the advanced stage (84%) belonged to subjects 20 years or under, more than the 67% reported elsewhere. VA decreases as corneal curvature and astigmatism increase (fig. 2). However, the correlations are not strong because of the variable influence of the amount, regularity, and obliqueness of the astigmatism, the level of progressive myopia, the scar type, morphology of the cone, and extent of any atopic disease. This indicates that the VA of a keratoconus patient does not present an accurate picture of the progress of the disease. Clinically this is seen when a keratoconic patient presents with an equal bilateral stage of the disease, with a VA in each eye that is manifestly different. Contact lenses generally provided the best means of improving vision, with 93% of eyes achieving 6/6 or better. Only one third of spectacle wearers achieved this level.

Atopic diseases (asthma and atopic dermatitis) have been suggested as aetiological components of keratoconus. Here, we did not find a strong pattern of association with only 16% of our patients reporting any form of atopy. This compares with an average of 35% reported by others. A link between allergy and eye rubbing has been reported, with atopic patients thought to develop keratoconus as a result of eye rubbing. Karsersas and Ruben, for example, found a history of eye rubbing in 66% of their keratoconus patients, while Weed and McGhee indicated that 48% of keratoconus patients rubbed their eyes. In the current study, 49 (39.2%) and 56 (44.8%) patients complained of allergy and rubbing.

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<tr>
<th>Visual acuity level</th>
<th>With spectacle correction</th>
<th>With rigid contact lenses</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (eyes)</td>
<td>Cumulative</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/4.5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/7.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/15</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Figure 3  Age at the time of ophthalmological diagnosis for each keratometry group. Error bars show mean (±1.0 SD).

Figure 4  Percentage of patients with ocular signs and symptoms accompanying keratoconus.
respectively. In addition, 15 of 30 (50%) patients in the early stage, 32 of 59 (54%) patients in the moderate stage, and 23 of 36 (63.8%) patients in the advanced stage complained of both allergy and rubbing.

In conclusion, an early onset and increased severity of keratoconus was found in Asir Province, Saudi Arabia. This may be related to a combination of genetic and/or environmental factors. Clinically, contact lens correction should be considered earlier to maximise visual performance. The results have implications for keratoconus screening in Saudi Arabia, to improve early detection and treatment.

The work was done in accordance with the ethical rules of the Saudi Ministry of Health and Asir Central Hospital.

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none was associated with CLL or CTCL. Some pigmentary changes were described in these cases, but in a pattern quite different from that seen in patients.

To date of approximately 6000 patients treated with denileukin diftitox the manufacturer has only nine reports of visual disturbance including these patients (data on file at Ligator Pharmaceuticals). Formal review of these reports has not revealed a clear pattern of ocular involvement. However, the similarity of the two cases reported here is striking, and raises the possibility of a novel toxic retinopathy.

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References


NOTICES
Macula of Paris
This meeting will take place on 6th September 2006 at the InterContinental Paris Le Grand Hôtel, 2 Rue Scribe, 75009 Paris, France. For further information, please contact Gisèle Soubran, MD, Department of Ophthalmology, University Pierre-et-Marie-Curie XII, Avenue de Verdun, 40, 94010 Creteil, France. Or email Anne-Sophie Caron at: as.caron@colloquium.fr

Back of the eye
The latest issue of Community Eye Health (No 57) assesses treatments for age related macular degeneration and other back of the eye conditions. For further information please contact: Journal of Community Eye Health, International Resource Centre, International Centre for Eye Health, Department of Infectious and Tropical Diseases, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK (tel: +(44) 020 7612 7964; email: Anita.Shabh@lshtm.ac.uk; online edition: www.jceh.co.uk). Annual subscription (4 issues) UK £28/US$45. Free to developing country applicants

Managing human resources
The latest issue of Community Eye Health (No 56) assess the use of human resources in the delivery of eye care. For further information please contact: Journal of Community Eye Health, International Resource Centre, International Centre for Eye Health, Department of Infectious and Tropical Diseases, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK (tel: +(44) 020 7612 7964; email Anitta.Shahe@lshtm.ac.uk).; online edition: www.jceh.co.uk). Annual subscription (4 issues) UK £28/US$45. Free to developing country applicants.

8th EUNOS Meeting – 2007
The 2007 European Neuro-ophthalmology Society meeting (EUNOS; www.eunos.org) will be taking place in Istanbul, Turkey on 26-29 May 2007. For further information please visit www.eunos2007.org or contact Pinar Aydin aydimp@eunos2007.org

Teaching courses on Retinal and Vitreous Surgery
Several teaching courses on Retinal and Vitreous Surgery have been organised throughout 2006 and 2007 around the world in association with the International Faculty. For further information on each of these courses please contact Ingrid Kressig, Univ.-Augenklinik Theodor-Kutzer-Ufer 1-3, 68164 Mannheim, Germany; email: Ingrid.kressig@augen.ma.uni-heidelberg.de; website: http://kressig.uni-hd.de/

EVER 2006
The EVER 2006 meeting will take place in Vilamoura, Portugal on 4–7th October 2006. For further information please contact the EVER Office, Kapucijnenvoer 33, 3000 Leuven, Belgium; website: www.ever.be

Recruitment halted on ESCRs study on antibiotic prophylaxis of endophthalmitis following clear beneficial result
THE ESCRs has terminated recruitment for its two year study of antibiotic prophylaxis of endophthalmitis following cataract surgery. Quarterly analysis of the figures to date by the study’s statisticians at the University of Strathclyde clearly indicates a beneficial treatment effect. In January 2006 the Data Monitoring Committee recommended that the study be unmasked and found the result to be so clear that they recommended to the Study Chairman that recruitment be halted.

The study has found that the risk of contracting endophthalmitis after coemulsification cataract surgery is significantly reduced by an intracameral injection of cefuroxime at the end of surgery.

The esrcs Study, a partially masked, randomised, placebo controlled multi-national study conducted at 24 ophthalmology centres across Europe commenced recruitment in September 2003. A preliminary report on the primary results will be published in the March 2006 issue of the Journal of Cataract and Refractive Surgery. Complete follow-up data and analyses will be reported at the XXXIV Congress of the ESCRs in London in September 2006 and will subsequently be published in the Journal of Cataract and Refractive Surgery.

For further information contact Caroline Fitzpatrick European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgeons, tel: +33 1 209 1100, caroline.fitzpatrick@escrs.org.

Prevention of Blindness Fellowship Programme
Application are invited for BCPB Fellowships to start in 2007. The aims of the Fellowships are to fund research and training in prevention of blindness for high caliber clinicians and scientists from the UK and overseas. Projects must further the goals of VISION 2020: THE RIGHT TO SIGHT, the elimination of avoidable blindness. In 2007, BCPB seeks to fund one Fellow from the UK and one Fellow from a low-income country to undertake projects that focus on Africa.

Priority will be given to applicants who:
• Demonstrate that their project is innovative and increases knowledge of the causes of blindness and/or its prevention in line with the priorities of VISION 2020
• Demonstrate the ability and ambition to pass on their skills in blindness prevention

The fellowships will be worth up to £60,000pa for 2 or 3 years. Applications must be submitted jointly by the Fellowship candidate and the supervisor at the host institution in the UK.

For further information and an application form, see www.bcpb.org or contact Jackie Webber at BCPB, 59–60 Russell Square, London WC1B 4HP or by email: info@bcpb.org. Closing date for applications is 30 September 2006.

do: 10.1136/ajo.2005.074955corr1

In the Scientific report titled, Incidence and severity of keratoconjunctivitis in Asir province, Saudia Arabia (Br J Ophthalmol 2005;89:1403–6) figure 2 was incorrect. The original legend printed for figure 2 has also changed. The authors apologise for this error. A full corrected figure is available on the RIO website at http://www.bjophthalmol.com/supplemental.
Figure: Scatter plot illustrating visual acuity against keratometry measurements. (A,B) Visual acuity decreases with increasing corneal curvature. (C,D) Visual acuity decreases with increasing corneal astigmatism, although only with a weak relation.