The efficacy of sirolimus in the treatment of patients with refractory uveitis

V A Shanmuganathan, E M Casely, D Raj, R J Powell, A Joseph, W M Amoaku, H S Dua

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

METHODS

Aims: To determine the efficacy of sirolimus in the treatment of patients with severe non-infectious uveitis.

Methods: Eight patients with severe non-infectious uveitis were recruited to an open study. Inclusion criteria were limited to patients whose disease was not controlled with at least two or more separate steroid sparing immunosuppressants (either because of unacceptable side effects or ineffectiveness of the drug) or who required regular doses of corticosteroids either as high dose systemic or orbital floor injections in order to control their disease. Intraocular inflammation, visual acuity, symptoms, corticosteroid burden, drug toxicity, and side effects were monitored.

Results: Sirolimus therapy was effective in five of the eight patients, all of whom had their dose of corticosteroids reduced or discontinued. Treatment in three patients was considered a failure as it caused intolerable side effects and/or failed to control the uveitis. Side effects were common and were typically gastrointestinal or cutaneous in nature. The severity of symptoms was dose dependent in most cases and occurred at trough blood levels above 25 ng/ml.

Conclusion: Sirolimus is an effective and potent immunosuppressive treatment in the majority of patients with non-infectious uveitis and can reduce the need for long term supplementary corticosteroid therapy. Further studies are required to establish the long term efficacy and safety of sirolimus alone or in combination with other steroid sparing immunosuppressants.

RESULTS

Severe non-infectious uveitis is a serious cause of ocular morbidity and systemic corticosteroids are typically used in the acute stage when local steroid therapy does not control the inflammation. The long term use of systemic corticosteroids to treat chronic disease is problematic because of its adverse side effects but the advent of steroid sparing immunosuppressants (either because of unacceptable side effects or ineffectiveness of the drug) or who required supplementary high dose corticosteroids (systemic or orbital floor injections) in order to control their disease.

Each patient was assessed both ophthalmologically and systemically. Baseline observations included blood pressure, weight, urinalysis, full blood count, urea and electrolytes, liver function tests, C reactive protein, and a fasting cholesterol. On commencement of treatment these parameters were regularly monitored.

Initially a regimen consisting of a single loading dose of 6 mg sirolimus followed by 2 mg daily, rising in increments to achieve satisfactory drug levels was followed. However, this process was too slow in achieving the required levels for our initial patients and so we started with 4 mg daily increasing by increments of 2 mg as determined by disease activity and trough blood levels. Sirolimus trough levels were measured every 4 weeks once stable drug levels were reached.

Success was defined in this study by one or more of the following parameters: an improvement of two or more lines of Snellen visual acuity, symptomatic improvement (that is, reduction subjectively in the number of floaters, pain, or photophobia), reduction in the number of inflammatory cells by binocular indirect ophthalmoscopy (BIO) as graded by two ophthalmologists (VAS and DR) according to an established uveitis scoring system, regression of vasculitis, and a reduction in the amount of corticosteroids required for disease control.

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Abbreviations: BIO, binocular indirect ophthalmoscopy; CMO, cystoid macular oedema


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Sirolimus in refractory uveitis

Table 1 Clinical details of patients and their treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No., age, sex</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Relevant history before treatment</th>
<th>Follow up (weeks)</th>
<th>Previous treatment</th>
<th>Maximum/current dose of sirolimus</th>
<th>Side effects of sirolimus therapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, 31, M</td>
<td>Anterior and intermediate uveitis</td>
<td>Episodes of CMO treated with orbital floor steroids. History of steroid induced raised intraocular pressure</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>TAC, depomedrone, orbital floor injections</td>
<td>8 mg/4 mg</td>
<td>Acne, abdominal pain, deranged liver function tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, 37, M</td>
<td>Panuveitis</td>
<td>Right eye vision reduced as a result of macular scarring secondary to chronic CMO. Repeated episodes of painful uveitis</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>CYC, MMF, TAC</td>
<td>10 mg/5 mg</td>
<td>Recurrent chest infections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 39, F</td>
<td>Panuveitis (unilateral)</td>
<td>Repeated episodes of vitreous haemorrhage secondary to neovascularisation. Episodes of CMO treated with oral corticosteroids</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>CYC, MMF, TAC, IV MP</td>
<td>8 mg/2 mg</td>
<td>Erythema nodosum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 30, M</td>
<td>Sarcoidosis, posterior uveitis</td>
<td>Repeated episodes of vitreous haemorrhage secondary to neovascularisation. Episodes of CMO treated with oral corticosteroids. At commencement of trial persisting mild CMO in left eye</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>TAC, MMF</td>
<td>4 mg/OARx</td>
<td>Nausea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, 46, F</td>
<td>Intermediate and posterior uveitis</td>
<td>Right eye vision reduced as a result of macular scarring secondary to chronic CMO. Episodes of CMO in left good eye treated with increased doses of oral corticosteroids.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>MMF, TAC, INF</td>
<td>10 mg/0 mg (treatment withdrawn)</td>
<td>Breast oedema and scleroderma-like changes in the feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, 44, M</td>
<td>Behcet’s syndrome, posterior uveitis and vasculitis</td>
<td>Left optic atrophy secondary to optic nerve ischaemia. Right eye vision reduced because of old maculopathy. Marked systemic symptoms of Behcet’s syndrome</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>CYC, AZA, TAC</td>
<td>5 mg/OARx</td>
<td>Myalgia in legs/painful feet in dorsal region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, 45, M</td>
<td>Behcet’s syndrome, posterior uveitis and vasculitis</td>
<td>Right eye vision lost because of retinal arterial occlusion</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>CYC, TAC</td>
<td>8 mg/6 mg</td>
<td>Sclerohoeic dermatitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 30, F</td>
<td>Behcet’s syndrome, posterior uveitis and vasculitis</td>
<td>Episodes of CMO treated with oral corticosteroids. At commencement of trial persisting mild CMO in left eye</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>CYC, Metho, AZA, TAC, INF, IV MP</td>
<td>12 mg/4 mg</td>
<td>Eczematous rash and severe headaches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CMO, cystoid macular oedema; CYC, cyclosporin; TAC, tacrolimus; INF, infliximab; AZA, azathioprine; Metho, methotrexate; IV MP, intravenous methylprednisolone; MMF, mycophenolate mofetil; OARx, off all treatment.

Treatment in case 5 was stopped as soon as the sclerodermatous-like changes in the foot appeared even though there was an improvement in BJO scores. Case 8 continued to have episodic vasculitis which affected the macula and resulted in transient loss of vision. This required “rescue” courses of high dose intravenous methylprednisolone. Full control of these vasculitic episodes was not achieved despite higher doses of sirolimus (12 mg) and were accompanied by unacceptable side effects. In five of the eight patients there was an improvement as adjudged by the above criteria. All of these five patients had their level of corticosteroids reduced to under 10 mg without compromising the control of intraocular inflammation or symptoms.

DISCUSSION

Sirolimus was originally developed as an antibiotic after being isolated from the fungus Streptomyces hygroscopicus. Its potential as an immunomodulatory agent is now established for the prevention of allograft rejection following solid organ transplantation. Recently it has been used in sirolimus eluting stents in patients with coronary artery disease, as it has also been shown to possess an antiproliferative effect on smooth muscle cells and on arterial intimal thickening.

Sirolimus is like cyclosporin and tacrolimus as it is an inhibitor of T cell activation—it binds to intracellular receptors known as immunophilins. However, it differs from cyclosporin and tacrolimus in that it targets a unique serine-threonine kinase involved in cell signalling. Hence, it functions as non-calcineurin inhibitor of T cells. It has additional immunomodulatory effects including the inhibition of IL-2 dependent and independent proliferation of B lymphocytes. Sirolimus has been shown to reduce inflammation in animal models of experimental autoimmune uveitis, albeit in combination with cyclosporin or tacrolimus. Hence there were appropriate studies to allow a trial in these patients with treatment resistant uveitis.

Our initial data are promising as five out of the eight patients were deemed to have successful treatment results as determined by our criteria. We were encouraged by the stabilisation of disease and reduction of inflammation without the need for high dose systemic corticosteroids seen in most of our cases. In two patients (cases 4 and 6) the treatment has not only led to a striking improvement in symptoms but the patients have been tapered off all treatment (including sirolimus) and their disease is currently in remission. We speculate that this phenomenon may be related to sirolimus induction of T cell clonal anergy which has been demonstrated in vivo. Sirolimus is also likely to be anti-angiogenic. Interestingly, as far back as 1995, Olsen et al showed that rats receiving sirolimus following orthotopic allogenic corneal grafts had reduced amounts of corneal neovascularisation. More recently Guba and colleagues have elegantly demonstrated the anti-VEGF (vascular endothelial growth factor) activity of sirolimus in a murine tumour model. This mode of action offers an explanation for the marked clinical improvement in case 4 where there was a dramatic regression of neovascularisation.

The side effects experienced by our patients were mostly dermatological and gastrointestinal in nature. Of the blood tests that were monitored mild increases in serum cholesterol.
For patients to be started on this drug, monitoring and awareness of potential side effects are critical. Our experience suggests that sirolimus can be added to this combination of treatments because it is the most effective. The system? Is there any way to predict which patients are likely to respond to which treatment? Which treatment or combination of treatments is the most effective? The advances in our understanding of the immune system have resulted in an increase in the number of therapeutic options available for the treatment of severe uveitis. The use of newer agents such as mycophenolate mofetil, daclizumab, infliximab, and camphath-1-H to treat ocular inflammatory diseases has recently been reported with some success.17–20 Our experience suggests that sirolimus can be added to this list. However, several key questions remain unanswered: What are the long term effects of these drugs on the immune system? Is there any way to predict which patients are likely to respond to which treatment? Which treatment or combination of treatments is the most effective? The preliminary reports of the newer agents should hopefully be the catalyst for randomised control studies that are needed in order to formulate an evidence base for the best treatment of severe recalcitrant non-infectious uveitis. We conclude that the management of patients with severe uveitis who do not respond to first line systemic treatment is challenging. Our initial experience with sirolimus demonstrates its effectiveness in the majority of patients with refractory non-infectious uveitis by not only controlling disease activity but also reducing the long term steroid burden.

were also observed. We noted that these side effects could be eliminated or minimised on dose reduction after the initial loading period. Fortunately we did not observe any of the reported serious adverse effects of sirolimus such as deep vein thrombosis and thrombocytopenia. Nevertheless, in three patients where the treatment was considered a failure also serious adverse effects of sirolimus such as deep vein thrombosis and thrombocytopenia were reported. Fortunately we did not observe any of the reported serious adverse effects of sirolimus such as deep vein thrombosis and thrombocytopenia.16 Thus, close monitoring and awareness of potential side effects are critical for patients to be started on this drug.

### Table 2 Clinical outcome of patients treated with sirolimus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No</th>
<th>Snellen visual acuity pretreatment</th>
<th>Snellen visual acuity post-treatment</th>
<th>Intraocular inflammation BIO score RE/LE pretreatment</th>
<th>Intraocular inflammation BIO score RE/LE post-treatment</th>
<th>Pretreatment prednisolone dose/current prednisolone dose</th>
<th>Clinical outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6/6, 6/9</td>
<td>6/5–3, 6/6–3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>40 mg/10 mg</td>
<td>Treatment failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6/18, 6/12</td>
<td>6/9, 6/9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40 mg/6 mg</td>
<td>Symptom improvement: reduction of floaters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/36, 6/4</td>
<td>6/36, 6/4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Intermittent IV MP/0 mg</td>
<td>Symptom improvement: reduction in pain and photophobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6/6–1, 6/12</td>
<td>6/5–1, 6/9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30 mg/0 mg</td>
<td>Reduction in vasculitis and regression of neovascularisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/60, 6/18</td>
<td>1/60, 6/9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40 mg/15 mg</td>
<td>Treatment failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/5, 6/9</td>
<td>6/5, 6/5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50 mg reducing to 20 mg/0 mg</td>
<td>Symptom improvement: reduction in pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6/18, HM</td>
<td>6/18, HM</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15 mg/7.5 mg</td>
<td>Regression of vasculitis with no further flare ups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>HM, 6/12</td>
<td>HM, 6/12</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Intermittent IV MP/6 mg and pulsed IV MP</td>
<td>Continuation of episodes of vasculitis leading to transient vision loss requiring repeated IV MP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIO, binocular indirect score; CMO, cystoid macular oedema; HM, hand movements; IV MP, intravenous methylprednisolone.

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Accepted for publication 16 September 2004

### References

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