Clinical and Microbiological Profile of Patients with Acute Febrile Illness Attending a Tertiary Care Hospital in South India

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Acute Febrile illness are caused by diverse microbial pathogens and are associated with significant morbidity and mortality. The methodical evaluation of area-specific etiologies of AFI helps in the rapid diagnosis, treatment and prevention and control strategies. To investigate the causes of AFI, their clinical spectrum and the seasonal trend through the year. A facility based prospective study was conducted in a tertiary care hospital in Kolar, Karnataka, South India; between January 2016 to December 2016. A total of 432 patients with AFI were enrolled and screened for specific etiological agents. The etiological agents were identified in 351 (81.25%) of AFI cases. The etiological agent could not be established in 81 (18.75%) of cases. Dengue was the most common cause of AFI (52.1%) followed by Scrub typhus (9.02%), Leptospirosis (6.48%), Chikungunya (5.32%), Enteric fever (4.16%), Malaria (3.93%) and Brucellosis (0.23%). The most common symptoms reported by enrolled patients included headache (93.1%), malaise (89.4%), joint pain (80%), chills (73.7%). In our study, AFI occurred most commonly during rainy and autumn seasons accounting for 272 (77.5%) cases. Laboratory based syndromic data of AFI can make clinicians vigilant regarding the potential pathogens in local area and further aid to establish the epidemiologic database of different etiologies.

Keywords: Acute febrile illness, Dengue, Scrub typhus.

Acute Febrile illness (AFI) is associated with significant morbidity and mortality in developing countries. AFI is caused by diverse microbial pathogens. In developed countries AFI is often due to viral etiological agents; whereas in the developing countries, the etiologies of AFI includes potentially significant infections such as malaria, enteric fever, rickettsiosis, leptospirosis, brucellosis, dengue fever, chikungunya and Japanese encephalitis.1,2

In addition to the great diversity of the pathogens, the burden of AFI is compounded by limited resources, low immunization rates and poor public health control measures. Further, AFI have similar signs and symptoms (i.e., fever, headache, joint pain, myalgia and splenomegaly) without any focal point of infection, making its diagnosis and management a very challenging affair.3 Although the clinical management guidelines for acute febrile illness are available these are rarely supported by knowledge of the locally prevalent causative agents. The infectious agents causing AFI varies by different regions suggesting that diagnosis and management needs to be based on a methodical evaluation of area-specific etiologies.

The use of laboratory-based syndromic surveillance can alert clinicians and also provide the knowledge of common infectious etiologies.
circulating in the given region during a specific

time period. Thus, it is important to maintain a

proper epidemiological data of AFI which helps

us in generating an evidence-based diagnosis and
effective treatment guidelines as most of them are
preventable deaths.

With this background, a hospital based

observational study was carried out to investigate
the causes of AFI, their clinical spectrum and the
seasonal trend through the year.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A facility based prospective study was

conducted in a tertiary care hospital in Kolar,
Karnataka, South India; between January 2016 to
December 2016.

All adult patients more than 18 years

of age with fever lasting for less than 2 weeks
with no evident focus of infection following
initial clinical evaluation were included in the
study. Patients with chronic illness, autoimmune
disorders, bone marrow hypoplasia, malignancies,
on immunosuppressant drugs, fever with definite
source of infection like urinary tract infections;
pneumonia, tuberculosis, and refusal to give
informed consent were excluded from the study.

The study protocol was approved by the
Institutional Ethical review committee and written
informed consent was obtained from the patient.
The detailed clinical history, physical examination
findings and routine laboratory investigation results
were recorded in the standardized format. The
routine baseline investigations included complete
blood count analysis, serum electrolytes, and liver
and renal function tests.

Specific Investigations

Serological tests were performed at
the discretion of the Physician advice based on
the clinical picture. The serological tests were
interpreted according to the manufacturer’s
instruction as positive, equivocal, or negative.
These included Dengue IgM Microlisa (J. Mitra &
Co. Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India), Scrub typhus IgM
ELISA (InBios International, Inc., Seattle, WA,
USA), leptospirosis IgM Microlisa (J. Mitra & Co.
Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India), IgM Chikungunya ELISA
(J. Mitra & Co. Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India), Weil felix
IgM test (J. Mitra & Co. Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India),
Malaria rapid test (Advantage Mal card J. Mitra & Co.
Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India), Brucella Standard agglutination test
(Micropath, Omega Diagnostics Ltd, Scotland,
UK), and Weil felix test (Micropath, Omega
Diagnostics Ltd, Scotland, UK).

Convalescent serological testing after
2-4 weeks was performed if the initial serological
diagnosis was unclear and if the patient was
willing. A 4-fold increase in titer from acute to
convalescent sample, or a result change going from
negative to positive, was considered indicative of
seroconversions. A thin smear was also performed
to detect malarial parasites. A single blood culture
was obtained from patients in an aerobic BacT/
Alert 3D (bioMerieux, Hazelwood, MO) bottle and
incubated for up to 7 days in the BacT/Alert 3D
blood culture system. All inpatients were followed
up until discharge from the hospital.

Diagnostic criteria

Dengue

Clinical features of dengue with dengue
IgM positive and other serologies and blood culture
negative or seroconversion on convalescent sera

Scrub typhus

Clinical features of Scrub typhus + scrub
IgM ELISA positive or Scrub IgM ELISA positive
with other serologies and blood culture negative,
Weil Felix test titres of OX K titres ≥ 1 : 160

Chikungunya

Clinical features of Chikungunya with
Chikungunya IgM positive and other serologies
and blood culture negative or seroconversion on
convalescent sera

Leptospirosis

Clinical features of Leptospirosis with
Leptospira IgM positive with other serologies and
blood culture negative

Malaria

Clinical features of Malaria with rapid
malaria card test or malaria parasites (Plasmodium
falciparum, Plasmodium vivax or mixed) visualized
on thin blood smears

Enteric fever

Clinical features of enteric fever with
blood culture positive for Salmonella typhi or
Salmonella paratyphi or 4-fold rise in titer on the
Widal test in convalescent sera

Brucellosis

Clinical features of Brucellosis: with
blood culture positive for Brucella Spp 4-fold
rise in titer on the Standard Agglutination test in convalescent sera

**Undiagnosed**

After complete evaluation, a definitive diagnosis was not made. The patients who did not give convalescent sera or who had multiple serologies positive without fulfilling the diagnostic criteria.

**Statistical Analysis**

Data were entered using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 22. Distribution of AFI cases in the year and also seasonal variation were represented using line graphs. Clinical and lab parameters in each of the AFI cases were grouped according to the diagnosis and expressed as proportions (%).

**RESULTS**

During the study period of one year, a total of 487 patients presented to the hospital with AFI (both outpatient department and casualty). Of the 487 patients, 55 patients were excluded as they either refused to give consent for blood sample collection for confirmation of the diagnosis (16) or were loss to follow-up (39). Thus, a total of 432 patients with AFI were enrolled and evaluated as shown in **Figure 1**. Of these, 272 (63%) were males and 160 (37%) were females.

The majority of the patients were from Karnataka (72.8%) and the neighboring states of Andhra Pradesh (18.4%) and Tamil Nadu (8.8%).

![Flow chart of patients presenting with AFI](image1.png)

**Fig. 1.** Flow chart of patients presenting with AFI

![Distribution of diagnosed AFI attending a tertiary care institute, Kolar in the year 2016*](image2.png)

**Fig. 2.** Distribution of diagnosed AFI attending a tertiary care institute, Kolar in the year 2016*

* Dengue cases not shown
Among 432 patients screened for specific etiological agents, we could identify the etiological agents in 351 (81.25%) cases of AFI. Despite the extensive evaluation carried out, 81 (18.75%) of AFI cases, the cause could not be determined as the serological tests were negative in 75 of patients and in six of them more than one serological test result was positive, probably due to cross-reactivity or may be due to dual infections. Dengue was the most common cause of AFI (52.1%) followed by Scrub typhus (9.02%), Leptospirosis (6.48%), Chikungunya (5.32 %), Enteric fever (4.16%), Malaria (3.93%) and Brucellosis (0.23%) as shown in Figure 1.

The most common symptoms reported by enrolled patients included headache (93.1%), malaise (89.4%), joint pain (80%), chills (73.7%) as shown in Table 1. The most common deranged hematological parameter was Thrombocytopenia (69.8%) followed by leucopenia (37.3%) and anemia (24.2%). The majority of thrombocytopenia is seen in patients with dengue fever. The Biochemical parameters also shows derangement of liver enzymes which are depicted in Table 2.

Seasons were classified as Summer (March to June), Rainy (July to September), Autumn (October to November) and Winter (December to February) according to the Indian Meteorological Department. In our study, the seasonal upsurge of AFI cases were observed and majority of AFI cases occurred in rainy (July, August, September) and Autumn seasons (October

Fig. 3. Distribution of diagnosed AFI attending a tertiary care institute, Kolar in the year 2016*

Fig. 4. Distribution of Dengue cases from a tertiary care institute, Kolar in the year 2016 (both seasonal and monthly distribution)
| Parameters          | Leptospirosis (n = 28) | Scrub typhus (n = 39) | Enteric fever (n = 18) | Chikungunya (n = 23) | Brucellosis (n = 1) | Malaria (n = 17) | Dengue (n = 225) | Total (n = 351) |
|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Fever               | 100                    | 100                   | 100                    | 100                  | 100                 | 100              | 100             | 100             |
| Headache            | 92.8                   | 94.8                  | 94.4                   | 91.3                 | 100                 | 82.3             | 93.7            | 93.1            |
| Malaise             | 82.1                   | 84.6                  | 77.7                   | 91.3                 | 100                 | 76.4             | 92.8            | 89.4            |
| Chills              | 67.8                   | 35.8                  | 11.1                   | 60.8                 | 100                 | 64.7             | 88.0            | 73.7            |
| Joint Pain          | 14.2                   | 30.7                  | 38.8                   | 100                  | 100                 | 41.1             | 99.1            | 80.0            |
| Abd Pain            | 64.2                   | 15.3                  | 94.4                   | 13.0                 | 0                   | 23.5             | 6.2             | 17.6            |
| Rash                | 0                      | 43.5                  | 5.5                    | 4.3                  | 0                   | 5.8              | 5.7             | 8.8             |
| Jaundice            | 92.8                   | 10.2                  | 61.1                   | 13.0                 | 0                   | 29.4             | 1.7             | 17.9            |
| Bleeding            | 0                      | 0                     | 0                      | 0                    | 0                   | 0                | 5.6             | 3.7             |
| Splenomegaly        | 0                      | 71.7                  | 88.8                   | 0                    | 100                 | 88.2             | 1.7             | 17.9            |

| Parameters          | Leptospirosis (n = 28) | Scrub typhus (n = 39) | Enteric fever (n = 18) | Chikungunya (n = 23) | Brucellosis (n = 1) | Malaria (n = 17) | Dengue (n = 225) | Total (n = 351) |
|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Anaemia             | 64.2                   | 61.5                  | 16.6                   | 8.6                  | 100                 | 82.3             | 10.2            | 24.2            |
| Leucopenia          | 42.8                   | 35.8                  | 88.8                   | 13.0                 | 100                 | 52.9             | 33.7            | 37.3            |
| Thromocytopenia     | 64.2                   | 28.2                  | 11.1                   | 13.0                 | 100                 | 35.2             | 90.6            | 69.8            |
| Alt                 | 92.8                   | 35.8                  | 44.4                   | 13.0                 | 100                 | 35.2             | 14.2            | 25.6            |
| Ast                 | 89.2                   | 30.7                  | 50.0                   | 17.3                 | 100                 | 41.1             | 15.1            | 26.2            |
| Bilirubin           | 96.4                   | 38.4                  | 61.1                   | 13.0                 | 100                 | 35.2             | 14.6            | 27.3            |
| Albumin             | 78.5                   | 28.2                  | 27.7                   | 8.6                  | 100                 | 47.0             | 6.2             | 17.9            |
and November) accounting for 272 cases (77.5%) as shown in Figure 2, 3 and 4.

DISCUSSION

The causes of AFI are numerous and are region and country specific. AFI accounts for most of the preventable deaths in developing countries. AFI causes significant morbidity and mortality in developing countries. The majority of the patients in our study were males. The male preponderance may be due to more chance of exposure to vectors like mosquitoes and mites owing to their outdoor activities and also attributed to lower utilization of health care facilities by females due to socio-cultural reasons.5

Most of the patients were in the middle age group (20 - 45 years), in economically productive period during which they have a greater risk of having contact with contaminated environment.

Our study revealed that there is a heavy burden of dengue fever, followed by scrub typhus, leptospirosis, chikungunya, enteric fever, malaria cases in South Indian region. The previous regional studies had reported etiologies among patients with AFI, with some variations and distribution based on the sampled population or the pathogen diagnostic panel facilities.6-10

Our finding was consistent with a similar study conducted by Garima Mittal et al., from a region of North India which showed that dengue was the most common cause of AFI followed by enteric fever, scrub typhus, malaria. A study by Abhilash K P et al. in 2013 from Southern India among inpatients had shown scrub typhus, dengue, malaria, and enteric fever to be the main etiologies.

We have identified the etiological agents in 81% of the cases. In the previous studies, the rates of identifying the etiology varied from 40% to 73.3%.11-13

In our study, the majority of the patients presented with non-specific symptoms, such as headache, malaise, joint pain, chills. A similar study conducted by Abhilash K P et al showed that the most common symptoms were generalized myalgia followed by headache, vomiting, abdominal pain and breathlessness. The symptoms and differential diagnoses of AFI are similar, often mimicking and making accurate clinical diagnosis is very difficult without laboratory confirmation.1,6,14

In our study, AFI occurred most commonly during rainy and autumn seasons accounting for 77.5% cases. The stagnant water as a result of rains compounded by poor drainage system in most of the areas in developing countries becomes a breeding ground for the mosquitoes helping them to transmit the diseases. Seasonal upsurge in fever is also a well-known documentation in previous studies.15, 16

The accurate diagnosis of AFI is complicated by a lack of knowledge of local pathogens, presence of similar signs and symptoms and unavailability of the extensive diagnostic panel leading to mismanagement of AFI cases. The infectious agents causing AFI varies by different regions suggesting that diagnosis and management need to be based on a methodical evaluation of area-specific etiologies based on the laboratory-based syndromic surveillance.

This study has few limitations. Our diagnostic testing panel did not cover the potential pathogens like H1N1, Hantan virus to name a few due to financial constraints and biohazard safety issues. Secondly, some patients did not turn up for follow up (second visit), so convalescent sera could not be obtained for confirmation of diagnosis. Thirdly, the study included only adult patients while pediatric cases would expect to have different febrile etiologies due to their different exposure and immunity status. So, the pattern of AFI observed in the present study could not be considered as representative cases of general population and thus cannot be generalized.

CONCLUSION

The similarity in clinical manifestations, diversity of etiological agents, lack of complete diagnostic panel poses a great challenge to Clinicians in diagnosis and management of AFI cases.

Laboratory based syndromic data of AFI can make clinicians vigilant regarding the potential pathogens in local area and further aid to establish the epidemiologic database of different etiologies of AFI in every region to anticipate epidemic preparedness in terms of resources and to provide quality health care facilities. This data can also be help to the local district health care
officials to take action in major vector control and plan for prevention strategies.

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