Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Research paper

Invasive pulmonary aspergillosis in COVID-19 critically ill patients: Results of a French monocentric cohort

Maaike Versyck, Wafa Zarrougui, Fabien Lambiotte, Nabil Elbeiki, Piehr Saint-Leger *

Department of Anesthesiology and Intensive Care Medicine, General Hospital of Valenciennes, France

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 2 September 2020
Received in revised form 30 December 2020
Accepted 12 February 2021
Available online 16 February 2021

Keywords:
COVID-19
Invasive pulmonary aspergillosis
Intensive care unit
SARS-CoV-2

A B S T R A C T

Introduction. – Coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19 is a new infectious disease responsible for potentially severe respiratory impairment associated with initial immunosuppression. Similarly to influenza, several authors have described a higher risk of fungal infection after COVID-19, in particular for invasive pulmonary aspergillosis. The main objective here is to define the prevalence of invasive pulmonary aspergillosis (IPA) in a cohort of COVID-19 patients with moderate to severe acute respiratory disease syndrome (ARDS).

Material and methods. – We conducted a large monocentric retrospective study investigating all the ventilated COVID-19 patients with ARDS hospitalized at Valenciennes’ general hospital, France, between March 15, 2020 and April 30, 2020. In the center a systematic IPA screening strategy was carried out for all ARDS patients, with weekly tests of serum galactomannan and beta-D-glucan. Bronchoalveolar lavage with culture and chest CT scan were performed when the serum assays were positives.

Results. – A total of 54 patients were studied. Their median age was 65 years, and 37 of the patients (71%) were male. Two patients had chronic immunosuppression and among all the patients, only 2 non-immunocompromised presented a putative IPA during their stay.

Conclusion. – The prevalence of IPA in this cohort of COVID-19 patients (3.7%) is not higher than what is described in the other ARDS populations in the literature. These results are however different from the previous publications on COVID-19 patients and must therefore be confirmed by larger and multicentric studies.

© 2021 Elsevier Masson SAS. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2 is a new coronavirus responsible for pulmonary infection. It has firstly appeared in December 2019 in the Hubei region in China and has rapidly spread around the world creating a real pandemic. This Coronavirus 2019 disease, also known as COVID-19, mainly causes respiratory damage and is responsible in its most severe forms for acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) [1].

Patients with severe forms of COVID-19 have deep immunosuppression characterized by deep lymphopenia in the initial stage. Similarly to influenza infections, several authors have mentioned the possibility of a more frequent association of invasive fungal infections (IFI), and in particular invasive pulmonary aspergillosis (IPA) in these patients [2].

The main objective of this work is to define in a retrospective analysis, the prevalence of putative IPA in a cohort of COVID-19 patients with moderate to severe ARDS. The modified definition from the AspICU algorithm developed by Schauwvlieghe et al. was used for this diagnosis of putative IPA in non-immunocompromised patients; it combines clinical, radiological and mycological criteria [3].

2. Material and methods

The cohort took place in the intensive care unit (ICU) at the Valenciennes’ general Hospital between the 15th of March 2020 and the 30th of April 2020. All the COVID-19 patients under mechanical ventilation with moderate or severe ARDS were studied. The diagnosis of COVID-19 was systematically performed.
by Real-time PCR on a nasal swab or a tracheal aspirate (TA). And an initial chest computed tomography (CT) scan was performed routinely to diagnose the severity of the lesions. Moderate or severe ARDS were both identified using the Berlin definition [4]. The patients’ demographic data and comorbidities, principally criteria of immunosuppression and host risk factors, were collected according to the standards of the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) [5].

All the critically ill Covid-19 patients were granted the same protocol of care given to the critically ill patients with influenza. In addition to the first recommendations of Gangneux et al. on COVID-19 patients, beta-D-glucan (BDG) (Fungitell® Associates of Cape Cod, Inc.) and galactomannan (GM) (Platelia® Aspergillus Bio-rad, Marnes-la-Coquette, France) serum assays were performed several times; 48 hours after initiation of invasive mechanical ventilation and then weekly over the duration of the ICU stay [2]. All mechanically ventilated patients also had weekly tracheal aspiration (TA) with bacterial and mycological examination.

In case of positive value of GM (positive at ≥ 0.5 in serum) whenever it was possible, bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) was performed with direct detection of hyphae, GM assay (positive at ≥ 0.8 in BAL) and culture for Aspergillus. A chest computed tomography (CT) scan was also conducted.

Putative IPA in non-immunocompromised patients was only considered after combining the clinical, radiological and mycological criteria defined by Schauwvlieghe et al. [3]. For the mycological criteria, one or more had to be present between a GM index positive on serum, a GM index positive on BAL, a direct microscopic evidence of hyphae and/or a positive Aspergillus culture from tissue or a BAL. Based on this practice, we do not perform systematic PCR on serum or BAL to detect Aspergillus in the center.

The data are reported as percentages for categorical variables and as a mean ± standard deviation (SD) or median with a range (min-max), as appropriate, for continuous variables.

This observational study was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles reflected in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the “Comité de Protection des Personnes Nord-Ouest IV” which is the Institutional Review Board of the University Hospital of Lille (IORG0009553) under the number HP 20/29/6.

3. Results

A total of 54 COVID-19 patients with moderate to severe ARDS under mechanical invasive ventilation were included. 37 of them were male (71%) with a median age of 65 years. Two patients were immunocompromised; one underwent a liver transplant and the other was followed for myeloma, but neither has developed an IFI during their stay. 15 patients (28%) have died. Demographic data and clinical characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Two patients showed early putative IPA, neither had prior immunosuppression or host risk factors (Table 2).

The first patient was 55 years old. He was immediately hospitalized in our intensive care unit with deep hypoxemia, seven days after the beginning of his symptoms. The first CT scan carried out in an emergency revealed serious COVID lesions, with approximately 75% of the lung parenchyma affected. There were no pulmonary aspergillosis lesions on the examination. Corticosteroid therapy at a rate of 2 mg/kg/day was started for the treatment of COVID-19 since day 1. With a neutrophil count of 6400/mm³ at the first biology, no neutropenia was found during the stay.

The serum GM on day 2 was immediately positive with a value of 3.93. The BAL performed on day 5 did not show any hyphae on direct examination but Aspergillus fumigatus was positive on culture and GM rate was 2.46 on the BAL. Pseudomonas aeruginosa was also positive on the BAL culture but other researches on IFI and viral infections ended up being negative. The control chest CT scan was only performed on day 15 and was highly suggestive of an IPA with the appearance of numerous excavations at the level of the pulmonary apex associated with typical disseminated nodular lesions. Treatment with voriconazole was started as soon as the first serum dosages were received, on day 3. The clinical evolution of the patient was however unfavorable. The serum GM concentration continued to rise despite treatment, from 5.8 on day 7 to > 6 on day 14; BDG concentration also kept on increasing, it went from 62 pg/ml on day 2, to 203 pg/ml on day 7 and 1783 pg/ml on day 14. Brain death occurred on day 18 after a massive cerebral hemorrhage, probably due to myotic aneurysm rupture.

The second patient was 72 years old. He was hospitalized with pleuropneumonia for ten days before joining the intensive care. No bacteria were found, but the diagnosis of COVID-19 was positive by PCR three days before the transfer to intensive care. The chest CT scan performed on the same day as the SARS-CoV-2 PCR revealed significant COVID lesions, with approximately 50% of the lung parenchyma affected. No pulmonary embolism and no pulmonary aspergillosis lesions were visible on the examination. Corticosteroid therapy was started in intensive care, at a rate of 2 mg/kg/day. The neutrophil count was of 5650/mm³ at the first biology, no neutropenia was found during the hospitalization.

His serum GM rate was negative on day 2 in intensive care (0.07) but positive on day 7 (0.78) with a BDG at 16 pg/ml on day 2 and 706 pg/ml on day 7 (positive at ≥ 80 pg/ml). Aspergillus fumigatus was identified in TA culture performed on day 8, but the BAL was not possibly done because of the severity of hypoxemia. The chest CT scan performed on day 10 suggested severe IPA with the appearance of multiple excavated lesions of the apex and centrolobular nodular lesions with a halo sign. Voriconazole treatment was started. No bacterial or viral infections (other than SARS-CoV-2) were documented for this patient during his stay. The kinetic of serum GM and BDG decreased under treatment, respectively to 0.11 and 513 pg/ml on day 15. But the patient yet died due to a shock and multivisceral failure on day 18. The chronology of highlights of these two patients is presented in Table 3.

Table 1: COVID-19 associated ARDS patients’ demographic characteristics and underlying diseases at ICU admission.

| Items                          | n = 54 |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Age, years (range)            | 65 (44-83) |
| Sex, Male n (%)               | 39 (72.2%) |
| BMI (kg/m²) mean ± SD         | 32.7 ± 6.2 |
| Charlson comorbidity index mean ± SD | 3.1 ± 1.9 |
| Comorbidities n (%)           |       |
| Diabetes mellitus             | 22 (40.7%) |
| Chronic immunosuppression      | 2 (3.7%) |
| Chronic kidney disease        | 4 (7.4%) |
| Chronic respiratory failure   | 4 (7.4%) |
| Chronic liver disease         | 2 (3.7%) |
| Cardio vascular disease       | 10 (18.5%) |
| Covid-19 lesions on initial chest CT-scan n (%) |       |
| < 25%                         | 6 (11.1%) |
| [25-50%]                      | 16 (29.6%) |
| [50-75%]                      | 21 (38.9%) |
| > 75%                         | 11 (20.4%) |
| Vasopressors n (%)            | 52 (96.3%) |
| Prone position n (%)          | 34 (62.9%) |
| ECMO rescue n (%)             | 4 (7.4%) |
| Renal replacement therapy n (%)| 22 (40.7%) |
| Interval from ICU admission to ICU discharge, days (range) | 15.2 (2-42) |
| Mortality in ICU n (%)        | 15 (27.8%) |

BDI: body mass index; SD: standard deviation; ECMO: extracorporeal membrane oxygenation; ICU: intensive care unit.

| Item                                | Value |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Age, years (range)                  | 65 (44-83) |
| Sex, Male n (%)                     | 39 (72.2%) |
| BMI (kg/m²) mean ± SD               | 32.7 ± 6.2 |
| Charlson comorbidity index mean ± SD| 3.1 ± 1.9 |
| Comorbidities n (%)                 |       |
| Diabetes mellitus                   | 22 (40.7%) |
| Chronic immunosuppression            | 2 (3.7%) |
| Chronic kidney disease               | 4 (7.4%) |
| Chronic respiratory failure          | 4 (7.4%) |
| Chronic liver disease                | 2 (3.7%) |
| Cardiovascular disease               | 10 (18.5%) |
| Covid-19 lesions on initial chest CT-scan n (%) |       |
| < 25%                               | 6 (11.1%) |
| [25-50%]                            | 16 (29.6%) |
| [50-75%]                            | 21 (38.9%) |
| > 75%                               | 11 (20.4%) |
| Vasopressors n (%)                  | 52 (96.3%) |
| Prone position n (%)                | 34 (62.9%) |
| ECMO rescue n (%)                   | 4 (7.4%) |
| Renal replacement therapy n (%)     | 22 (40.7%) |
| Interval from ICU admission to ICU discharge, days (range) | 15.2 (2-42) |
| Mortality in ICU n (%)              | 15 (27.8%) |

BDI: body mass index; SD: standard deviation; ECMO: extracorporeal membrane oxygenation; ICU: intensive care unit.
Table 2
Characteristics of patients with putative invasive pulmonary aspergillosis.

| Risk factors of severe COVID-19 | Patient 1 | Patient 2 |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Pre-existing pulmonary pathology | No        | No        |
| Risk factors of IPA*            | No        | No        |
| Specific anti COVID-19 therapy  | Hydroxychloroquine | Tocilizumab |
| Steroids use, 2 mg/kg/day       | Yes       | Yes       |
| Vasopressor                     | Yes       | Yes       |
| Prone position                  | Yes       | Yes       |
| ECMO rescue                     | No        | No        |
| Renal replacement therapy       | Yes       | Yes       |
| IPA diagnosis                   | Fever refractory, deep hypoxemia | Recrudescent fewer, worsening respiratory insufficiency |
| Clinical criteria               | 3.93      | 0.78      |
| BAL galactomannan index         | Aspergillus fumigatus | - |
| BAL or TA culture               | 62        | Aspergillus fumigatus |
| B-D-glucan, pg/ml               | Excavations, nodular lesions | 706 |
| Chest CT scan                   | Day 15    | Day 18    |

Outcome: Death Death

IPA: invasive pulmonary aspergillosis; ECMO: extracorporeal membrane of oxygenation; BAL: bronchoalveolar lavage; TA: tracheal aspirate; CT: computed tomography.

* The risk factors of IPA have been defined by European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) and include: deep neutropenia for more than 10 days, Hematologic malignancy, receipt of an allogeneic stem cell transplant or a solid organ transplant, daily use of corticosteroids for more than 3 weeks, severe acute graft-versus-host disease and treatments with recognized T-cell or B-cell immunosuppressants [5].

Table 3
Chronology of highlights of the two patients with putative IPA.

|                     | Patient 1 | Patient 2 |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|
| COVID-19 diagnosis by PCR | Day 0     | Day 0     |
| Hospitalisation in intensive care | Day 0     | Day 3     |
| Mechanical ventilation | Day 0     | Day 3     |
| Start of corticosteroid treatment | Day 1     | Day 3     |
| Galactomannan positivity on serum assay | Day 2     | Day 10    |
| Tracheal aspirate or bronchoalveolar lavage | Day 5     | Day 11    |
| Chest computed tomography scan | Day 10    | Day 13    |
| Death               | Day 18    | Day 21    |

Three patients had elevated serum BDG without increasing GM, they were not immunocompromised. Two of them had systemic candidiasis due to Candida albicans and one had Candida tropicalis fungemia. No Aspergillus were detected in these three patients, nor in all TA realized on the other 49 patients during their stays.

4. Discussion

We have reported 2 cases of putative IPA in the 52 immunocompetent COVID-19 patients with moderate to severe ARDS (and 2 immunocompromised patients without IPA). These two patients with putative IPA received corticosteroid therapy for the treatment of their COVID-19 but this treatment was started less than 3 weeks (2 days and 7 days) before the diagnosis of IPA and therefore could not be considered a risk factor for the host for API [5].

The frequency of putative IPA in this large monocentric cohort is therefore relatively low (3.7%) and seems similar to what is described with severe ARDS in post-infectious pneumopathy. Schauwvlieghe et al. in fact, have noticed a rate of 5% in their retrospective series involving 315 immunocompetent ICU patients with severe ARDS [3]. And even if our cohort lacks potency, the rate of putative IPA in COVID-19 does not appear to be as elevated as in populations with influenza ARDS. Indeed, the rate of secondary IPA was 14% in the retrospective analysis of Schauwvlieghe et al. established between 2009 and 2016, where 45 cases of secondary IPAs were described among 315 immunocompetent patients with influenza ARDS [3].

The publication by Chen et al. which presents a cohort of 99 COVID-19 patients during January 2020 at the Jinyintan Hospital in Wuhan also shows a low frequency of IPA with only one positive patient for Aspergillus flavidus, without specifying whether this was a colonization or a true IPA [7]. We should highlight that in Chen et al.’s study only 17 patients were described with ARDS; the other patients had a less severe form of COVID-19.

The feedback recently published by van Arkel et al. differs from ours [8]. The authors report a cohort of 31 COVID-19 patients on mechanical ventilation during the months of February and March 2020; of which 6 patients (19.4%) developed a presumed secondary IPA, 5 of these had evidence of Aspergillus fumigatus in tracheal aspirations. However, only 3 of the 6 patients had a positive GM level indicating probable IPA when the other 3 patients had neither no GM level nor negative serum levels. This does not enable to distinguish a possible IPA from a simple Aspergillus colonization. Furthermore, only one patient had a chest CT-scan and no IPA-suggestive images were found on the exam. It is interesting to note that for the 3 patients with probable IPA, the delay of IPA diagnosis after ICU admission for severe COVID-19 was 5 days. This rapid onset is similar to the one observed for the two patients in Valenciennes’ hospital for who the secondary IPA was done very early in the event of severe SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Another recent publication by Alanio et al. reports 8 putative IPAs and one probable IPA in 27 mechanically ventilated patients with COVID-19 [9]. In this publication, putative IPA was considered if Aspergillus spp were identified in BAL culture, or if there were two conditions met between the presence of Aspergillus spp in TA; a positive Aspergillus fumigatus quantitative real-time PCR in BAL, TA or serum; a positive galactomannan detection in BAL or serum; and a positive BDG in serum. For these 8 putative IPAs, only one had a positive GM in BAL (negative in serum) with Aspergillus fumigatus identification in the BAL culture. Two patients had positive identification of Aspergillus in BAL culture with negative GM in BAL and serum; and two patients had negative BAL culture, but one had positive GM in BAL and the other, positive GM in serum. We cannot deny that they could all be putative IPAs but most only had one mycological criteria for it. In opposition, in our cohort, we may have missed IPAs by not routinely performing BAL for all patients and using only the GM serum assay in first step to routine performance, which has lower sensitivity than the GM assay on TA or BAL (sensitivity 25 to 65% versus 88% in different series of
non-neutropenic patients) [3,10]. But although we did not perform systematic BAL, all patients had TA cultures during their stay and none were positive for Aspergillus spp when the serum GM assays were negative.

To our knowledge while our cohort is a single-center study, it is one of the largest publications of critically ill COVID-19 patients with systematic search for IPA by repeated serum assays. And even if it lacks potency, the prevalence of putative IPA in patients with COVID-19 does not seem to be greater than in other situations of severe pulmonary sepsis and is not as elevated as in critically ill patients with influenza. These results need to be confirmed by larger studies of patients with severe COVID-19, and the mechanisms of action explaining such difference with influenza could only be advanced after having acquired a better knowledge of the physiopathology of SARS-CoV-2.

5. Conclusion

The new Coronavirus 2019 disease might be responsible for severe forms of ARDS but the risk of secondary IPA does not appear to be more significant than in other infectious ARDS in immunocompetent patients. For this retrospective study doesn’t demonstrate an increased prevalence of putative IPA. Given the high morbidity of IPA in critical care patients, these results need to be confirmed by large cohorts.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This observational study was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles reflected in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the “Comité de Protection des Personnes Nord-Ouest IV” which is the Institutional Review Board of the University Hospital of Lille (IORG0009553) under the number HP 20/29.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the French patient protection law, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable requests.

Funding

Not applicable.

Authors’ contributions

M.V., W.Z. and P.S.L. drafted the manuscript. All authors read, revised and approved the final manuscript.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Nathalie Leone, MD, Hanane Fodil, Chaouki Bouras and Rima Dridi for their help and assistance.

References

[1] Wu Z, McGoogan JM. Characteristics of and Important Lessons From the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Outbreak in China: Summary of a Report of 72 314 Cases From the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. JAMA 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.2648.
[2] Gangneux JP, Bougnoux ME, Dannaou F, Cornet M, Zachar JR. Invasive fungal diseases during COVID-19: We should be prepared. J Mycol Med 2020;100971.
[3] Schauwvlieghe AFAD, Rijnders BJ, Philips N, Verwijs R, Vanderbeke L, Van Tienen C, et al. Invasive aspergillosis in patients admitted to the intensive care unit with severe influenza: a retrospective cohort study. Lancet Respir Med 2018;6(10):782–92.
[4] Definition Task Force ARDS, Ranieri VM, Rubenfeld GD, Thompson BT, Ferguson ND, Caldwell E, et al. Acute respiratory distress syndrome: the Berlin Definition. JAMA 2012;307(23):2526–33.
[5] Donnelly JP, Chen SC, Kauffman CA, Steinbach WJ, Baddley J, Verweij PE, et al. Revision and Update of the Consensus Definitions of Invasive Fungal Disease From the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer and the Mycoses Study Group Education and Research Consortium. Clin Infect Dis 2019. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciz1098.
[6] World Medical Association. World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki: ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. JAMA 2013;310(20):2191–4.
[7] Chen N, Zhou M, Dong X, Qu J, Gong F, Han Y, et al. Epidemiological and clinical characteristics of 99 cases of 2019 novel coronavirus pneumonia in Wuhan, China: a descriptive study. Lancet 2020;395(10223):507–13.
[8] van Arkel ALE, Rijpstra TA, Balderbos HNA, van Wijngaarden P, Verweij PE, Bentvelsen RG. COVID-19 Associated Pulmonary Aspergillosis. Am J Respir Crit Care Med 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1164/rccm.202004-0388LE [published online 12 May].
[9] Alainio A, Dollère S, Fodil S, Bretagne S, Mégabane B. Prevalence of putative invasive pulmonary aspergillosis in critically ill patients with COVID-19. Lancet Respir Med 2020.
[10] Meersseman W, Lagrou K, Maertens J, et al. Galactomannan in bronchoalveolar lavage fluid: a tool for diagnosing aspergillosis in intensive care unit patients. Am J Respir Crit Care Med 2008;177:27–34.