Disease Severity Scores and Haemogram Parameters in Nigerian Sickle Cell Disease Patients

Emmanuel Okocha¹, Emmanuel Onwubuya², Charles Osuji², Gladys Ahaneku³, Uche Okonkwo³, Nancy Ibeh⁴, John Aneke¹, Ebere Nwachukwu⁵ and Christian Onah⁶

¹Department of Haematology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, Nnewi, Nigeria
²Department of Medicine, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, Nnewi, Nigeria
³Department of Medicine, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
⁴Department of Medical Laboratory Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria
⁵Department of Chemical Pathology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, Nnewi, Nigeria
⁶Corresponding author: Dr. Aneke John C, Department of Hematology and Blood Transfusion, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, PMB 5025, Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria, Tel: +2348063756285; E-mail: anekjc@gmail.com

Received date: Oct 19, 2015, Accepted date: Dec 09, 2015, Publication date: Dec 14, 2015

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Abstract

**Background:** Sickle cell disease (SCD) is associated with high mortality in Nigeria and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa; there is need to find easily available parameters that could predict disease severity and influence therapy.

**Objective:** To evaluate the haemogram of a population of SCD patients and correlate these with objective scores of disease severity.

**Methods:** Thirty (60) asymptomatic steady state (ASS) SCD patients in our clinic were randomly selected and interviewed with a questionnaire. Their haemogram was done using a 17 parameter, 3-part white cell differential, auto-analyser (KX 21N, Sysmex corporation, Chuo ku, Kobe, Japan) and objective severity scores calculated using a modification of the method proposed by Anyeagbu et al. Statistical analysis of data was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences software, version 20 (SPSS Inc., IL, Chicago, USA), with significance assigned to p values less than 0.05.

**Result:** Of the 60 subjects assessed, severity scores were calculated for 49: 11 (22.4%), 31 (63.3%) and 7 (14.3%) met the criteria for mild, moderate and severe disease respectively. The haemogram parameters that were significantly positively correlated with disease severity were mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration (MCHC), and white blood cell count (WBC), p=0.014, and 0.001 respectively. Haemoglobin concentration (Hb) and packed cell volume (PCV) were negatively correlated with disease severity (p=0.001).

**Conclusion:** In addition to already known haemogram parameters that affect SCD severity (such as WBC, Hb concentration, and PCV) MCHC also does same and can be manipulated by drugs and other kinds of therapy to ameliorate severity in patients.

**Keywords:** Sickle cell disease; Disease severity; Blood counts; Mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration

Introduction

SCD is a disorder that presents with a wide variation of clinical features and is mostly found in developing countries where medical resources are scarce and the people mostly poor [1,2]. As a result of a number of factors, ranging from infrastructural deficits to a dearth of adequately trained manpower, the mortality from SCD remains high in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa [3,4]. A number of factors including disease severity have been reported to influence the pattern of disease presentation, prognosis and survival; patients with severe disease tend to present with more complications and end-organ dysfunction [5,6]. The impact of end organ dysfunction in patients with sickle cell disease is particularly huge and is known to adversely influence disease manifestations and survival [7-9].

Recent studies has focused on evaluating ways of predicting and appropriately stratifying patients based on disease severity, with a view to identifying those that could benefit from more intense monitoring and treatment [10-12]. The observation that SCD patients (particularly children) with raised cerebral blood flow (through transcranial doppler ultrasonography) have increased risk of cerebrovascular disease has necessitated appropriate preventive treatment modifications for these group of patients with very encouraging results [10,11].

Similarly, patients indentified as having severe SCD are currently offered hydroxyurea (and even stem cell transplantation) with significant impact on disease prognosis [12]. In an earlier study by Okocha et al. C-reactive protein (CRP) was identified as a surrogate marker of disease severity in Nigerian patients with SCD, hence its monitoring could guide appropriate patient stratification and therapy [13]. Interesting as this observation could be however, laboratory evaluation for CRP is presently not universally available in most health care facilities in resource poor settings such as Nigeria and this may.
also be the case in health institutions in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. This therefore added more impetus to the search for a more universally available, cost effective surrogate marker of disease severity in this group of patients.

The aim of this study was therefore to correlate haemogram parameters with objectives scores of disease severity in Nigerian patients with SCD, with a view to finding cheap and universally available indices which could assist physicians in predicting severity/outcome, thereby engendering appropriate treatment modification for patients, especially in resource poor settings.

Subjects and Methods

Patient selection

Sixty (60) asymptomatic steady state (ASS) sickle cell disease (SCD) patients; 37 males and 23 females were randomly selected from our paediatric, adult and out-station clinics. ASS in our patients was defined as those who had not in the last two weeks suffered any form of crisis, had a febrile illness and not transfused in the last 3 months.

The patients or their care givers were interviewed with a questionnaire which noted at what age the patient was diagnosed, past medical history including complications such as stroke, leg ulcers, avascular necrosis of the femoral or other bones and any other condition complicating the disease. Age, sex and other demographic data were also noted. Most of the subjects were on routine drugs such as folic acid, low dose soluble Aspirin, prophylactic antimalarial drugs and omega 3 fatty acids. Ethical approval was obtained from the hospital ethical committee.

Disease severity

An objective score was calculated for disease severity by using a modification of the method proposed by Hedo et al. [14]. Scores were assigned to the following parameters: patient white blood cell count, haemoglobin levels, and number of complications suffered from. Scores of ≤3 were deemed mild disease. Scores of 3 ≥ 5 were considered moderate disease, while scores >5 were taken for severe disease.

Sample collection and laboratory analysis

Five (5) mls of blood was collected into Ethylene Diamine Tetra Acetic acid (EDTA) containers for full blood count (FBC) analysis. Analysis was done using a 17 parameter, 3-part WBC Deferential, Automated Hematology analyser (KX-21N, Sysmex Corporation, Chuo-ku, Kobe, Japan). Parameters done included packed cell volume (PCV), haemoglobin concentration, white blood cell count (WBC) and differentials, platelet count and red cell indices- mean corpuscular volume (MCH), mean corpuscular haemoglobin (MCH), and mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration (MCHC).

Statistical analysis

Analysis of data was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences software package version 20 (SPSS Inc., IL, Chicago, USA). Percentages, means and standard errors of mean were used to express the data obtained which were tabulated by sex, age, and other parameters that were analysed. P values were generated by comparing frequencies using Chi Square. Correlation between variables was determined using Spearman’s or Pearson’s correlation tests. Significance was assigned to p values less than 0.05.

Results

The mean and median ages for the subjects were 20.9 ± 10.23 and 20 years (range of 4-47 years) respectively. There was no significant statistical difference in the ages of male and female study subjects (p=0.3, Table 1).

Table 2 shows the mean and median haemogram values for the subjects. Of the 60 subjects assessed, severity scores were calculated for 49 of them; 11 (22.4%) 31 (63.3%) and 7 (14.3%) met the criteria for mild, moderate and severe disease respectively. Table 3 shows the correlation between haemogram values and disease severity. The haemogram parameters that were significantly positively correlated with disease severity were MCHC, MCV and WBC (p values=0.014, 0.025 and 0.001 respectively). Haemoglobin concentration (Hb) and PCV were negatively correlated with disease severity (p=0.001).

Table 4 shows a comparison of various haemogram parameters across different categories of disease severity. Hb, WBC and PCV remained significant (p<0.001, respectively); while MCHC was close to significance (p=0.096). Figures 1-3 are graphical representations of the relationship between disease severity score and WBC, Hb and PCV respectively in study subjects.

| Parameters | N  | Mean | Standard Deviation | Median | P-value |
|------------|----|------|--------------------|--------|---------|
| Age        | 60 | 20.86| 10.23              | 20     | 0.297   |
| Female     | 23 | 22.68| 8.09               | 18     |         |
| Male       | 37 | 19.78| 11.28              | 11.5   |         |

Table 1: Age and Sex distribution of Subjects.

| Parameters | N  | Mean | Standard Deviation | Median |
|------------|----|------|--------------------|--------|
| PCV        | 60 | 0.23 | 0.05               | 0.23   |
| HB         | 60 | 7.37 | 1.74               | 7.2    |
| WBC        | 60 | 12.72| 5.18               | 11.6   |
| RBC        | 60 | 2.79 | 0.73               | 2.74   |
| Platelet   | 60 | 327.08| 133.37             | 338    |
| MCV        | 60 | 86.48| 9.13               | 86.35  |
| MCHC       | 60 | 31.71| 2.29               | 31.7   |
| MCH        | 60 | 27.44| 3.23               | 26.7   |

Table 2: Mean and Median values of Haematological Parameters of subjects.
Table 3: Correlation of severity score with some haematological parameters.

| Parameters       | Pearson's correlation | P-Value |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Severity score vs MCH | -0.025                | 0.885   |
| Severity score vs MCV | 0.289                | 0.025   |
| Severity score vs MCHC | 0.315               | 0.014   |
| Severity score vs RBC | 0.141               | 0.284   |
| Severity score vs Platelet | 0.154             | 0.241   |
| Severity score vs PCV | -0.554              | <0.001  |
| Severity score vs HB | -0.714               | <0.001  |
| Severity score vs WBC | 0.631               | <0.001  |

*significant p-values.

Table 4: Comparison of different haematological parameters by disease severities.

| Parameters | Mild disease | Moderate disease | Severe disease | P-value |
|------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------|---------|
| RBC        | 1.63 ± 0.314| 1.62 ± 0.27     | 2.01 ± 0.40    | 0.82    |
| Platelet   | 243.97 ± 191.90| 253.94 ± 187.48| 222.71 ± 152.55| 0.926   |
| PCV        | 0.26 ± 0.05  | 0.20 ± 0.04     | 0.19 ± 0.04    | <0.001  |
| HB         | 8.9 ± 1.49   | 6.60 ± 1.02     | 6.04 ± 1.35    | <0.001  |
| WBC        | 7.11 ± 5.63  | 14.15 ± 3.48    | 17.54 ± 7.35   | <0.001  |
| MCV        | 86.43 ± 8.86 | 87.78 ± 7.78    | 83.49 ± 13.42  | 0.632   |
| MCH        | 28.24 ± 3.28 | 26.94 ± 2.94    | 26.57 ± 3.88   | 0.422   |
| MCHC       | 32.55 ± 2.16 | 30.77 ± 2.29    | 32.00 ± 2.29   | 0.096   |

*significant p-values.

Figure 1: Association between white blood cell count (WBC) and severity score.

Figure 2: Association between Haemoglobin (HB) levels and severity score.
In addition, evidence exists to show that in SCD, erythrocytic Hb-S concentration reduces the oxygen affinity of the blood thereby increasing the release of oxygen to end tissues [23]. Correspondingly, it has also been found that as MCHC increases, blood O₂ affinity decreases with increased tendency for red cell sickling [24]. May et al. argued that this phenomenon may be due to the fact that high MCHC levels encourage polymerization of sickle haemoglobin (which is an initiating step in red cell sickling) [25]. Hydroxyurea is well known for its effect in ameliorating the clinical presentation of SCD and one of the mechanisms by which this comes about is by reducing the MCHC [26]. Therefore, the identification of the MCHC as a surrogate marker of disease severity in this study is not surprising, in view of its established influences on red cell deformability, haemoglobin S polymerization and tendency to sickling.

Packed cell volume, Hb concentration and WBC are well known parameters that affect severity in SCD [27-29]. Hence we used Hb concentration and WBC as parameters in our calculation of an objective severity score.

Limitation of the study

This work is limited by the fact that some of the data we collected were based on recall of our patients or their care givers, more so, a larger study size population could have given the work more power to detect significant results.

Conclusion

In addition to well known haemogram parameters such as WBC, Hb concentration, and PCV, this work clearly shows that MCHC equally affects severity in SCD. The MCHC is measured by most automated haematology analysers and it could equally be calculated manually, using the Hb concentration and PCV. This makes it available to physicians and other health professionals who care for patients with SCD, even in resource poor settings. Importantly, the MCHC is amenable to manipulation by drugs and other kinds of therapies and this could potentially be explored with a view to ameliorating disease severity in patients with SCD.

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