The Combined Use of Tocilizumab and Hemoadsorption in a Patient with SARS-COV-2-19-Associated Pneumonia: A Case Report

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Keywords
SARS-COV-2-19 · Tocilizumab · CytoSorb · Interleukin 6 · C-reactive protein.

Abstract
The SARS-COV-2-19-associated respiratory involvement is caused by the massive release of inflammatory cytokines ultimately leading to interstitial pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). In the absence of an effective antiviral treatment, a reasonable causal approach could be constituted by the neutralization of these substances. The authors describe the clinical course of a patient with SARS-COV-2-19 interstitial pneumonia treated with the combination of an anti-interleukin 6 (IL-6) agent (tocilizumab) and hemoadsorption (HA). This combination was used to abate the surge of inflammatory mediators leading to the lung damage. Blood levels of IL-6 and C-reactive protein (CRP) were measured before the initiation of the treatment and in the following 3 days. At the end of the treatment, the values of IL-6 and CRP decreased from 1,040 to 415 pg/mL and from 229 to 59 mg/L, respectively. The gas exchanges and the chest imaging rapidly improved, and the patient was extubated 10 days later. The combination of tocilizumab and HA could be valuable in the treatment of SARS-COV-2-19-associated pneumonia and ARDS that are caused by the release of inflammatory mediators.

Background
Since the beginning of February 2020, an outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease (SARS-COV-2-19) spread all over Italy [1]. Similarly to what has been reported in epidemics caused by other strains of coronavirus and H1N1 influenza virus, it appears that a massive release of inflammatory mediators, including tumor necrosis factor, several pro-inflammatory mediators, including interleukin (IL)-1, IL-2, IL-6, interferon, etc. could be responsible for the endothelial and alveolar damage ultimately leading to the severe hypoxia and multiple organ dysfunction.
syndrome occurring in these patients [2, 3], making them prone also to infections with other germs and viruses [4]. A similar reaction, frequently indicated as cytokine release syndrome can occur also in a number of critical conditions other than sepsis, including hemophagocytic syndrome (HS), onset of adult Still’s disease and untoward reactions to innovative therapies aiming to enhance the host’s immune response against the tumor cells [5–7].

Aiming to contrast this hyperinflammatory response, we combined hemoadsorption (HA) and the anti-IL-6 agent tocilizumab in a patient with a SARS-COV-2-19 severe interstitial pneumonia. To the best of our knowledge, no other similar case has been reported so far.

**Case Description**

A 40-year-old man with an uneventful history was admitted to our ICU due to a severe respiratory failure caused by SARS-CoV-2 that was diagnosed from the pharyngeal swab. The chest radiograph (CRX) demonstrated multiple bilateral opacities (Fig. 1). He was mechanically ventilated with an FIO2 of 100% and a PEEP of 10 cm of H2O; the initial PaO2/FIO2 was 80 but increased up to 245 with recruitment maneuvers. The C-reactive protein (CRP) was elevated, but other biochemistries, including the procalcitonin were in the normal range (Table 1). An antiviral treatment with lopinavir/ritonavir was started. Due to the elevated inflammatory pattern, HA was initiated simultaneously with the iv. Anti-IL-6 tocilizumab was administered at a dosage of 8 mg/kg and repeated after 24 h. HA was performed with a CytoSorb® (CytoSorbents Corporation, Monmouth Junction, NJ, USA; Aferetica s. r.l. Bologna Italy) using a femoral bi-lumen catheter; the anticoagulation was obtained with a continuous infusion of iv. Heparin was titrated according to the to the APTT; 3 sessions of CytoSorb® were performed, each lasting 24 h; the procedure was performed in the hemoperfusion mode, as the patient did not need any renal replacement treatment. The blood levels of IL-6 and CRP were measured before the initiation of HA and tocilizumab and in the following 4 days (D1–D4, respectively) (Table 1). Both substances were measured with commercially available kits.

Twenty-four hours after the start of the treatment, the PaO2/FIO2 increased to 341. At the end of the combined procedures, the CRX was substantially improved (Fig. 2) and 10 days after admission, the patient was extubated and discharged to a sub-ICU. SARS-CoV-2 was no longer present in the bronchoalveolar lavage. Ten days after the discharge from ICU, he left the hospital and returned home free of symptoms, and 1 month later, he called us over phone and announced that he became father of a girl.

**Discussion**

In the absence of effective antiviral treatments, the approach to patients with SARS-COV-2-19 acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) remains largely supportive and includes the use of protective mechanical ventila-

**Table 1. Time course of some inflammatory and respiratory variables**

| Variablea (normal values) | Interventions |
|---------------------------|---------------|
|                           | Tmab + HA     | Tmab + HA     | HA     | none |
| PaO2/FIO2                 | 132           | 200           | 220    | 315   |
| CRP (<5.0 mg/L)           | 229           | 180           | 129    | 59    |
| PCT (<0.5 ng/mL)          | <0.5          | <0.5          | <0.5   | <0.5  |
| IL-6 (0–10 pg/mL)         | 1,040         | 953           | 487    | 415   |

HA, hemoadsorption; Tmab, tocilizumab; IL, interleukin; CRP, C-reactive protein; PCT, procalcitonin. a All blood samples were obtained before the initiation of HA and Tmab.

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Fig. 1. Admission CRX: bilateral multiple confluent opacities. CRX, chest radiograph.

Fig. 2. One day after the end of treatment with CytoSorb® and tocilizumab. Bilateral reduction of the opacities.

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Tocilizumab and HA in a Patient with SARS-COV-2-19-Associated Pneumonia

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DOI: 10.1159/000509738

Conclusions

In our experience, the combined use of CytoSorb® and tocilizumab was followed by the rapid improvement of the gas exchange and CRX in a patient with SARS-COV-2-19 pneumonia. These variations were associated with a sharp decrease of CRP and IL-6 whose levels remained low even on the day after the end of the treatment. We suggest considering the use of the combined approach of CytoSorb® and tocilizumab in patients with SARS-COV-2-19-induced pneumonia, ARDS, and/or multiple organ dysfunction syndrome with elevated levels of CRP.

Acknowledgements

The authors are deeply grateful to the nursing and administrative staff of the Trieste ICU.

Yet, 2 relevant points need clarification. First, which patient could take advantage from this treatment? Actually, as the rapid measurement of blood levels of IL-6 as well as of other mediators is not readily available in Italy, other markers are warranted. Recently, Mehta et al. [12] suggested the HS score to screen SARS-COV-2-19 patients with a hyperinflammatory response and, thus, eligible for immunomodulatory treatment. This system has been developed by Fardet et al. [13] to assess the individual risk of reactive HS in patients with septic shock and is based on the measurement of 22 variables whose derangement is ranked according to the deviation from their normal values; however, it requires some information that can be either difficult to gather in SARS-COV-2-19 patients, such as the presence of hemophagocytosis in the bone marrow aspirate or not directly related to the SARS-COV-2-19 such as the hepatomegaly or the splenomegaly. A more practical approach could be constituted by the repeated measurements of the CRP as this acute-phase reactant is produced under the stimulation of the IL-6 [14]. Put in other terms, the CRP could be considered as a proxy of IL-6, and its elevation could prompt the initiation of the tocilizumab and HA therapies. Actually, in the absence of readily available markers of inflammation, Ronco et al. [15] advocate the unspecific blockade of the cytokine surge by means of CytoSorb® or other similar techniques.

Second, it is not (yet) clear if and in which amount the antiviral agents are inactivated by the HA. Although the efficacy of lopinavir/ritonavir is questionable [16], this issue is particularly relevant in view of other agents currently under investigation [17] because the measurement of their circulating levels and the consequent adjustment of dosage is not yet available everywhere.
Statement of Ethics

Not applicable; the patient gave the authorization to the publication of his case in anonymous form.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have non conflicts of interest to declare.

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