Remission of Subacute Psychosis in a COVID-19 Patient With an Antineuronal Autoantibody After Treatment With Intravenous Immunoglobulin

To the Editor:

Patients with the COVID-19 coronavirus are at increased risk for developing new or recurrent psychosis (1). Viral infections—including SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) (2–4)—can cause psychosis in the context of autoimmune encephalitis (5). However, some individuals with parainfectious psychosis do not meet criteria for autoimmune encephalitis, yet they respond to immunotherapy (6,7). We present a case of COVID-19–associated subacute psychosis that did not meet criteria for autoimmune encephalitis yet remitted after treatment with intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIg). We subsequently identified a novel IgG class antineuronal autoantibody in the patient’s cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).

A 30-year-old man without medical, psychiatric, or substance use history developed fever and malaise. The following day, he developed a delusion that the “rapture” was imminent. On day 2, a nasopharyngeal swab was positive for SARS-CoV-2 by reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction. He began a 14-day isolation but maintained daily contact with family. He did not have anosmia, ageusia, or respiratory symptoms, nor did he receive treatment for COVID-19. He initially suffered from hypersonnia and slept 22 hours/day. He then developed insomnia, sleeping only 3 to 4 hours/day. During this time, he began pacing and rambling about “lights.” He worried that he was dying and said that he had been speaking to deceased relatives and God.

On day 22, he kicked through a door and pushed his mother, prompting an emergency department evaluation. In the emergency department, he endorsed speaking with the dead, falsely claimed to be a veteran, and worried about being experimented on with “radiation.” He did not have suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, or hallucinations. Noncontrast head computed tomography was normal, and urine toxicology studies, including a clinical autoimmune encephalitis autoantibody panel, were only notable for an elevated IgG of 4.8 mg/dL (reference 1.0–3.0 mg/dL) with a normal IgG index (see Table 1).

Lacking focal neurologic symptoms, seizures, magnetic resonance imaging abnormalities, or CSF pleocytosis, his presentation did not meet consensus criteria for autoimmune encephalitis (7). Nevertheless, his subacute psychosis, cognitive slowing, and recent SARS-CoV-2 infection raised concern for autoimmune-mediated psychosis. Therefore, starting on day 35, he received a total of 2 g/kg of IVIg over 3 days. His cognitive slowing and psychotic symptoms remitted after the first day of treatment. His sleep cycle normalized, and he was discharged without scheduled antipsychotics. He returned to work immediately after discharge and remained symptom-free 3 months later.

Because his robust response to IVIg indicated an underlying autoimmune process, we tested his CSF for antineuronal antibodies using anatomic mouse brain tissue staining (9), a validated and standard method performed by incubating rodent brain sections with CSF and counterstaining with a human IgG-specific antibody. At a 1:4 dilution, his CSF produced a novel immunostaining pattern that we have not observed in over 500 screens of CSF from other patients with neuroinflammatory disorders.

His IgG prominently immunostained Satb2-expressing upper-layer (layer II/III) pyramidal neurons in the anteromedial cortex (Figure 1A), a population of excitatory callosal projection neurons necessary for the integration of intercortical information (9). We also observed relatively uniform puncta in the corpus callosum (Figure 1B), consistent with immunostaining of callosal projections. In the olfactory bulb, mitral cell bodies and the external plexiform neuropil were immunostained (Figure 1C). In the dentate gyrus, linearly organized puncta resembling axonal transport vesicles and oblong neurons were apparent in the hilus (Figure 1D). In the thalamus, linear and less organized punctate staining was observed (Figure 1E). In the cerebellum, Purkinje cell bodies were modestly stained, while the overlying molecular layer was densely stained with variably size puncta (Figure 1F).

In this case we identified a candidate novel neuronal autoantibody in the CSF of a COVID-19 patient with antipsychotic-refractory subacute psychosis, whose symptoms rapidly and completely remitted after treatment with IVIg. This autoantibody primarily localized to layer II/III callosal cortical neurons, which have been implicated in schizophrenia (10). Although antineuronal autoantibodies are present in some neurologically impaired COVID-19 patients (11–13), autoantibody studies are rarely performed in cases of COVID-19–associated psychosis (14–22).

Importantly, early initiation of immunotherapy for autoimmune disorders of the central nervous system significantly improves outcomes (23). Although autoimmune encephalitis can be established on clinical grounds, the diagnosis requires neurologic, magnetic resonance imaging, and/or CSF abnormalities (7). To identify individuals with potentially immune-responsive acute psychosis without neurologic impairment, Pollak et al. (24) proposed criteria for autoimmune psychosis.
While “possible” autoimmune psychosis relies solely on clinical factors, “probable” and “definite” require abnormal imaging or laboratory studies.

Our patient’s subacute psychosis and cognitive dysfunction qualified him for possible autoimmune psychosis. However, he had several red flags for probable autoimmune psychosis: infectious prodrome, rapid progression, and insufficient response to antipsychotics [24]. Moreover, his mood dysregulation, cognitive slowing, and hypersomnia were evocative of the mixed symptomatology more typical of autoimmune encephalitis [25,26]. Given his overall clinical picture, we administered IVIg with apparent clinical response. Although our patient might have later developed autoimmune encephalitis, consideration of autoimmune psychosis can prompt earlier immunotherapy and potentially improve outcomes. Only by relying on ancillary criteria were we able to justify immunotherapy for our patient, suggesting that re-evaluating the criteria for autoimmune psychosis may improve its sensitivity [27].

Even so, this case should be interpreted with caution. Psychotic disorders are protean by nature, mixed symptomatology does occur, and most psychotic presentations are unlikely to be immune mediated. However, given the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, psychiatric practitioners should consider autoimmune psychosis in patients with COVID-19–associated psychosis.

### Table 1. Clinical Studies

| Source               | Test                           | Result (Reference) |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Nasopharyngeal Swab  | SARS-CoV-2 RNA PCR             | Day 2: positive    |
|                      |                                | Day 34: negative   |
| Urine                | 9-drug toxicology screen       | Negative           |
| Serum                | Basic metabolic panel          | Within acceptable limits: Na 146 mmol/L (136–144 mmol/L) K 3.1 mmol/L (3.3–5.1 mmol/L) |
|                     | Prothrombin time               | 11.5 s (9.6–12.3 s) |
|                     | International normalized ratio | 1.07               |
|                     | Complete blood count           | Day 24 WBC: 6.9 × 1000/μL (4.0–10.0 × 1000/μL) Day 34 WBC: 5.4 × 1000/μL (4.0–10.0 × 1000/μL) MPV 11.6 fL (8.0–11.0 fL) |
|                     | Thyroid stimulating hormone    | 2.520 uIU/mL (0.270–4.200 uIU/mL) |
|                     | D-dimer                        | 1.89 mg/L (≤0.50 mg/L) |
|                     | Liver enzymes                  | AST 156 U/L (<35 U/L) ALT 372 U/L (<59 U/L) |
|                     | C-reactive protein             | 1.7 mg/L (<1.0 mg/L) |
|                     | Ferritin                       | 1124 ng/mL (30–400 ng/mL) |
|                     | Ammonia                        | 27 μmol/L (11–35 μmol/L) |
|                     | Albumin                        | 4.2 g/dL (3.6–4.9 g/dL) |
|                     | IgG                            | 1230 mg/dL (700–1600 mg/dL) |
| CSF                  | Cell count                     | 0 nucleated cells   |
|                     | Protein                        | 41.2 mg/dL (15–45 mg/dL) |
|                     | Glucose                        | 60 mg/dL (40–70 mg/dL) |
|                     | Culture                        | No growth           |
|                     | Oligoclonal banding            | None                |
|                     | Albumin                        | 25.8 mg/dL (10–30 mg/dL) |
|                     | IgG                            | 4.8 mg/dL (1.0–3.0 mg/dL) |
|                     | IgG index                      | 0.67 (<0.7)         |
| Autoimmune encephalopathy panel | Negative for AMPA Ab, amphiphysin Ab, antialgial nuclear Ab, neuronal nuclear Ab (types 1, 2, and 3), CASPR2, CRMP-5, DPPX, GABA<sub>α</sub> receptor, GAD65, GFAP, IgLON5, LGH1-IgG, mGlur1, NIF, NMDA receptor, Purkinje cell cytoplasmic Ab (types Tr, 1, and 2) |
| Imaging              | CT head without contrast       | No acute intracranial findings. |
|                     | MRI brain with contrast        | No acute intracranial abnormality or definitive structural abnormality identified. Specifically, no imaging findings suggestive of encephalitis or acute demyelination. |
|                     | Electroencephalography         | Normal prolonged (>12 hours) awake and asleep inpatient video electroencephalogram. |

Ab, antibody; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; CT, computed tomography; GABA, gamma-aminobutyric acid; IgG, immunoglobulin G; mGlur1, metabotropic glutamate receptor 1; MPV, mean platelet volume; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; NIF, neuronal intermediate filament; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; WBC, white blood cell.
Figure 1. Characterization of antineuronal antibody staining. Mice were perfused with 4% paraformaldehyde; 12-μm frozen sagittal brain sections were immunostained with cerebrospinal fluid at a 1:4 dilution and counterstained with an antihuman IgG secondary antibody (green) (Jackson #709-545-149 at 2 μg/mL). Nuclei were labeled with DAPI (blue). Scale bars = 10 μm. (A) Cortical immunostaining of pyramidal neuron cell bodies and proximal processes in layer II of the anteromedial cortex. Staining of neuropil was also observed. (Inset) Cerebrospinal fluid immunostains Satb2-expressing (red) neurons (filled arrowheads) but not surrounding Satb2-negative cells (unfilled arrowhead) (Abcam #ab51502 at 1 μg/mL). (B) Relatively uniform punctate staining along the ventricular wall (filled arrowheads) and overlying corpus callosum. (C) Olfactory bulb immunostaining of mitral cell bodies (filled arrowheads) and neuropil of the external plexiform layer (ep). (D) Hippocampal immunostaining of an axon-like process in the hilus (h) of the dentate gyrus (filled arrowheads) and a subset of hilar cell bodies (unfilled arrowheads). (E) Thalamic axon-like (filled arrowhead) and scattered (unfilled arrowhead) punctate immunostaining. (F) Immunostaining of cerebellar Purkinje cell bodies (filled arrowheads) and neuropil of the molecular layer (m); bv, blood vessel; gc, granule cell layer; ip, internal plexiform layer; mc, mitral cell layer; pc, Purkinje cell layer; v, ventricle.

Lindsay S. McAlpine
Brooke Lifland
Joseph R. Check
Gustavo A. Angarita
Thomas T. Ngo
Samuel J. Pleasure
Serena S. Spudich
Shelli F. Farhadian
Christopher M. Bartley

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Article Information

From the Departments of Neurology (LSM, SSS) and Psychiatry (BL, JRC, GAA), Yale University School of Medicine; and the Section of Infectious Diseases (SFF), Department of Internal Medicine, Yale University School of Medicine; and the Weill Institute for Neurosciences Diseases (TTN, CMB), Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences (TTN, CMB), and the Department of Neurology (SJP, MRW), University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California; and the Hanna H. Gray Fellowship Program (CMB), Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

LSM and BL contributed equally to this work.

Address correspondence to Christopher M. Bartley, M.D., Ph.D., at christopher.bartley@ucsf.edu.

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