Thrombosis and thrombocytopenia after ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccination: a single UK centre experience

Fehmida Bano, Buddikha Badugama, Deepak Chandra

SUMMARY
We report clinical findings of three patients presenting with thrombosis and thrombocytopenia 10–16 days following the first dose of the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine against SARS-CoV-2. All patients presented to a major university teaching hospital in the UK over a 5-day period and were found to have high-titre antibodies against platelet factor 4 (PF4) without previous exposure to heparin. All three patients presented with extensive venous thrombosis, significant thrombocytopenia, elevated D-dimer and borderline low fibrinogen. Two had fatal intracerebral haemorrhage secondary to cavernous venous sinus thrombosis and one had PE. Reference laboratory testing of serum demonstrated anti-PF4 antibodies in all three patients. The clinical and laboratory findings confirmed vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT) which was poorly described at the time of presentation. We were able to manage successfully one patient with PE with intravenous immunoglobulin and corticosteroids.

BACKGROUND
Following regulatory approval by the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in December 2020, the UK was one of the first countries worldwide to introduce large-scale non-trial vaccination with ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 for adults over 18 years of age to prevent COVID-19. ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 is a recombinant adenoviral vector encoding the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2. The safety and efficacy of the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine were confirmed following four randomised controlled trials in the UK, South Africa and Brazil, none of which reported an increased incidence of thrombosis or thrombocytopenia.2 The MHRA granted temporary authorisation for prophylactic use of this vaccine for adults over 18 years of age. Initial vaccination was prioritised for the elderly (over 70 years of age) and frontline health and social care workers. Subsequently, adults of all ages have been invited for vaccination, prioritised according coexisting medical problems and descending age order. As of 8 April 2021, over 31 million individuals have received the first dose of a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine in the UK,3 the majority of which have been ChAdOx1 nCoV-19. A rare complication of thrombosis associated with thrombocytopenia has been reported 5–28 days following the first dose of the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine and is now termed vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT).4,5

We describe this syndrome in three patients who presented to our centre 10–16 days after receiving the first dose of ChAdOx1 nCoV-19. Two patients were diagnosed with cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) and developed secondary cerebral haemorrhage, which proved fatal. One patient presented with a large pulmonary embolism (PE) and went on to make a full recovery. We present all these cases in order of presentation to our hospital which occurred over a 5-day period (19–23 March 2021) which was prior to widespread recognition of the syndrome. Several countries have since reported cases of VITI, leading to restriction of this vaccine in the younger age group in many countries.

CASE PRESENTATION
Patient 1: presentation
A 61-year-old woman presented with a 3-day history of progressive dyspnoea, pain and swelling in the right leg. She had received the first dose of ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 16 days before presentation and had a history of asthma and hypertension. Her thrombotic risk factors included a high body mass index of 38 kg/m² and current use of hormone replacement therapy which had been ongoing for 20 years. The two-level Wells Score predicted a high probability for PE. D-dimer was elevated at 9376 ng/mL, and platelet count at presentation was 25×10⁹/L. A CT pulmonary angiogram confirmed bilateral PE (figure 1) with right heart strain. Prothrombin time (PT) international normalised ratio (INR) and activated partial thromboplastin time (aPTT) were normal, and fibrinogen was low at 1.26 g/L. Biochemical tests were unremarkable. Thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP) and antiphospholipid syndrome (APLS) were excluded after appropriate screening investigations.

Patient 1: further investigations and management
At presentation, the patient was transfused one unit of platelets and commenced on two times per day low-molecular-weight heparin (LMWH). Due to the unusual presentation, the possibility of autoimmune heparin-induced thrombocytopenia (HIT) with no prior heparin exposure was considered. As such, a blood sample was taken for an HIT screen.

The HIT screening test with a rapid particle gel immunoassay (ID-PaGIA Heparin/PF4 Antibody Test, Bio-Rad) was weak positive. The sample was sent for HIT ELISA and functional assay. LMWH was stopped and anticoagulation was switched to treatment dose fondaparinux after 12 hours of presentation. Further platelet transfusion was withheld. The patient was...
treated with intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) 1 g/kg single dose and pulsed dexamethasone 20 mg once daily for 4 days. Her platelet count improved steadily after 2 days of treatment. The HIT ELISA was reported as strong positive for anti-platelet factor 4 (PF4)/heparin antibodies by IgG-specific ELISA immunoassays (optical density (OD) 2.871; cut-off for positive reaction >0.4). In the functional assay in which platelet activation was tested with serum and heparin in high and low concentration, her platelet activation was inhibited by excess heparin effectively confirming strong positive antibodies against PF4.

Patient 1: outcome and follow-up
She was discharged on day 7 with a platelet count of 197×10⁹/L after switching anticoagulation to rivaroxaban for 3 months. At follow-up 1 week post discharge, she was asymptomatic with a normal full blood count. She has been advised not to take the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. Figure 2, table 1 provide an outline of her clinical presentation and management.

Patient 2: presentation
A 53-year-old woman was referred to our centre’s neurosurgical department from another centre where she had presented a few hours prior with sudden onset headache and facial weakness. She gave a history of worsening headaches for the past 3 days and weakness of the right arm and leg. She had received the first dose of ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 14 days prior to presentation. She had a medical history of fibromyalgia. Her initial blood tests showed an elevated D-dimer of 5620 ng/ml and a platelet count of 24×10⁹/L. A CT scan of the head showed extensive intracerebral haemorrhage. She further had a CT venogram, which confirmed CVST (figure 3). PT INR and aPTT were normal with a borderline low fibrinogen of 1.9 g/L. Biochemical tests were normal. TTP and APLS were again excluded after relevant investigations.

Patient 2: further investigation and management
Twenty-four hours into admission, her level of consciousness deteriorated and she required intubation. Three units of platelets were transfused before urgent neurosurgical intervention. Anti-coagulation was not started due to the risk of life-threatening bleeding. Following referral to clinical haematology, a blood sample was taken for an in-house HIT screen by rapid particle gel immunoassay, which was reported as negative. However, our experience with patient 1 and emerging case reports prompted a high clinical suspicion for VITT. As such, a sample was sent to the reference laboratory. Her HIT ELISA was reported as strong positive (OD 2.631). Platelet functional assay was negative in this case.

Patient 2: outcome and follow-up
Her repeat scans showed further bleeding, with signs of increased intracranial pressure (ICP). She further deteriorated with seizures and coning and further neurological intervention was not attempted due to futility. Her platelet count remained low at 23×10⁹/L, and she died on the 16th day after vaccination. Figure 4, table 1 provide an outline of her clinical presentation and management.

Patient 3: presentation
A 55-year-old man with no comorbidities presented to the emergency department with a 2-day history of headache followed by the onset of dysphasia, right arm weakness and discoordination in the preceding few hours. He had received his first dose of ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 10 days prior to admission. At presentation, there was isolated thrombocytopenia with a platelet count of 21×10⁹/L and a very high D-dimer of 47 881 ng/ml. CT scan of the head showed extensive CVST with the extension of thrombus into the left internal jugular vein and secondary subarachnoid haemorrhage (figure 5). The PT INR and aPTT were normal, and fibrinogen was borderline low at 1.9 g/L. Biochemical tests were normal. TTP and APLS were again excluded after relevant investigations. As with patient 2, the in-house rapid particle gel immunoassay HIT screen was negative, but due to high clinical suspicion, samples were sent to the reference laboratory.

Patient 3: further investigation and management
Prior to the results of the reference laboratory testing, the patient was managed empirically for VITT with dexamethasone 20 mg and anticoagulation with argatroban, given its reversibility. Platelets and cryoprecipitate were transfused to maintain the count above 50×10⁹/L and fibrinogen above 1.5 g/L. IVIG 0.5 g/kg was planned to be given. HIT ELISA was reported as
strong positive (OD=2.423) confirming antibodies against PF4. The platelet functional assay was negative.

**Patient 3: outcome and follow-up**

Despite intensive management he developed seizures and deteriorated further with falling level of consciousness. Repeat brain imaging showed a new subarachnoid haemorrhage causing significant midline shift and compression of the midbrain. He underwent emergency decompressive craniectomy and ICP monitoring. However, the patient persisted and the patient deteriorated. Following discussion within the medical team and with the family, treatment was withdrawn and he died within 24 hours of presentation.

**Discussion**

We have summarised the clinical and laboratory characteristics of three patients who presented to our centre with VITT, and Table 1 provides an outline of his clinical presentation and management.

**Table 1  Clinical and laboratory features of three patients**

| Characteristics                  | Patient 1                        | Patient 2                        | Patient 3                        |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Age (years)                      | 61                               | 53                               | 55                               |
| Sex                              | Female                           | Female                           | Male                             |
| Comorbid conditions              | Asthma, hypertension, high body mass index | Fibromyalgia                      | Nil                              |
| Time from vaccination to admission (days) | 16                               | 14                               | 10                               |
| Medication on admission          | Hormone replacement therapy, indapamide | None                             | None                             |
| Presenting symptoms              | Shortness of breath, pain and swelling in the right leg | Headaches, facial weakness, hemiparesis | Headaches, dysphasia, right arm weakness |
| Site of thrombosis               | Right main pulmonary artery extending into upper, middle and lower pulmonary arteries | Superior sagittal sinus, right sigmoid, right transverse sinus | Cortical veins, superior sagittal sinus, left transverse, left sigmoid sinus and left internal jugular vein |
| Platelet count nadir (<10^⁹/L (reference range 150–450)) | 25                               | 24                               | 21                               |
| D-dimer peak (ng/ml (reference range 0–350)) | 9376                             | 5620                             | 47 881                           |
| PT INR peak (normal range 0.80–1.20) | 1.0                              | 1.2                              | 1.1                              |
| aPTT peak (normal range 0.80–1.17) | 1.1                              | 0.9                              | 0.97                             |
| Fibrinogen (Claus) nadir (g/L (reference range 1.9–4.8)) | 1.26                             | 1.90                             | 1.33                             |
| SARS-CoV-2 PCR test result       | Not detected                      | Not detected                      | Not detected                      |
| Rapid particle gel immunoassay    | Weak positive                     | Negative                          | Negative                          |
| PF4-ELISA (optical density (cut-off for positive reaction >0.400)) | 2.871                             | 2.631                            | 2.423                            |
| Platelet functional assay        | Positive                          | Negative                          | Negative                          |
| Anticoagulation therapy          | Initial split dose of LMWH then fondaparinux | Nil                              | Alteplase                         |
| Platelet transfusion             | 1 unit                           | Multiple                          | Multiple                          |
| Other treatment                  | IVIG (1 g/kg) Dexamethasone (20 mg once daily for 4 days) | None                             | Dexamethasone 20 mg Cryoprecipitate |
| Outcome                          | Full recovery                     | Death                             | Death                             |

References:

1. Bano F, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2021;14:e243894. doi:10.1136/bcr-2021-243894

2. Dutt G, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2021;14:e243894. doi:10.1136/bcr-2021-243894

3. Bano F, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2021;14:e243894. doi:10.1136/bcr-2021-243894

4. Bano F, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2021;14:e243894. doi:10.1136/bcr-2021-243894
Managing such patients is challenging and requires timely intervention. Involvement of a multidisciplinary team with urgent referral to haematology at the earliest suspicion is the key to achieving a good outcome. Radiological, neurosurgical, pathological and pharmacological support is mandatory to save lives by active intervention, especially during the first few hours. HIT ELISA testing should be done at the earliest suspicion and clinicians should not be falsely reassured by a negative rapid particle gel immunoassay or functional assay.

The optimal treatment of VITT is not fully established but national and international guidelines recommend IVIG, therapeutic anticoagulation and the avoidance of platelet transfusion. Anticoagulation with non-heparin anticoagulants such as danaparoid, argatroban, direct oral anticoagulants and fondaparinux is recommended. In unstable patients, we have favoured argatroban due to its short half-life. The initiation of anticoagulation in a thrombocytopenic patient with thrombosis necessitates careful evaluation of the risks and benefits. In the presence of catastrophic haemorrhage, this judgement is especially challenging. However, due to the pathophysiology of VITT, the balance of risk is in great favour of commencing therapeutic anticoagulation and avoiding platelet transfusion. Despite this, in some circumstances, anticoagulation will be contraindicated and these patients will likely be those with the most severe clinical presentations. Moreover, although prompt recognition and management is important, for some patients with catastrophic presentations, the efficacy of medical interventions will be limited and it is likely that VITT will remain a fatal complication of vaccination in isolated cases. Table 2 highlights potential diagnostic and therapeutic strategies and pitfalls.

Further investigation of the underlying pathophysiology and epidemiology of VITT is urgently underway to inform the
dynamic risk assessment which must balance individual and public health implications of vaccination and this rare side effect. Following these three cases over 5 days, our institution developed a local guideline to raise awareness across the hospital and to trigger involvement of haematology at the earliest opportunity.

Patient’s perspective

I had my vaccine about 2 weeks before I attended the hospital. I suffered from aches and pains shortly after the vaccine but they got better. A few days later I had pain in my right leg and bad headache which persisted. The next day I had pain in the chest and shortness of breath when I attended the hospital. I was diagnosed of a blood clot in my lungs. I am now much better after the blood thinning treatment and my walking is improving. I am walking my dog and getting back to normal. I have read about these vaccine complications but never thought I will be affected. I am just glad that it has got better.

Learning points

► Clinicians should have a high suspicion of investigating any acute onset thrombosis associated with thrombocytopenia presenting 5–28 days following the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine.

► Check baseline full blood count, D-dimer and fibrinogen levels in all suspected cases.

► Seek advice from an experienced haematologist at earliest suspicion.

► Screen for platelet factor 4 antibodies by ELISA heparin-induced thrombocytopenia assay and treat positive cases with intravenous immunoglobulin.

► Further investigations are required to prove the link between the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine and immune thrombocytopenia with associated thrombosis.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr Richard Buka, resident haematologist, in addition to the medical staff of the Neurosurgical and Intensive care Department at the University Hospital of North Midlands for their valuable contributions in management of these patients. The authors would also like to thank Dr James Davies, resident radiology, for providing help for radiology images.

Contributors

FB is the lead author for this case report, leading the care and management of patients 1 and 2 as well as leading the writing of the manuscript. BB is the consultant incharge of patient 3 and was actively involved in decision-making and patient treatment, also she contributed to the manuscript. DC is the lead consultant supervising the management of all three patients as well he reviewed and edited the manuscript.

Table 2

| Dos                                      | Don’ts                                      |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Laboratory testing by PF4 antibody assay (ELISA HIT assay) | Do not exclude VITT based on a negative HIT screen from a rapid particle gel immunoassay |
| Commence therapeutic anticoagulation with non-heparin-based therapies | Avoid heparin, including heparin-based flushes. Fondaparinux can be used |
| Urgently treat with IVIG                  | Avoid platelet transfusion                  |
| Consider giving corticosteroids           | Avoid thrombopoietin receptor agonists       |
| Report to regulatory health agencies      | Do not give a second dose of any vaccine for SARS-CoV-2 until further data are available |

HIT, heparin-induced thrombocytopenia; IVIG, intravenous immunoglobulin; PF4, platelet factor 4.

Funding

The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests

None declared.

Patient consent for publication

Obtained.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

This article is made freely available for use in accordance with BMJ’s website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may use, download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.

ORCID ID

Fehmida Bano http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8260-7604

REFERENCES

1. Gov.UK. Regulatory approval of COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca [Internet]. GOV.UK, 2021. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/registration-approval-of-covid-19-vaccine-astrazeneca [Accessed 7 Apr 2021].

2. Voysey M, Clemens SAC, Madhi SA, et al. Safety and efficacy of the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine (AZD1222) against SARS-CoV-2: an interim analysis of four randomised controlled trials in Brazil, South Africa, and the UK. Lancet. 2021;397:99–111.

3. The official UK government website for data and insights on coronavirus (COVID-19). Available: https://covid-19.data.gov.uk/ [Accessed 13 Apr 2021].

4. Greinacher A, Thiele T, Warkentin TE, et al. Thrombotic thrombocytopenia after ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccination. N Engl J Med. 2021;384:2092–101.

5. Scully M, Singh D, Lown R, et al. Pathologic antibodies to platelet factor 4 after ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccination. N Engl J Med. 2021;384:2202–11.

6. Blauenfeldt RA, Kristensen SR, Emstsen SL, et al. Thrombocytopenia with acute ischemic stroke and bleeding in a patient newly vaccinated with an adenosine vector-based COVID-19 vaccine. J Thromb Haemost. 2021;19:1771–5.

7. Pottegard A, Lund LC, Karlstad Øystein, et al. Arterial events, venous thromboembolism, thrombosis, and bleeding after vaccination with Oxford-AstraZeneca ChAdOx1-S in Denmark and Norway: population based cohort study. BMJ. 2021;373:n1114.

8. Aregally GM. Heparin-Induced thrombocytopenia. Blood. 2017;129:864–72.

9. Amir J, Marfaing-Koka A, Poncz M, et al. The biological basis of immune heparin-induced thrombocytopenia. Platelets. 1998;9:77–91.

10. Greinacher A, Juhi D, Strobel U, et al. Heparin-induced thrombocytopenia: a prospective study on the incidence, platelet-activating capacity and clinical significance of antiplatelet factor 4/heparin antibodies of the IgG, IgM, and IgA classes. J Thromb Haemost. 2007;5:1666–73.

11. Greinacher A, Selleng K, Warkentin TE. Autoimmune heparin-induced thrombocytopenia. J Thromb Haemost. 2017;15:2099–114.

12. Schultz NH, Sørvoll IH, Michelsen AE, et al. Thrombosis and thrombocytopenia after ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccination. N Engl J Med. 2021;384:2124–30.

13. B-s-h.org.uk. 2021. Available: https://b-s-h.org.uk/media/19530/guidance-version-13-on-mgmt-of-thrombosis-with-thrombocytopenia-occurring-after-c-19-vaccine_20210407.pdf [Accessed 7 Apr 2021].

14. The ObG Project. ASH Guidelines: Diagnosis and Management of COVID-19 Vaccine-Induced Thrombosis with Thrombocytopenia - The ObG Project [Internet]. 2021. Available: https://www.obgproject.com/2021/04/25/ash-guidelines-diagnosis-and-management-of-covid-19-vaccine-induced-thrombosis-with-thrombocytopenia [Accessed 25 Apr 2021].
