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R Pironkova
Joseph Giamelli
New York Medical College

H Seiden
V Parnell
D Gruber

See next page for additional authors

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Authors
R Pironkova, Joseph Giamelli, H Seiden, V Parnell, D Gruber, C Sison, and K Ojamaa

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Brain injury with systemic inflammation in newborns with congenital heart disease undergoing heart surgery

ROSSITZA P. PIROTKOVA1,8, JOSEPH GIAMELLI1,9, HOWARD SEIDEN1,10, VINCENT A. PARNELL2, DOROTA GRUBER1,3, CRISTINA P. SISON4,5, CZESLAWA KOWAL6 and KAIE OJAMAA1,5,7

Divisions of 1Pediatric Cardiology and 2Pediatric Cardiothoracic Surgery, Department of Pediatrics, Cohen Children’s Medical Center of New York at Northwell Health, New Hyde Park, NY 11040; 3Department of Pediatrics, Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine, Hempstead, NY 11549; 4Biostatistics Unit, The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, Northwell Health, Manhasset, NY 11030; 5Department of Molecular Medicine, Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine, Hempstead, NY 11549; Centers for 6Musculoskeletal and Autoimmune Diseases, and 7Immunology and Inflammation, The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, Northwell Health, Manhasset, NY 11030, USA

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Abstract. The potential role of systemic inflammation on brain injury in newborns with congenital heart disease (CHD) was assessed by measuring levels of central nervous system (CNS)-derived proteins in serum prior to and following cardiac surgery. A total of 23 newborns (gestational age, 39±1 weeks) with a diagnosis of CHD that required cardiac surgery with cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB) were enrolled in the current study. Serum samples were collected immediately prior to surgery and 2, 24 and 48 h following CPB, and serum levels of phosphorylated neurofilament-heavy subunit (pNF-H), neuron-specific enolase (NSE) and S100B were analyzed. Systemic inflammation was assessed by measuring serum concentrations of complement C5a and complement sC5b9, and the following cytokines: Interleukin (IL)-1β, IL-6, IL-8, IL-10, IL12p70, interferon γ and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α. Analysis of cord blood from normal term deliveries (n=26) provided surrogate normative values for newborns. pNF-H and S100B were 2.4- to 2.8-fold higher (P<0.0001) in patient sera than in normal cord blood and remained elevated following CPB. Pre-surgical serum pNF-H and S100B levels directly correlated with interleukin (IL)-12p70 (p=0.442, P<0.05). pNF-H was inversely correlated with arterial pO2 prior to surgery (p=0.493, P=0.01) and directly correlated with arterial pCO2 post-CPB (p=0.426, P<0.05), suggesting that tissue hypoxia and inflammation contribute to blood brain barrier (BBB) dysfunction and neuronal injury. Serum IL12p70, IL-6, IL-8, IL-10 and TNF-α levels were significantly higher in patients than in normal cord blood and levels of these cytokines increased following CPB (P<0.001). Activation of complement was observed in all patients prior to surgery, and serum C5a and sC5b9 remained elevated up to 48 h post-surgery. Furthermore, they were correlated (P<0.05) with low arterial pO2, high pCO2 and elevated arterial pressure in the postoperative period. Length of mechanical ventilation was associated directly with post-surgery serum IL-12p70 and IL-8 concentrations (P<0.05). Elevated serum concentrations of pNF-H and S100B in neonates with CHD suggest BBB dysfunction and CNS injury, with concurrent hypoxemia and an activated inflammatory response potentiating this effect.

Introduction

Approximately 8 in 1,000 live births are diagnosed with a congenital heart defect (I) and many require surgical intervention to ensure survival beyond the neonatal period. Recent advances in medical management, transcatheter intervention, surgical procedures and cardiopulmonary bypass, have significantly increased the survival rate of such children. Up to 50% of children with congenital heart disease (CHD) experience neurodevelopmental and behavioral problems including seizures, cognitive impairment, delays in speech, language, visual-motor and visual-spatial skills, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and learning disabilities (2-5).

The etiology of the neurobehavioral problems in children with CHD is complex, with contributions of innate factors including genotype that cannot be modified and acquired factors that potentially may be (6). These acquired factors are secondary to chronic and acute hypoxia, hypoperfusion,
hematocrit, reperfusion injury, and surgery with cardio-
 pulmonar y bypass and cross-clamp, and have a cumulative
effect (7,8). The developing fetus with congenital heart defects
may be exposed to hypoxia and abnormal cerebral perfusion
in utero and these insults on the brain may continue during
the neonatal period as a result of the failing heart (9,10). The
mechanisms of brain injury are poorly understood but may
involve multiple causative factors including maternal infection,
inflammation, hypoxia and hypoperfusion, as observed in the
development of periventricular leukomalacia (PVL), charac-
terized by cerebral white matter damage (11-13). PVL has been
documented by brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in
16% of children with congenital heart disease and this inci-
dence increases to 50% in children following cardiac surgery
with cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB) (14). The duration of
CPB, complexity of the anatomical defect and surgical repair,
and the occurrence of cyanosis contribute to the post opera-
tive systemic inflammatory response. This involves activated
complements and lymphocytes, monocytes/macrophages,
endothelial cells and myocytes expressing cytokines, such as
tumor necrosis factor (TNF-α) and interleukins (ILs) (15-20).
Postoperative systemic inflammatory response syndrome is
a complication occurring in pediatric patients, particularly
neonates undergoing corrective or palliative heart surgery and
remains a challenge during the postoperative management
of these patients (21-25). Inflammation during early brain
development has been implicated in white matter damage and
has been associated with cerebral palsy, autism and neuropsy-
chological disorders (26-29). In experimental models, TNF-α
induced myelin degeneration and oligodendrocyte apoptosis,
and transgenic animals overexpressing TNF-α in the CNS
exhibited demyelination and vacuolization (30,31). White
matter injury is a complication of neonatal cardiac surgery and
may occur in response to systemic inflammation; however, this
association remains unclear and may be of relevance regarding
patients undergoing highly complex cardiac surgeries (32,33).

The blood-brain and blood-cerebrospinal fluid (CSF)
barriers restrict the passage of proteins into and out of the
brain. Research on the blood-brain barrier (BBB) in experi-
mental models has demonstrated that prolonged systemic
inflammation in the early post-natal period leads to a transient
increase in the permeability of blood vessels in the brain to
serum proteins (34). Similar to that observed with ischemic
or traumatic brain injury, it has been postulated that cardiopul-
monary bypass with concomitant inflammation and activation
of complements can lead to loss of integrity of the BBB and
blood-CSF barrier (35-38).

Previous studies have determined that there is an asso-
ciation between the severity of the inflammatory response
to heart surgery and an increased need for medical interven-
tion or length of stay at hospitals (20,21,39-43). The current
study hypothesized that newborns with CHD and in whom
circulating pro-inflammatory mediators and complements
were elevated, would have measurable concentrations of
CNS-derived proteins, indicative of a compromised BBB
and CNS injury. Serum markers of brain injury (43) include
the high molecular weight (200 kDa) neurofilament protein
(NF-H) that is abundant in neurons and concentrated in axons.
The highly phosphorylated form of NF (pNF-H) is resistant to
proteolysis and when released from damaged axons remains
largely intact; thus, its presence in the blood is indicative
of neuronal damage (44,45). Other biomarkers measured
included a brain-specific isoform of enolase known as neuron
specific enolase (NSE) (46) and S100, a 20 kDa protein
belonging to the S100/calmodulin/tropinin C superfamily of
calcium-binding proteins that forms heterodimers (S100A1B)
and homodimers (S100BB) in CNS glial cells and peripheral
Schwann cells (47,48).

Patients and methods

Patient demographics and diagnostic classifications. The
current prospective study conducted at the Cohen
Children's Medical Center of New York at Northwell Health
(Manhasset, NY, USA) was approved by the Northwell Health
Institutional Review Board and conducted in accordance with
the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was
obtained from parents on admission of patients to the hospital.
A total of 23 patients with congenital heart disease requiring
surgical repair with cardiopulmonary bypass were enrolled
in the present study between January 2009 and August 2010.
Full patient demographics are listed in Table I. The lesions
consisted of hypoplastic left heart syndrome (n=8), transposi-
tion of the great arteries (n=5), co-arctation of the aorta (n=3),
tricuspid atresia/pulmonary atresia (n=1), truncus arteri-
ous communis (n=1), aortopulmonary window (n=1), endocardial
cushion defect (n=1), ventricular septal defect (n=1), anomalous
right pulmonary artery (n=1) and total anomalous pulmonary
venous connection (n=1). Two patients harbored known
chromosomal abnormalities, including one with DiGeorge
syndrome (22q11 deletion). Criteria for exclusion were body
weight <1,600 grams, patent ductus arteriosus ligations, heart
surgery without CPB, newborns of mothers with autoimmune
disease and suspected congenital or postnatal infections.

Surgery, anesthesia and postoperative care. The conduction
of surgical procedures including cardiopulmonary bypass and
anesthesia followed our institutional standard practices.
Sixteen of the 23 patients underwent CPB with deep hypo-
thermic circulatory arrest with an average circulatory arrest
time of 20±16 min. Eleven of these 16 patients were treated
by ice cooling of the head. Twenty-one patients required
mechanical ventilation. Postoperative patient management in
the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) followed the stan-
dard institutional protocol. Decisions regarding the medical
management of each patient were based on clinical assessment
made by attending PICU physicians who were unaware of the
study protocol and analysis.

Clinical data acquisition and sample collection. Patient
clinical data were recorded, including pre-operative vari-
ables such as birth weight, gestational age, APGAR score
at birth, head circumference, abnormal chromosomal find-
ings, abnormal head ultrasound findings, need for respira-
tory support including intubation and fraction of inspired oxygen
(FiO2) requirement, pre-operative systemic saturation, arte-
rial pO2, and pCO2, lowest pre-operative hematocrit, degree of
acidosis, lactate levels, mean arterial pressures, urine output,
presence of infection, presence of seizures, administration
of vaccines or Rhogam, need for blood transfusion, need of prostin infusion or inotropes, or balloon atrial septostomy. Intra-operative data were recorded, including weight and age at perfusion, length of cardiopulmonary bypass and aortic cross-clamp time, administration of intra-op steroids and degree of cooling. Postoperative variables were also measured and included presence of arrhythmia, medication including inotropes and diuretics, mean arterial blood pressure (MAP), degree of acidosis, blood lactate levels, hematocrit, pO₂ and pCO₂, FiO₂ requirement, duration of mechanical ventilation, duration of PICU care and hospitalization, systemic oxygen saturation at discharge and any neurological findings such as seizures, neurodevelopmental risk evaluation score or brain imaging results. Brain imaging protocols included brain ultrasound, computed tomography, electroencephalogram (EEG) or MRI during routine postoperative care of the patient.

Blood samples from patients were drawn from central intravenous catheters preoperatively and 2, 24 and 48 h following CPB. Blood was allowed to clot at room temperature for 4 h and subsequently centrifuged at 1,000 x g for 15 min at room temperature. Serum was stored at -70°C until analysis. Serum samples were also obtained from cord blood collected from 26 healthy term births that were donated to the Tissue Donation Program of Northwell Health but which were not used for stem cell collection due to insufficient cell counts. Data from these samples were used as normative newborn values.

**Analyses of serum samples.** Commercially available ELISA or EIA kits were used to measure serum concentrations of pNF-H (cat. no. RD191138300; BioVendor LLC, Asheville, NC, USA), human NSE (cat. no. 0050; Alpha Diagnostic International, San Antonio, TX, USA), S-100B (cat. no. 708-85; Fujirebio Diagnostics, Inc., Gothenburg, Sweden), C5a and sC5b-9 (cat. no. A021 & A020; Quidel Corp., San Diego, CA, USA). The Meso Scale Discovery multiplex assay kit (cat. no. K15008C-2; MSD, Rockville, MD, USA) was used for simultaneous measurement of cytokines IL-6, IL-8, IL-12p70, IL-1β, TNF-α, interferon (INF)-γ, and IL-10 in each serum sample.

**Immunoblot analysis.** The specificity of the anti-pNF-H antibody used in the ELISA was verified via immunoblot analysis comparing mouse brain tissue with patient plasma samples. Murine brain lysate was prepared as previously described (49). For immunoblot analysis, serum samples (12 μl) from 2 randomly selected patients were diluted in Laemmli buffer and separated by SDS-PAGE on 10% polyacrylamide gels, transferred to nitrocellulose membranes and incubated at 4°C overnight with monoclonal antibody against pNF-H (cat. no. IMG-5018A-2; 1:1,000; Novus Biologicals, LLC, Littleton, CO, USA). Signal from horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibody (cat. no. 170-6516; 1:5,000; Bio-Rad Laboratories, Inc., Hercules, CA, USA) was developed using chemiluminescence reagent (Western Lightning Electrochemiluminescence Pro; cat. no. NEL120001EA; Perkin-Elmer, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) and detected by exposure to x-ray film. A sample of murine brain lysate (20 μg protein) was used to positively identify the antibody reactive pNF-H protein band.

**Statistical analysis.** Comparisons among variables were made using one-way analysis of variance or Kruskal-Wallis test, as appropriate, for continuous-type measures and the χ² or Fisher's exact test for categorical outcomes. Healthy controls were compared to patients using the Mann-Whitney test for continuous measures and the χ² or Fisher's exact test for categorical outcomes. Spearman correlations were calculated to determine the strength of correlation between serum biomarkers. A mixed models approach to repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted to determine if the patterns of change across time with respect to each of the biomarker levels differed between groups. Bonferroni-like adjusted pairwise comparisons (P<0.01) were used post-hoc to determine which time points differed from one another. Statistical analysis was performed using SAS V9.3 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA).

**Results**

**Study patients and perioperative data.** Table I lists patient demographics, mean (± standard deviation) and median values (min-max range) of specific pre-, intra- and postoperative physiological measures and outcome variables that were used for statistical analyses.

**Role of cyanosis.** A total of 70% (16/23) of patients were cyanotic prior to surgery, and they received surgery at a younger age compared with the seven acyanotic patients (5.9±3.2 vs. 11.4±6.4 days, respectively). The cyanotic patients had significantly longer bypass times (160±49 vs. 100±15 min; P=0.007) and total cross clamp times (75±38 vs. 40±17 min; P=0.012) indicative of greater complexity of surgical cardiac repair. When patients prior to surgery were grouped as cyanotic or acyanotic, no statistically significant differences in serum biomarkers either prior to or following surgery were measured. Therefore, data from all patients were combined for the statistical analyses presented herein.

**Brain biomarkers prior to and following cardiopulmonary bypass surgery.** The presence of pNF-H in the serum of newborns with CHD has not been previously reported. Therefore, the specificity of the detection antibody used in the ELISA assay was tested by immunoblot analysis of patient sera and mouse brain tissue known to express pNF-H. The antibody recognized both high- and medium-molecular weight NF proteins in mouse brain and a corresponding 200 kDa protein in two patient serum samples, thus confirming its specificity (Fig. 1). pNF-H concentration in the pre-surgical samples of patients was 2.4-fold higher (P<0.0001) than that measured in cord blood from healthy newborns (Table II). The concentration of pNF-H in serum obtained 2 h after CPB was significantly reduced compared to pre-surgery (P<0.0001) but then accumulated during the subsequent period, reaching pre-surgical levels 48 h following CPB (Fig. 2). S100B, a protein expressed in glial cells, was also significantly higher in patient sera prior to surgery compared with normal cord blood (P<0.0001; Table II) and increased significantly 2 h following CPB (P<0.0001), further supporting potential CNS injury in these patients (Fig. 2). Both the rapid increase of S100B following CPB and subsequent rapid decrease in 24 h likely reflects its reported short
half-life (~60 min). The amount of NSE in patient sera prior to surgery did not differ significantly from that in normal cord blood (Table II); however, it increased significantly 2 h post-CPB (P<0.0001) and then slowly decreased to pre-CPB levels over the subsequent 48 h, reflecting a longer reported serum half-life of ~30 h (Fig. 2).

Inflammation in neonates and response to surgery. Concentrations of cytokines, apart from INF-γ and IL-1β, were significantly lower in normal cord blood than in the sera of patients prior to surgery (P<0.05) (Table II). The responses of these inflammatory mediators to surgery are presented in Fig. 3. Serum levels of all ILs and INF-γ peaked immediately following CPB (P<0.01) and then decreased over the following 48 h (Fig. 3), although levels of IL-1β increased slightly but not significantly over 48 h post-CPB (data not shown). Serum TNF-α levels remained unchanged throughout the pre- and postoperative periods (Fig. 3). Complement activation, specifically the serum level of soluble C5b9, which potentially measures endothelial injury, was higher (P<0.0001) in patients prior to surgery than in normal cord blood (Table II). Serum C5a and sC5b9 concentrations increased progressively following surgery, with levels at 48 h being significantly higher than pre-surgical values (P<0.01; Fig. 4).

Table I. Patient demographics and peri-operative variables.

| Variable                           | Mean ± SD | Median | Min-max         |
|------------------------------------|-----------|--------|-----------------|
| All patients (n=23)                |           |        |                 |
| Male % (n)                         | 48 (11)   |        |                 |
| Gestational age, weeks             | 39±1.4    | 39.4   | 35.2-41.0       |
| Birth weight, kg                   | 3.235±0.410 | 3.345  | 2.381-3.750     |
| Age at surgery, days               | 7.6±5     | 6.0    | 3-20            |
| Weight at surgery, kg              | 3.2±0.4   | 3.2    | 2.5-3.8         |
| Body mass index, kg/m²             | 12.83±1.49 | 12.57  | 10.97-18.12     |
| Pre-operative data                 |           |        |                 |
| SaO₂ (%)                           | 87±11     | 90     | 60-99           |
| Hb (g/dl)                          | 12.5±2.5  | 12.3   | 8.6-18.0        |
| PaO₂ (median value, mmHg)          | 48±29     | 40     | 25-154          |
| PaCO₂ (highest value, mmHg)        | 50±22     | 45     | 30-142          |
| HCO₃⁻ (lowest value, mEq/l)        | 20.3±4.3  | 21.0   | 5-27            |
| pH                                | 7.27±0.16 | 7.31   | 6.71-7.42       |
| Lactate (mg/dl)                    | 5.3±4.3   | 3.7    | 1.4-21.0        |
| MAP (mmHg)                         | 48±4      | 48     | 40-56           |
| Intra-operative data               |           |        |                 |
| Bypass time, min                   | 141±49    | 139    | 44-240          |
| Cross-clamp time, min              | 71±32     | 72     | 21-14           |
| Postoperative data (within 48 h)   |           |        |                 |
| FiO₂ requirement                   | 0.48±0.18 | 0.50   | 0.21-1.00       |
| Hb (lowest value, g/dl)            | 11.3±1.7  | 11.0   | 8.3-15.3        |
| PaO₂ (lowest value, mmHg)          | 74±37     | 64     | 29-160          |
| PaCO₂ (median value, mmHg)         | 49±8      | 50     | 35-60           |
| pH                                | 7.36±0.09 | 7.37   | 7.07-7.50       |
| Lactate (highest value, mg/dl)      | 8.0±6.6   | 6.0    | 1.9-25.0        |
| SaO₂ at discharge %                | 90±10     | 96     | 66-100          |
| MAP (mmHg)                         | 52±5      | 50     | 45-66           |
| Mechanical ventilation, days        | 10.0±15.9 | 5.0    | 1.0-69.0        |
| Intensive care unit stay, days     | 13.3±14.5 | 9.0    | 4.0-69.0        |
| Hospital stay, days                | 20.8±13.5 | 17.0   | 7.0-69.0        |

SD, standard deviation; Hb, hemoglobin; MAP, mean arterial blood pressure; FiO₂, fraction of inspired oxygen.
Correlation between brain-derived biomarkers and inflammatory cytokines prior to surgery. The systemic inflammatory response to heart surgery with CPB in neonates has been well documented (15-21). However, immune function in neonates with CHD prior to heart surgery and its potential role on the clinical course of these patients is less clear. In the present study, Spearman correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive associations between the age of patients at surgery and pre-surgical serum levels of the cytokines (P<0.05; Table III). The age-dependent increases in serum IL-12p70, INF-γ, TNF-α and IL-10 may be indicative of immune activation of T helper (Th) 1 immune response in these neonates. By contrast, the levels of the interleukins IL-1β, IL-6 and IL-8 were not correlated with patient age.

To support the hypothesis that inflammatory mediators serve a role in BBB permeability, it was observed that pre-surgical serum IL-12p70 concentrations correlated directly with levels of the brain proteins pNF-H and S100B (r=0.442, P<0.05; Table III). The age-dependent increases in serum IL-12p70, INF-γ, TNF-α and IL-10 may be indicative of immune activation of T helper (Th) 1 immune response in these neonates. By contrast, the levels of the interleukins IL-1β, IL-6 and IL-8 were not correlated with patient age.

It was examined whether pre-operative blood pressure and/or inotropic support of patients correlated with inflammatory biomarkers. A total of 15 patients treated with diuretics had significantly higher serum TNF-α, IL-10, IL12p70, IL1β and IL-6 levels compared with untreated patients (P<0.05; Table IV). Seven of these 15 patients also received dopamine and 8 patients (4 receiving both diuretics and dopamine) had elevated blood creatinine levels compared with the normal range for neonates (data not shown), suggesting that patients who were hemodynamically unstable exhibited an augmented inflammatory response. Furthermore, 12 patients requiring ventilator support had significantly lower serum concentrations of the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10, compared with those who were not mechanically ventilated (P<0.05; Table V).

Figure 2. Concentration of CNS biomarkers in patient sera taken immediately prior to surgery (pre-) and at 2, 24 and 48 h post-CPB. Scatter plot represents individual patient data. Box plot: box boundaries indicates 25th and 75th percentile; line marks the median; whiskers indicate 10th and 90th percentiles. Statistical significance was determined by RM-ANOVA followed by Bonferroni post-hoc analysis for pairwise comparisons. *P<0.01; **P<0.001; ***P<0.0001. CPB, NSE, neuron-specific enolase; CHD, congenital heart disease; SD, standard deviation.

Postoperative outcomes and serum biomarkers. Postoperative outcome variables demonstrating statistically significant correlations with serum brain biomarkers, cytokines and
Correlations were determined between physiological measurements recorded during the first or second 24 h period post-CPB and blood samples obtained at 24 or 48 h. MAP during the first 2 days post-CPB correlated positively with serum TNF-α and C5a. Measurements indicative of tissue hypoxia including arterial blood gases (pO₂, pCO₂) and lactate, and increased requirement for oxygen inhalation (FiO₂) correlated significantly with inflammatory responses and complement activation. Levels of the brain biomarkers pNF-H and NSE correlated directly with blood pCO₂ and lactate, respectively (both P<0.05) during the first 24 and 48 h post-CPB, suggesting that hypoxia may have contributed to BBB permeability and release of these brain proteins. Serum levels of S100B and NSE, as well as IL-8 and IL-10, were inversely correlated with blood oxygen saturation at hospital discharge (P<0.01, P<0.05, P<0.01 and P<0.01, respectively) suggesting that systemic inflammation following surgery was an important determinant of clinical course (Table V). The postoperative duration of mechanical ventilation (length of intubation) was directly correlated with serum levels of IL-12p70 and IL-8 measured 48 h post-CPB (both P<0.05; Table V).

Although only a small number of patients (six) without chromosomal abnormalities exhibited anomalies in brain imaging during their hospital course, they had significantly higher serum levels of IL-12p70 (1.21±0.58 vs. 0.77±0.86 pg/ml, P<0.05) and NSE (50.64±32.19 vs. 23.52±20.86 ng/ml, P<0.05).
Table III. Correlations between serum biomarkers and patient age.

|                   | TNF-α  | INF-γ  | IL-10   | IL-12p70 |
|-------------------|--------|--------|---------|----------|
| Age at blood      | 0.500a | 0.638a | 0.491a  | 0.656a   |
| draw/surgery      |        |        |         |          |
| IL-12p70          | 0.544b | 0.737d | 0.576b  | -        |
| IL-8              | 0.660c | ns      | ns      | ns       |
| sC5b9             | 0.450a | ns      | ns      | ns       |

Correlations between biomarker concentrations in patient sera obtained immediately before surgery and patient age at surgery at the time of blood draw. Numbers are Spearman correlations ρ-values; ①P<0.05; ②P<0.01; ③P<0.001; ④P<0.0001. ns, not statistically significant correlation; IL, interleukin; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; INF, interferon.

Figure 5. Spearman correlation analysis between brain biomarkers, pNF-H, S100B and cytokine IL-12p70 in patient sera obtained prior to surgery demonstrated similar correlation coefficients of ρ=0.442 and P<0.05. The straight line represents the best-fit linear regression between pNF-H and IL-12p70. Triangles or circles represent individual patient serum S100B or pNF-H values, respectively, plotted vs. serum IL-12p70. IL, interleukin; TNF-H, phosphorylated neurofilament-heavy subunit.

following surgery compared with the 15 patients without any suspicion of CNS pathology or clinical findings.

Discussion

In the present study, it was hypothesized that newborns with CHD and specifically those with tissue hypoxia, experience systemic inflammation as a consequence of the disease, which results in dysfunction of the BBB and subsequent injury to the CNS as measured by the presence of circulating CNS-derived proteins. A number of studies have linked elevated serum concentrations of IL-6, IL-10, TNF-α, INF-γ, and C5b9 to BBB dysfunction and subsequent injury to the CNS. Serum concentrations of IL-6, IL-10, TNF-α, INF-γ, and C5b9 trended towards significance. These data support the hypothesis that the BBB remains permeable to certain inflammatory cytokines and components of the complement system from the circulation (55). Serum concentrations of IL-6, IL-10, TNF-α, and C5b9 prior to and immediately following CPB in the present study are similar to those published in a study by Berdat et al (56) that demonstrated that various ultrafiltration methods were effective at removing such mediators to a varying extent. Despite ultrafiltration, levels of the inflammatory mediators NSE and S100B, increased significantly immediately following CPB, reflecting their release/secretion and accumulation. Serum concentration of pNF-H, a large 200 kDa protein, decreased following CPB compared to pre-surgical levels, suggesting that it had been effectively removed by ultrafiltration. One explanation for these changes could be either volume expansion or hemococoncentration as a result of the CPB procedure. However, the results of the current study suggest that the temporal differences in serum concentrations of pNF-H, NSE and S100B possibly depended on their individual half-lives. The short half-life of S100B (90 min) predicted its rapid rise and fall immediately following CPB (<24 h), whereas the relatively longer half-life of NSE (~30 h) was reflected in its slower decline with serum concentrations at 24 h remaining significantly higher than pre-surgery. By contrast, the stable hyperphosphorylated NF-H protein, with a half-life >3 days, was slow to rise in serum and took 48 h to reach concentrations similar to pre-surgery. Previous studies have demonstrated that pNF-H is elevated in serum for weeks following spinal cord or mild brain injury and in children with febrile seizures (45,57). Although the kinetics of these molecules in serum remain largely unknown, these data support the hypothesis that the BBB remains permeable in the initial h following CPB but begins to close within the first postoperative day. Abu-Sultaneh et al (48) demonstrated a significant correlation between peak serum S100B following CPB with cerebral oxygen desaturation during surgery, as measured by near-infrared spectroscopy. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that cerebral oxygen saturation is correlated with neurodevelopmental outcomes and brain MRI at one year of age (58). While brain biomarkers, including S100B and NSE, have been studied in children in response to cardiac surgery with CPB, to the best of our knowledge this study is the first to examine their role in newborns with CHD.
First to measure pNF-H in the serum of newborns with CHD undergoing open-heart surgery with CPB.

Newborns with complex CHD have an increased risk of white matter injury, reduced brain growth and delayed brain development (6,59) and those requiring corrective surgeries with CPB during the neonatal period experience an inflammatory response (2,13,14,21,60,61). Although inflammation during the perinatal period has been determined to affect brain development in the pre-term infant (28,29), the significance of inflammation on the long-term neurocognitive development of children with CHD who have undergone surgical cardiac repair remains unclear and its significance is controversial (7,33). Upon examination of various pre-operative treatments and postoperative physiological outcome measurements, it was determined that patients receiving diuretics and/or dopamine had significantly higher serum concentrations of many cytokines, which cannot be explained solely by changes in intravascular/extracellular fluid volumes. In the postoperative period, levels of IL-10 and IL-8 correlated with arterial hypoxemia and increased with blood lactate levels and inhaled O2 requirements. Other cytokines, including TNF-α and IL-12p70, similarly correlated with these post-surgical parameters but with varying strengths of association. Thus, taken together these data support an augmented systemic inflammatory response to tissue hypoxia and acidosis, with an increased need for mechanical ventilation with higher oxygen requirements in the postoperative period, suggesting that these neonates may be at higher risk of CNS injury.

In light of reports that activation of complement leads to loss of integrity of the BBB and blood-CSF barrier, the

| Table IV. Effects of pre-operative treatments on serum cytokine concentrations. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Treatment variables | n | TNF-α | IL-10 | IL-12p70 | IL-1β | IL-6 |
|---------------------|---|-------|-------|---------|-------|------|
| Ventilator support | (+) | 12 | ns | 3.72±2.88a | ns | ns | ns |
| (-) | 10 | ns | 10.15±8.93 | ns | ns | ns |
| Diuretics | (+) | 15 | 16.83±8.14a | 8.73±7.93a | 0.39±0.31a | 1.60±2.73a | 14.84±21.58a |
| (-) | 8 | 8.41±3.60 | 2.99±2.65 | 0.11±0.10 | 0.30±0.22 | 4.09±4.82 |

Fisher’s exact test for categorical outcomes was used to determine statistical differences between pre-operative treatment groups. *P<0.05; numbers are serum cytokine concentrations (pg/ml); ns, not statistically significant; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; IL, interleukin; n, number of patients/group; (+) treated, (-) not treated.

| Table V. Correlations between pre- or postoperative physiologic measurements and serum biomarkers. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Variables | Serum brain biomarkers, complement, cytokines |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| pO2 (median value on ABG) | pNF-H | S100B | NSE | C5a | sC5b9 | TNF-α | IL-10 | IL-12p70 | IL-8 |
| PRE-OP | -0.493b | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns |
| pCO2 (highest value on ABG) | ns | ns | ns | ns | +0.448a | ns | ns | ns | ns |
| POSTOP | MAP (median daily value) | ns | ns | ns | +0.551b | ns | +0.407a | ns | ns | ns |
| pO2 (lowest daily value ABG) | ns | ns | ns | ns | -0.520b | ns | -0.437a | ns | -0.430b |
| pCO2 (median daily value ABG) | +0.426a | ns | ns | +0.423a | ns | +0.449a | ns | ns | ns |
| Lactate (maximum daily value) | ns | ns | +0.631a | ns | -0.500b | ns | +0.553b | +0.727c | +0.475a |
| FiO2 requirement | ns | ns | ns | ns | +0.425a | +0.483a | ns | ns | ns |
| O2 saturation at discharge | ns | -0.584b | -0.489b | ns | +0.663c | ns | -0.611b | ns | -0.556b |
| Length of intubation | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns | ns | +0.442a | +0.445a |

Correlations between physiological parameters measured pre-operatively or during the first or second 24 h period post-CPB and serum biomarkers measured in serum collected at those time points. Numbers are Spearman correlation ρ-values; *P<0.05; bP<0.01; cP<0.001. ABG, arterial blood gas; MAP, mean arterial pressure; FiO2, fraction of inspired oxygen; NSE, neuron specific enolase; IL, interleukin; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; ns, not statistically significant correlation.
serum content of C5a was measured to assess activation of the complement system and serum sC5b-9 to assess potential cellular damage mediated by complement. Activation of the complement system has been observed in intracranial inflammation following traumatic brain injury with upregulation of soluble terminal complement complex sC5b-9 in spinal cord fluid that correlated with degree of BBB dysfunction (36). C5a and C3a are known leukocyte chemotactic factors that can induce the release of lysosomal enzymes and oxygen-derived free radicals, and can stimulate cytokine production and release (62). In the present study, serum C5a and sC5b9 were significantly higher in patients who had red blood cell transfusion prior to surgery and sC5b9 correlated directly with serum levels of TNF-α and IL-1β. In the postoperative period C5a and sC5b9 correlated with various parameters indicative of arterial hypoxemia, elevated blood pressure and increased length of hospital stay. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report demonstrating complement activation in this setting. Pagowska-Klimiek et al. (63) have recently reported that cardiac surgery with CPB activated the lectin pathway of complement activation and this response was significantly greater in pediatric patients presenting with post-bypass systemic inflammation. Further study is warranted in assessing the role of complement activation in brain injury in infants with CHD, particularly regarding novel therapeutic advances directed at the complement system to treat autoimmune diseases that may be repurposed for treatment of newborns with CHD (64-66).

It was observed that there was a significant correlation between patient age at surgery (between 3 and 20 days) and pre-surgical serum levels of TNF-α, IL-12p70, INF-γ and IL-10. The strongest correlation was between patient age at surgery and levels of IL-12 and INF-γ, which are Th1 cytokines. Newborns exhibit a bias toward a Th2 cell-dominated cytokine response, including the release of IL-4, IL-6 and IL-10; however, with increasing age and maturation of dendritic cells and their production of IL-12 in response to INF-α, a shift to a Th1 cell response occurs (67,68). The predominance of Th2 cytokine production in the fetus and neonate serves to dampen innate immune responses, protecting the newborn from Th1-induced effects (69,70). The capacity of mononuclear cells to secrete a number of inflammatory cytokines increases with age from 2 months through one year to adulthood; however, monocytes from normal cord blood, which is essentially newborn blood, have increased capacity in response to pathogens to secrete TNF-α, IL-6, IL-10 and INF-γ (but not IL-12) at levels observed in adults (71,72). Similarly, the observation that serum concentrations of TNF-α, INF-γ and IL-12p70 increased in neonates as they lived longer with their disease prior to heart surgery suggests that the production of Th1 cytokines was in response to disease-induced effects rather than normal maturation of immunity towards Th1 cell polarization. Gestational age and weight have been reported to be important determinants of the neonate's immune response to infection (73). In the current study, mean gestational age was 39 weeks and no neonates were small for their gestational age, suggesting that these newborns had the capacity to elicit an age-appropriate innate immune response. Therefore, the current study concludes that term newborns with congenital heart disease may be able to elicit an age-appropriate immune response; however, this response to their disease process may promote an excessive pro-inflammatory Th1 response potentially leading to end-organ damage, including increased permeability of the BBB and neuronal injury. New avenues of investigation, including studies examining the response of isolated peripheral blood mononuclear cells from neonates with CHD to various pathogenic and danger signals may advance understanding of innate immunity in this unique patient group and improve approaches to their medical care.

Limitations of the current study are the small sample size and absence of data from age-matched normal neonates aged between 3 and 30 days. Cord blood was analyzed from healthy term deliveries to provide surrogate normative newborn values. Although none of the study patients were small for gestational age or born pre-maturely, prospective collection of cord blood from these subjects would be preferable. A further limitation is the inclusion of congenital heart disease pathologies with varying degrees of severity and complexity. Despite these limitations, consistent immune responses were observed in this patient population, lending support to the significance of the results.

In summary, the results of the present study demonstrate that neonates with congenital heart disease requiring surgical repair/palliation during the first month of life have elevated serum levels of pNF-H, a CNS-derived axonal protein that suggests brain injury with loss of BBB integrity. Concentrations of complement and pro-inflammatory cytokines in the patients' serum were found to be higher than normal cord blood, and these biomarkers of inflammation were significantly correlated with pre- and post-operative measurements of tissue hypoxia/acidosis, and an increased need for mechanical ventilation with higher oxygen requirements, suggesting that these neonates may be at higher risk of CNS injury.

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