Convalescent plasma therapy for patients with severe COVID-19
A case series study

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Abstract
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a novel acute respiratory infectious disease that can lead to multiple-organ dysfunction in patients with severe disease. However, there is a lack of effective antiviral drugs for COVID-19. Herein, we investigated the efficacy and safety of convalescent plasma (CP) therapy for treating severe COVID-19 in an attempt to explore new therapeutic methods.

The clinical data of 3 imported patients with severe COVID-19 who underwent treatment with CP and who were quarantined and treated in a designated COVID-19 hospital from March 2020 to April 2020 were collected and analyzed.

The 3 patients, including a 57-year-old male, 65-year-old female, and 59-year-old female, were clinically classified as having severe COVID-19. The main underlying diseases included hypertension, diabetes, sequelae of cerebral infarction, and postoperative thyroid adenoma. The common symptoms included cough, fever, and shortness of breath. All patients received antiviral drugs and other supportive treatments. Additionally, CP treatment was administered. At 48 to 72 hours after the CP transfusion, all 3 of the patients exhibited an improvement and alleviation of symptoms, an elevated arterial oxygen saturation, and decreased C-reactive protein and interleukin-6 levels. The counts of the total lymphocytes and T lymphocytes (CD3+) and their subsets (CD4 + and CD8+) were also obviously increased. Repeated chest computed tomography also revealed obvious absorption of the lesions in the bilateral lungs. Only 1 patient had a mild allergic reaction during the CP infusion, but no severe adverse reactions were observed.

The early treatment with CP in patients with severe COVID-19 can rapidly improve the condition of the patients, and CP therapy is generally effective and safe.

Abbreviations: SaO2 = arterial oxygen saturation, CT = computed tomography, CP = convalescent plasma, COVID-19 = coronavirus disease 2019, CRP = C-reactive protein, IL-6 = interleukin-6, SARS-CoV-2 = severe acute respiratory syndrome-associated coronavirus-2.

Key words: convalescent plasma, COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, x-ray computed tomography

1. Introduction
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which is induced by severe acute respiratory syndrome-associated coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), is a novel acute respiratory infectious disease that can lead to multiple-organ dysfunction in patients with severe disease. The infection rate remains high in most countries. As of April 27, 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused more than 511 million cases and over 6.22 million deaths worldwide (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html). However, there is still a lack of effective antiviral drugs for COVID-19.[1,2] Convalescent plasma (CP) therapy has been used for treating influenza for more than a century. A meta-analysis of 32 studies demonstrated that CP therapy reduces mortality in patients with influenza.[3] Currently, several clinical studies have demonstrated that CP therapy can significantly improve the clinical symptoms and prognosis of severe and critically ill patients with COVID-19.[4–6] A randomized controlled trial in China further revealed that an early infusion of CP has a good therapeutic effect in patients with COVID-19 patients and that the therapeutic benefit is higher in patients with severe COVID-19 than in those with life-threatening COVID-19.[7,8] Nevertheless, there is also evidence against the benefit of CP.[9,10] This study retrospectively analyzed the clinical data of 3 patients with severe COVID-19 who underwent CP therapy and for whom CP therapy demonstrated good curative effects to further improve the understanding of the application value of this therapy in patients with severe COVID-19.
2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Patients

The clinical data, including epidemiological data, clinical manifestations, laboratory examination and imaging results, and treatment outcomes, were collected from 3 imported patients with severe COVID-19 who were quarantined and treated in a designated hospital in Fuzhou from March 2020 to April 2020. The last follow-up was completed on May 7, 2020. Respiratory tract specimens (throat swabs) of all enrolled patients were positive for SARS-CoV-2 RNA by qualitative reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction. All patients met the diagnostic criteria according to the Diagnosis and Treatment Program for COVID-19 issued by the National Health and Family Planning Commission.[11]

The disease severity in the COVID-19 patients was classified as follows. Mild COVID-19 was defined as mild clinical symptoms without pneumonia on chest imaging. Moderate COVID-19 was defined as clinical symptoms (e.g., fever and respiratory symptoms) with limited pneumonia on chest imaging. Severe COVID-19 was defined as any of the following: respiratory distress and a respiratory rate of ≥30 breaths/min in a resting state, an oxygen saturation of ≤93% in room air, an arterial partial pressure of oxygen (PaO2)/fraction of inspired oxygen (FiO2) of ≤300, or significant lung lesion progression of >50% within 24 to 48 hours on chest imaging. Critically ill (life-threatening) COVID-19 was defined as respiratory failure requiring mechanical ventilation, or shock or other organ failure (apart from lung) requiring monitoring in the intensive care unit.[12] All patients in our study were clinically classified as having severe COVID-19 according to the above criteria.

During the period of hospitalization, respiratory tract specimens (throat swabs) of all 3 patients were continuously performed to monitor for viral shedding until the samples were negative for SARS-Cov-2 RNA for 2 consecutive days (at least 24 hours apart). This study was approved by the ethics committee of People's Hospital Affiliated to Fujian University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and the patients provided informed consent for the publication of this paper.

2.2. Collection, storage, and use of CP

According to the Clinical Treatment Scheme of COVID-19 Convalescent Plasma,[13] CP was obtained from COVID-19 patients who had recently recovered and were discharged from the hospital. Before venous blood samples were collected, all donors underwent strict medical screening and evaluation, including meeting the quarantine and discharge standards according to the Diagnosis and Treatment Program for COVID-19,[10] at least 2 weeks after being discharged. Respiratory specimens were negative for SARS-CoV-2 and other viral nucleic acids, and serum tests for hepatitis B virus, hepatitis C virus, human immunodeficiency virus, and syphilis were negative. Serum SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody dilution titers of 3 donors were at least 1:80, and the total CP infusion dose of each patient was 200 to 400 mL (4–5 mL/kg). An early CP administration was defined as CP infusion initiated within 1 week after admission and 2 weeks following the onset of symptoms.[14–16] Adverse reactions to CP infusion were closely monitored during CP treatment, and the first efficacy assessment, including clinical symptoms, oxygenation function, inflammatory markers, lymphocyte counts, chest computed tomography (CT) manifestations, and more, was performed at 48 to 72 hours after transfusion.

3. Results

3.1. Plasma donors

Plasma was obtained from 3 COVID-19 patients who had recently recovered and were discharged from the COVID-19-designated hospital in Fuzhou. Among these donors, the anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG titers were 1:160, 1:80, and 1:80. All of the recipients were treated with complete blood type ABO-compatible CP.

3.2. Clinical manifestations, treatment, and prognoses of plasma recipients

The main results are shown in Tables 1–3. During the study, 3 patients with severe COVID-19, 1 male and 2 females, were enrolled and underwent CP transfusion. This male patient was 57 years old, and the female patients were 65 and 59 years old. The main underlying diseases included hypertension, diabetes, cerebral infarction, and postoperative thyroid adenoma. The common symptoms included cough, fever, and shortness of breath. Blood laboratory examinations exhibited a decreased arterial oxygen saturation (SaO2), increased C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) levels, and decreased counts of

| Characteristics                        | Case 1                | Case 2                | Case 3                |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Importing nation                       | Brazil                | America               | France                |
| Nationality                            | Chinese               | Chinese               | Chinese               |
| Age (y)                                | 57                    | 65                    | 59                    |
| Sex                                     | Male                  | Female                | Female                |
| Body weight (kg)                       | 82                    | 50                    | 58                    |
| BMI (kg/m²)                            | 27.7                  | 22.2                  | 20.3                  |
| Disease type                           | Severe                | Severe                | Severe                |
| Underlying disease                     | Hypertension, sequelae of cerebral infarction | Hypertension, diabetes | Postoperative thyroid adenoma |
| Symptom                                | Cough, expectoration, fever, breathlessness, headache | Cough, breathlessness, appetite, excessive fatigue | Cough, fever, breathlessness, dry throat |
| Chest CT feature                       | Multiple lesions      | Multiple lesions      | Multiple lesions      |
| Complication                           | None                  | None                  | None                  |
| Blood type                             | Type B                | Type A                | Type B                |
| SARS-CoV-2 IgG titer for infusion      | Positive at 1:160; negative at 1:320 | Positive at 1:80; negative at 1:160 | Positive at 1:80; negative at 1:160 |
| Time from onset to CP infusion (d)     | 7                     | 10                    | 10                    |
| Time from admission to CP infusion (d) | 2                     | 2                     | 7                     |
| Total CP volume (mL)                   | 400                   | 200                   | 200                   |
| Adverse reactions related to CP infusion | None              | Mild anaphylactic reaction | None              |

BMI = body mass index, CP = convalescent plasma, CT = computed tomography; IgG = immunoglobulin G, SARS-CoV-2 = severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2.
the total lymphocytes (CD45+) and T lymphocytes (CD3+) and their subsets (CD4+, CD8+) (Fig. 1). Chest CT revealed multiple ground-glass opacities and consolidation and linear opacities in both lungs (Figs. 2A,B, 3A,B, and 4A,B). After admission, all the patients received transnasal catheter oxygen therapy and were administered antiviral treatment with arbidol, hydroxychloroquine, lopinavir/ritonavir, or recombinant human interferon α-2b, and 1 patient was treated with a combination of antibiotics. Other medicines, including immunostimulants (thymalfasin), anti-inflammatory agents (xuebijing injection and ulinastatin), and Chinese herbal medicines, were also administered. On the basis of the conventional treatment after admission, the condition of these patients continued to worsen. Then, they all underwent additional CP therapy. All of the patients provided informed consent for the CP treatment before the transfusion was performed. The volume of the CP transfusion for the 3 patients was 400 mL (2 doses of 200 mL transfused 24 hours apart). At 48 to 72 hours after CP transfusion, all of the patients exhibited an improvement in and alleviation of symptoms, an elevated SaO₂, decreased CRP and IL-6 levels, and increased lymphocyte counts (Fig. 1). Repeated chest CT revealed obvious absorption of the lesions in the bilateral lungs (Figs. 2C,D, 3C,D, and 4C,D). On days 9 and 30 after the CP transfusion, the above-mentioned indicators continued to improve, and the conditions of the patients improved until they were discharged in stable condition. The latest outpatient follow-up was performed on May 7, 2020, when the patients remained well without signs of recurrence.

### Table 2
Conventional treatment of the patients from the 3 cases after admission.

| Conventional treatment | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Antiviral treatment    | Abidol 0.2 g tid po. for 10 days | Abidol 0.2 g tid po. for 10 days | Abidol 0.2 g tid po. for 10 days |
| Hydroxychloroquine 0.2 g bid po. for 7 days | Lopinavir/ritonavir 0.5 g bid po. for 10 days | Lopinavir/ritonavir 0.5 g bid po. for 10 days |
| Antibiotic therapy     | None | None | Ceftriaxone 2.0 g gd i.v. for 10 days |
| Anti-inflammatory agent | Xuebijing 50 mL bid i.v. for 7 days | Xuebijing 50 mL bid i.v. for 7 days | Xuebijing 50 mL bid i.v. for 7 days |
| Immunostimulant        | Thymalfasin 1.6 mg gd s.t. for 15 days | Thymalfasin 1.6 mg gd s.t. for 11 days | Thymalfasin 1.6 mg gd s.t. for 30 days |
| Respiratory support    | Ransnasal catheter oxygen therapy | Ransnasal catheter oxygen therapy | Ransnasal catheter oxygen therapy |

bid = twice a day, IFN = interferon, inh. = inhalation, i.v. = intravenous injection, po. = per os, gd = once a day, s.t. = subcutaneous injection, tid = three times a day, TIU = thousand IU.

### Table 3
Dynamics of the indicators during plasma therapy for the patients from the 3 cases.

| Characteristics | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Pretreatment of CP |  |  |  |
| SaO₂ (%) | 94 | 94 | 93 |
| CRP (mg/L; normal range: 0–10) | 63.9 | 17.6 | 45.9 |
| IL-6 (pg/mL; normal range: <7.0) | 59.9 | 29.3 | 44.3 |
| CD3 + (cells/μL; normal range: 355–2860) | 550 | 906 | 541 |
| CD3+/CD4 + (cells/μL; normal range: 550–1440) | 355 | 421 | 305 |
| CD3+/CD8 + (cells/μL; normal range: 320–1250) | 186 | 528 | 228 |
| Total lymphocytes (cells/μL; normal range: 1530–3700) | 952 | 1331 | 755 |
| 48–72h after CP treatment |  |  |  |
| Symptom | Improvement | Improvement | Improvement |
| Lung lesion | Partially absorption | Partially absorption | Partially absorption |
| SaO₂ (%) | 97 | 96 | 96 |
| CRP (mg/L) | 25.8 | 5.7 | 9.1 |
| IL-6 (pg/mL) | 8.1 | 10.3 | 7.2 |
| CD3 + (cells/μL) | 818 | 1087 | 872 |
| CD3+/CD4 + (cells/μL) | 550 | 537 | 583 |
| CD3+/CD8 + (cells/μL) | 250 | 508 | 282 |
| Total lymphocytes (cells/μL) | 1298 | 1450 | 1239 |
| 9 days after CP treatment |  |  |  |
| Lung lesion | Sustained absorption | Sustained absorption | Sustained absorption |
| SaO₂ (%) | 98 | 96 | 98 |
| CRP (mg/L) | 2.5 | 0.62 | 0.92 |
| IL-6 (pg/mL) | <1.5 | <1.5 | <1.5 |
| CD3 + (cells/μL) | 707 | 1282 | 958 |
| CD3+/CD4 + (cells/μL) | 468 | 713 | 562 |
| CD3+/CD8 + (cells/μL) | 235 | 561 | 308 |
| Total lymphocytes (cells/μL) | 984 | 1651 | 1239 |
| 30 days after CP treatment |  |  |  |
| Lung lesion |  |  |  |
| SaO₂ (%) | 1122 | 2466 | 813 |
| CRP (mg/L) | 707 | 1041 | 545 |
| IL-6 (pg/mL) | 382 | 1345 | 259 |
| Total lymphocytes (cells/μL) | 1878 | 3203 | 1074 |
| Time from onset to a negative viral test result (d) | 17 | 16 | 33 |
| Duration of hospital stay (d) | 17 | 13 | 33 |

CD₃⁺ = T lymphocytes, CD₃⁺/CD₄⁺ = CD₄⁺ T-lymphocyte subset, CD₃⁺/CD₈⁺ = CD₈⁺ T-lymphocyte subset, CP = convalescent plasma, CRP = C-reactive protein, IL-6 = interleukin-6, SaO₂ = arterial oxygen saturation.
3.3. Adverse reactions related to CP transfusion

One patient (case 2) developed a red rash with pruritus around the infusion site of the right upper extremity 17 hours after the CP transfusion, and the rash extended to the whole body with pruritus 22 hours after transfusion. Considering the transfusion-related anaphylactic reaction, the patient underwent antianaphylactic treatment with 10% calcium gluconate infusion and oral ebastines. Then, the symptoms became gradually relieved, and the rash disappeared completely 5 days after the CP transfusion. No severe adverse reactions were observed in any of the patients.

4. Discussion

To date, COVID-19 is still rapidly spreading worldwide. Clinical data from China have demonstrated that the rate of
severe COVID-19 was as high as 41.1% to 48.3% in the early stages of the pandemic.\textsuperscript{[17,18]} Due to the rapid progression of disease and high mortality in patients with severe COVID-19, effective treatment strategies are urgently needed to control the disease. However, there are currently no antiviral drugs that have proven to be effective in treating infection from this novel virus.\textsuperscript{[19,20]} A multicenter trial demonstrated that plasma therapy could accelerate the virus clearance rate and clinical recovery, shorten the length of hospital stay, and reduce the risk of death by 35% in patients with COVID-19.\textsuperscript{[17]} Ibrahim et al reported that an early application of plasma therapy helped accelerate the clinical recovery and reduce the mortality rate in patients with COVID-19.\textsuperscript{[14]} In a large retrospective case-control study, Xia et al also demonstrated that CP therapy improved the clinical symptoms, reduced the risk of intensive care unit admission, and reduced the mortality rate (the risk of mortality was
reduced by 50%) in patients with COVID-19. Previous studies have also demonstrated that an early application of plasma in patients with severe disease is more effective than a late application, while the overall benefit of CP in extremely critical patients, such as those with tracheal intubation or life-threatening conditions, was not significant. The patients of the 3 cases in our study were severely elderly patients with underlying diseases, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, but without endotracheal intubation. After admission, the condition of these patients deteriorated rapidly, and there was a high risk of developing critical illness. Then, CP was administered based on conventional treatment. After the combined therapy was administered, the symptoms of the patients became rapidly alleviated and the lung lesions were significantly resolved, inflammatory indexes decreased, and oxygenation function and cellular immune function were improved in the patients. The remarkable improvement of these patients suggests that plasma therapy is an effective remedy for patients with severe COVID-19. Hegerova et al reported that patients who underwent CP within 1 week after admission had a markedly lower risk of death within 14 days (mortality was 0) than those who underwent CP later than 1 week after admission. The timing of CP therapy in all of the patients in our study was within 1 week after admission (within 10 days after onset), which was significantly earlier than the time reported by Xia et al (the median time from onset to CP was 45 days). Significant improvement was achieved within 72 hours after treatment with CP in our research, suggesting that early CP therapy in patients with severe COVID-19 becomes even more effective.

Notably, although the 3 patients improved significantly after CP, one of them (case 3) remained positive for SARS-CoV-2 RNA for more than 1 month (33 days). At the beginning of the disease, the lymphocyte counts in the 3 patients all decreased and the number of lymphocytes gradually increased after CP, which is a result that is consistent with those of a previous report. However, the lymphocyte counts in 1 patient (case 3) were still lower than the normal standards 30 days after CP, whereas those in the other 2 patients (case 1 and case 2) returned to normal. The prolonged viral removal in case 3 was considered to be associated with a prolonged period of immunodeficiency. Additionally, the donor plasma antibody titer results exhibited that the titer of CP administered for case 1 was the highest (1:160) and the titer of CP administered for case 2 was positive for 1:80, whereas the titer of CP for case 3 was only weakly positive at 1:80. This suggests that this patient (case 3) received the lowest antibody level of CP in these 3 patients, which may have reduced the efficacy of the plasma therapy.

Additionally, only 1 patient (case 2) had a mild anaphylactic reaction with erythema and pruritus in the early stages of the transfusion. No other serious adverse reactions were observed in the follow-up period. Generally, the plasma treatment in our study was safe and reliable, and this is consistent with other reports in the literature.

Notably, there are some limitations to our research. First, this study included only 3 patients and was not a randomized controlled trial. Second, the patients were also administered other medications (including antiviral drugs, antibiotics, anti-inflammatory agents, immunostimulants, and Chinese herbal medicines) and treatments. Hence, this is a confounding factor. It is possible that these factors may play an important role in the recovery from, as well as in the synergy of, CP treatment. However, no effective antiviral drugs or other traditional therapies for controlling the novel virus were proven in our study. Combined CP therapy was initiated after the condition worsened after conventional treatment. Additionally, as mentioned previously, patients who underwent CP earlier have more-favorable clinical outcomes. The CP remedy in our study was utilized in the early stages of the disease course. Moreover, the first evaluation of a curative effect was assessed in a short time after the CP transfusion (within 48 to 72 hours), and the findings, which demonstrated obvious improvement with clinical symptoms, radiological images, and laboratory tests, were encouraging. As a result, we believe that the marked efficiency should be mainly attributed to the additional treatment with CP.

In summary, the early application of CP therapy in patients with severe COVID-19 can rapidly improve the condition of the patient, and the therapy is generally effective and safe. This therapy can reduce the risk of COVID-19 progressing from severe cases to critical illness.
to critical, lower the mortality rate,[24] and help raise the rescue success rate in patients with severe disease. In the absence of effective anti-SARS-CoV-2 drugs, CP therapy is an alternative method for treating patients with severe COVID-19 using adjuvant therapy.[24]

Acknowledgments
We would like to thank the Fujian Provincial Medical Treatment Clinical Expert Group for COVID-19, the nurses and clinical staff who provided care for the patient in Fuzhou Pulmonary Hospital of Fujian, and the patients for their willingness to participate in this study.

Author contributions
HL conceived the study and reviewed all drafts of the manuscript. JH drafted the manuscript. HW managed the data generation and data analysis and assisted in drafting the manuscript. CL helped to carry out the clinical data collection. JH and HW contributed equally to this study as senior authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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