Cutaneous Xanthoma- A Clue to Familial Hypercholesterolemia

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PRESENTATION OF CASE

A thirty-year-old female presented with multiple non-tender symmetrical slow growing swellings over dorsal aspect of bilateral foot, bilateral elbows and over interphalangeal joints for 5 years. The patient had similar swellings over the natal cleft, left knee, and dorsum of the hand which was surgically excised fifteen years ago. Her elder brother and sister also had similar complaints of multiple painless swellings.

On examination these swellings were multiple, non-tender, soft to firm in consistency and mobile with normal skin overlying the swelling.

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Her Lipid profile revealed a Total Cholesterol: 541 mg/dl (<200: desirable) or 30.0 mmol/L, Triglycerides 96 mg/dl or 5.32 mmol/L (<150: Normal), LDL levels: 477 mg/dl or 26.4 mmol/L (<100: optimal), HDL levels: 28 or 1.554 mmol/L (40: Low), Cholesterol/HDL ratio: 19.3 (>11.0: High Risk), HDL/LDL Ratio: 17.0 (>6 High Risk), VLDL: 19.2 (<30: Normal).

**Histopathology Report**

Grossly a skin covered swelling measuring 3*3 cm with cut surface showing a variegated colour ranging from yellow to brown to white with a focus of haemorrhage. Histopathological examination revealed them to be xanthomas characterized by foamy histiocytes, cholesterol clefts and multinucleated Touton type of giant cells.

Immunohistochemical marker CD68 was used to confirm diagnosis which is demonstrated by the foamy macrophages. The present report was consistent with the histopathological reports of previously excised swellings which also revealed to be Xanthoma.

Xanthomas are non-neoplastic lesions which are characterized by yellow macules or papules, to subcutaneous plaques and nodules localized to tendons (tendinous nodules) because of deposition of lipid laden macrophages in dermis and subcutis.\(^1\) It is not a true tumour. It is a reactive histiocytic proliferation that occurs as a response to alterations in serum lipids.\(^2\) Pathogenesis of xanthomas is similar to the pathogenesis in early stages of atherosclerotic plaques and this has brought interest and significance in patients presenting with xanthomas.\(^3\)

In 1835 Rayer introduced cutaneous xanthomas for first time. In 1908, it was found that xanthomas may be seen with an increase in serum cholesterol by Pick & Pinkus. Later in 1938, Thannhauser & Magendantz put forward the first biochemical classification of the dyslipidosis based on serum lipids. They classified it into three groups namely: Hypercholesterolaemia, Hyperlipidemias (Hypertriglyceridaemia) and Normolipemia. Then Frederickson, Lees & Levy (1967) proposed a classification of familial hyperlipidaemia based on the electrophoretic patterns of plasma lipoproteins.\(^4\)

Familial hypercholesterolemia (FH), is a primary inherited hyperlipoproteinaemia. It is an autosomal codominant genetic disorder caused by mutations in the LDL receptor gene located on chromosome 19. Familial hypercholesterolemia (FH) shows association with increased risk of premature cardiovascular disease. There are two types of FH: A Homozygous FH (HoFH), have two mutant LDL receptor alleles, and when there is one mutant allele is known as Heterozygous FH (HeFH). Homozygous familial hyperlipidemia is affected more severely than the latter.\(^5,6\)

The prevalence of molecularly defined HoFH is one in 300,000 individuals and the prevalence of heterozygous FH is one in 250 individuals.\(^7\) The commonly followed diagnostic criteria for FH is the Dutch Lipid Clinic Network criteria. These criteria calculate a score based on LDL-C levels, the presence
of arcus cornealis and tendon xanthomas, hypercholesterolaemia and premature CVD in relatives, and positive genetic testing. This is used only for the identification of Index Cases and a total score >8 gives a definitive diagnosis.\[^9\]

On applying the above criteria to our patient 1) Family history of first degree relative has presented with xanthoma (score of 2), 2) Presence of tendon xanthomas on bilateral elbows (score of 6), 3) LDL cholesterol levels being more than 8.5 mmol/L (score of 8) giving an aggregate score more than 8 thereby making a clinically definite diagnosis of Heterozygous Familial Hypercholesterolemia.

Xanthomas are of various types including xanthelasma palpebrum, tuberous xanthomas, tendinous xanthomas, eruptive xanthomas, plane xanthomas, xanthoma disseminatum and giant gluutal xanthoma. Among the various types of xanthomas tuberous and tendinous xanthomas are characteristic of familial hypercholesterolemia and that too mainly in homozygous FH.\[^9\]

Cutaneous xanthomas in cases of FH increases the risk of coronary artery disease as much as threefold.\[^10\] Xanthomas may be the only clinical presentation of the underlying grave lipid abnormality. Therefore Xanthomas pose a much larger threat than a simple cosmetic lesion.\[^11\] They remain gravely underdiagnosed and delayed diagnosis can lead to further consequences as it can progress rapidly to atherosclerotic changes leading to Aortic Stenosis and Coronary Artery Disease.

**DISCUSSION OF MANAGEMENT**

Lifestyle and non-cholesterol risk factor modification is an important part of treatment. These include dietary modification, physical exercise, avoidance of weight gain, cessation of smoking.\[^12\] Various studies tell us that statins markedly reduce the risk of coronary artery disease and total mortality in FH.\[^13\]

International guidelines outline LDL-C <2.6 mmol/L as the optimal target in adults with FH. All statins have been used in FH but adult patients require high-intensity statin therapy, like Atorvastatin 40–80 mg or Rosuvastatin 20–40 mg. Women with FH should receive pre-pregnancy counselling as they should be advised to stop any lipid-lowering treatment at least 4 weeks before discontinuing contraception and should not use statins in pregnancy and lactation. Ezetimibe and bile acid sequestrants are other options.\[^14\] For patients failing to attain target LDL-C, the new PCSK9 inhibitors helps in reducing LDL-C and thereby cardiovascular risk. In cases of severe HoFH, lomitapide and LDL apheresis are indicated.\[^15\]

Our patient is currently advised Atorvastatin 40 mg along with regular cardiovascular follow up.

**FINAL DIAGNOSIS**

Thirty-year-old lady with familial heterozygous hypercholesterolemia with multiple, recurrent cutaneous and tendon xanthomas.