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Dutch-beta thalassemia: A rare mutation from India
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Abstract

Introduction: COVID-19 pandemic imposed challenges towards management of transfusion-dependent thalassemia patients (TDT). The need for regular blood transfusions and iron chelation therapy in these patients added further uncertainty about managing COVID-19 in this subset of patients.

Aims: To describe the clinical manifestations of SARS-CoV2 infection in patients with TDT and to evaluate feasibility of home management for patients with mild disease.

Materials and methods: The study involved TDT patients registered with thalassemia day care center, DMCH, who tested positive for COVID-19 by RTPCR. The demographics, clinical characteristics and baseline investigations were recorded. Patients with mild disease were managed at home and others were hospitalized. The daily home monitoring and the hospital course were noted and analyzed.

Results: The study involved 14 TDT patients who were infected with SARS-CoV2 with a mean age of 18.9 ± 6.7 years and a male to female ratio of 6:1. Five patients each were in low and high-risk groups and 4 patients were in highest risk group. The symptoms reported by these patients were fever, fatigue, sore throat etc. Two patients were hospitalized with one patient requiring oxygen therapy. He was discharged after 48 hours. The other patient had severe cardiac iron overload and diabetes mellitus. His iron chelation therapy was withheld during hospitalization. He presented with a cardiac arrhythmia later and was cardioverted. Thus, all other patients were continued on iron chelation with deferasirox. Twelve patients were successfully managed at home with regular telephonic monitoring.

Conclusion: Patients with thalassemia do not necessarily need hospitalization for management of COVID-19. Home management can be offered to patients with mild disease in a resource limited setting. Iron chelation with deferasirox can be continued safely.

1. Introduction

Beta Thalassemia is a hereditary blood disease caused by numerous mutations in the HBB gene [1]. Mutations in this gene can result in variable β-globin production leading to autosomal recessive disorders like β-Thalassemia (quantitative β-chain defect) and sickle cell anemia (qualitative β-chain defect). Although multiple mutations are known to occur with β-Thalassemia, the common ones in Indian population are only few which constitute about 90% of them. Nonetheless, many rare variants of the disorder are also known like the Dutch 12.6 kb βthalassaemia deletion. We hereby present a case report of a child with Thalassemia with rare mutation with the consent of the parents.

2. Case report

An eight year old female child presented to us with a history of progressive paleness of body and jaundice for 15 days. She had no previous history of blood transfusion. On physical examination, she had moderate pallor, icterus and palpable spleen 3 cm below the
left costal margin along its long axis. Rest of the examination was
unremarkable. She had a haemoglobin level of 9.3 gm% with
normal total leucocyte count and platelet count. The RBC indices in
the order of MCV, MCH, MCHC, RBC count and RDW were as fol-
lowing: 63.3 fl, 18.5 pg, 29.5 g/dL, 5.02 million cells/cmm and 21.7%
respectively, drawing an interpretation of microcytic hypochromic
blood picture. Her iron profile was normal. Therefore a high per-
formance liquid chromatography (HPLC) was performed on BIO-
RAD Variant II analyser, which revealed 99% HbF with absence of
HbA and A2 (Fig. 1). Subsequently, an HPLC of the parents was also
performed which revealed that both had elevated levels of HbF
(12.7% and 16.2% in mother and father respectively) with normal
HbA2 levels. A comparative table of their laboratory parameters are
depicted in Table 1.

Thus in view of the clinical and laboratory parameters of he-
molytic anemia with elevated HbF levels and complete absence
HbA possibilities of: 1) homozygous delta-beta (dβ) Thalassemia, 2)
homozygous hereditary persistence of fetal haemoglobin, 3) double
heterozygous δβ Thalassemia and classical β Thalassemia; and 4)
rare variants of homozygous β Thalassemia were considered.
Hence, a comprehensive beta Thalassemia [HBB] gene analysis by
next generation sequencing (NGS) was done. This included selec-
tive amplification and sequencing of the targeted region of the
gene along with multiplex PCR amplification to create a
target amplicon library from each DNA sample. A deletion dupli-
cation analysis was also performed. This assay enabled target spe-
cific library generation for NGS analysis of HBB gene. It revealed
a homozygous deletion spanning HBB gene from upstream of exon 1
to exon 3 downstream within the detection limits copy number
variants (CNV) in the HBB gene of this subject. This deletion is
known as the Dutch I bβ+ Thalassemia and it is a homozygous bβ-
thalassemia.

Currently the patient is non-transfusion dependent and
receiving folic acid supplementation.

Due to financial constraints, gene analysis of the parents could
not be performed to confirm their heterozygous state.

3. Discussion

Beta Thalassemia is an inherited blood disorder caused by over
350 mutations in the HBB gene which is responsible for the syn-
thesis of a protein called beta-globin, a subunit of haemoglobin [1].
Mutations in this gene can result in decreased (β−) or no (β0)
-globin production leading to autosomal recessive disorders like β-
Thalassemia and sickle cell anemia. In a meta-analysis from India,
information on 8505 alleles has been collated and 64 β-globin gene
mutations causing β−Thalassemia have been identified [2]. Na-
tionally, IVS1-5 G>C is the single most common mutant allele and
represents 54.7% of all β-thalassemia mutations reported. Five
common mutations found in Indian sub-continent, which comprise
82.5% of all mutations, are: 1) IVS1-5 G>C, 2) IVS1-1 G>T, 3)
codon 41/42(-TTCT), 4) codon 8/9 (+G) and 5) the 619 base-pair
(bp) deletion [2,3]. Other 5 mutations namely: Codon 15 G>A,
Codon 30 G>C, Cap site +1 A>C, Codon 5’-CT and Codon 16’-C
account for an additional 11.0% of all mutant alleles [2] These
constitute about 90% of the mutations found in India, however
many rare variants of the disorder may also be reported sporadically.

The Dutch 12.6 kb β0-thalassaemia deletion is a member of a
discrete 12–13 kb size category of deletions [4,5]. It is a homozy-
gous deletion spanning HBB gene from upstream of exon 1 to exon
3 downstream detected in the HBB gene [12612 NTS deleted in the
beta gene]. There is no beta chain production and considerable
increase in gamma chain formation [5]. Individuals with Dutch I β-
thalassemia show few clinical symptoms like mild to severe
anemia in homozygous condition and elevated fetal haemoglobin
(4–11%) in heterogeneous condition [4,5]. The presence of high HbF
levels may also postpone its diagnosis beyond infancy. Also, the
higher levels of HbF lead to an increased oxygen carrying capacity
of the RBCs. Therefore despite the absence of HbA the patient has
only mild anemia and is not transfusion dependent.

A striking finding of normal HbA2 with an elevated HbF in the
parents has been seen in this patient, although in most beta thal-
assemia heterozygotes with deletion of the beta globin gene, the
HbA2 is unusually elevated. Expression of the adult β globin gene
depends on lack of competition from the upstream γ gene for LCR

Table 1
Comparative data on the laboratory parameters of the index case and parents.

| PARAMETER            | CHILD | MOTHER | FATHER |
|----------------------|-------|--------|--------|
| Hb (gm/dL)           | 9.3   | 10.5   | 14.7   |
| MCV (fl)             | 63.3  | 67.9   | 69.3   |
| MCH (pg)             | 18.5  | 21     | 22.8   |
| MCHC (%)             | 29.5  | 31     | 33     |
| RDW (%)              | 21.7  | 18.0   | 15.9   |
| RBC Count (10^6/μL)  | 5.02  | 4.99   | 6.44   |
| HbF (%)              | 99.1  | 12.7   | 16.2   |
| HbA (%)              | 3.1   | 75.7   | 72.4   |
| HbA2 (%)             | 2.6   |        |        |

Fig. 1. Hplc of the family.
sequences. It has been proposed that deletion of the β promoter removes competition for the upstream βLCR and limiting transcription factors. This permits greater interaction of the LCR with the cis δ and γ genes, thus resulting in their enhanced expression [6]. In homozygote patients of Dutch β-thalassaemia there is a high level of Cγ chain in Hb F whereas in heterozygotes the Hb F value ranges 4–11% [4,5]. This would explain the cause of high Hb F level in the parents, however a suitable explanation of normal Hb A2 in them was not found.

The Dutch beta variant has not yet been reported from Uttar Pradesh or India at all and there are only anecdotal case reports since 1987 from other nations as well [3,7]. This deletion has been previously reported in isolated cases of Dutch β^-Thalassaemia in different ethnic population specifically in autochthonous Dutch population [8].

HBB genetic testing must be employed for diagnostic purposes in individuals with clinical symptoms of β-Thalassemia or a hemoglobinopathy. Parents who have symptoms, family history of the disorder or are known carriers of the disease, can benefit from prenatal testing for mutations in this gene.

4. Conclusion

A high level of HbF on HPLC is more commonly associated with homozygous delta-beta Thalassemia or homozygous hereditary persistence of fetal haemoglobin but one should also consider a possibility of homozygous beta Thalassemia with rare genetic mutations which can be confirmed by mutational analysis. Thus we reiterate the importance of mutational analysis in cases of markedly elevated HbF levels beyond fetal period.

Financial support

None.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Patient's consent:

Consent has been obtained from the patient's parents.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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