Original Research Article

**Cytokine IL-12, Dengue in children: analysis of a unique relationship**

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**ABSTRACT**

Background: Dengue is a mosquito borne viral infection caused by one of the four serotypes of dengue viruses (DENV1-DENV4). The consequences of DENV infection range from asymptomatic condition, dengue fever (DF), or severe forms, such as dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF) and dengue shock syndrome (DSS). The host immune responses have been considered as the major factor responsible for dengue pathogenesis. In this study, the cytokine IL-12 is reviewed for its utility as potential biomarker of severe dengue disease.

Methods: 120 children of paediatric age group with either dengue NS1 antigen or dengue IgM positive were included. Cases were classified as uncomplicated dengue (dengue without warning signs) and complicated dengue (dengue with warning signs and severe dengue). Clinical features and IL-12 (ELISA KIT) levels were analyzed in the study population.

Results: Analysis of clinical features among the study groups revealed children with complicated dengue had persistent vomiting (95%), abdominal pain (80%), decreased urine output (50%), bleeding manifestations (83.3%), Hepatomegaly (70%) Haemoconcentration with concurrent thrombocytopenia (93.3%), altered coagulation profile (28.3%), ICU stay (54.7%), leukocytosis (15%), leucopenia (66.6%) normal leucocytes, (18.4%). Analysis of IL-12 levels revealed children with complicated dengue showed significant elevation compared to controls and uncomplicated dengue.

Conclusions: In our study IL-12 levels were significantly higher in complicated dengue patients in comparison with uncomplicated dengue patients as well as normal control population.

Keywords: IL-12 and dengue, Predictors of dengue severity, Clinical features and dengue, Dengue and children

**INTRODUCTION**

Dengue is a mosquito borne viral infection caused by one of the four serotypes of dengue viruses (Denv1-Denv4). Over 2.5 billion people of the world’s population are now at risk for dengue. Dengue infections are a worldwide phenomenon spread throughout the tropical and subtropical zones.

The dengue virus is carried and introduced into the human host by the female Aedes mosquito. The global incidence of dengue has significantly increased over the past decade and is now endemic in many developing countries. South-East Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand are at the highest risk of dengue accounting for nearly half of the global risk. Factors that have contributed to the dramatic expansion of dengue include population growth, urbanization, and inadequate water management leading to mosquito proliferation sites and convenient global travel.
The consequences of DENV infection range from asymptomatic condition, dengue fever (DF), or severe forms, such as dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF) and dengue shock syndrome (DSS). Severe dengue is characterized either by plasma leakage, fluid accumulation, respiratory distress, severe bleeding or organ impairment. Clinical manifestations offer the earliest markers in predicting severe dengue disease.

A recent meta-analysis of signs and symptoms of severe dengue shows that bleeding, nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain, skin rashes, and hepatosplenomegaly are associated with severe dengue disease. Patients with dengue fever were clustered into two groups: one with warning signs including abdominal pain, mucosal bleeding and liver enlargement that warrant ICU admission and the other without these signs. Early prediction of severe dengue in patients without any warning signs who may later develop severe DHF is very important to give the best supportive care since approved vaccines for immunization are yet to be commercialized. An ideal biomarker should be able to identify individuals who are at risk of developing severe dengue.

The mechanism by which only a few DENV infected individuals’ progress to severe dengue disease is poorly understood. The host immune responses have been considered as the major factor responsible for dengue pathogenesis.

The process of plasma leakage, shock and hemorrhagic manifestations initiated by enhancing infection with DENV virus with the help of opsonising antibodies, resulting in an altered immune response which triggers T cell activation and release of cytokines and chemical mediators has been a risk factor in secondary infection. However, undefined factors could play a role in the development of severe dengue in individuals with primary infection and immune non-response.

Dengue patients show fever symptoms during peak of viremia while DHF/DSS appears during the time when the virus has been cleared from the circulation suggesting severe dengue disease is most likely associated with immunopathology. Thus, the host immune response components including cells, cytokines, complements and other cellular mediators can serve as biomarkers of the disease.

It is reported that the macro-morphology of endothelial lining remains intact while the functionality of the endothelial cells is altered by activation which leads to vascular permeability resulting in plasma leakage.

Therefore, endothelial activation markers such as expression of adhesion molecules and receptors can also serve as biomarkers of severe dengue disease. In present study, the cytokine IL-12 is reviewed for their utility as potential biomarker of severe dengue disease.

**METHODS**

Children with dengue (NS1 antigen/IgM positive) admitted as inpatients were taken as cases and afebrile children admitted for non-infectious causes in Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute were controls and were enrolled for the study.

**Inclusion criteria**

120 children of paediatric age group from 1 month till 18 years of age with fever for more than 5 days with either dengue NS1 antigen or dengue IgM positive were cases.

30 children who were admitted for non-infectious disease (e.g., surgery) without fever and without any systemic illness and pre-existing illness (tuberculosis, asthma) in Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute were controls.

**Exclusion criteria**

Children with the following:

- Under immunomodulatory treatment (e.g., Steroids),
- Chronic ailments (e.g., Bronchial asthma),
- Systemic illness (e.g., Malaria, Tuberculosis, HIV etc), and
- Children of parents who did not give consent for the study.

Consent was obtained and history was elicited. After physical examination and basic investigations including dengue reports, patients were categorized into 3 categories as per WHO classification of dengue, 2009. Controls were categorized into three groups as 1-month–6 years, 6 years–12 years, 12 years – 18 years irrespective of the gender. Children with coexisting illness, chronic ailments and who were on immune modulatory treatments (exclusion criteria) were not enrolled in the study.

Cases were diagnosed as dengue without warning signs, dengue with warning signs and severe dengue and were further categorized into two groups as uncomplicated dengue (dengue without warning signs) and complicated dengue (dengue with warning signs and severe dengue) and samples were collected. 120 (60+60) blood samples were collected and stored at -50° centigrade. Children who were admitted for other reasons (afebrile, non-infectious causes) were divided into 3 groups as 1 month to 6 years, 6 years to 12 years and 12 years to 18 years and 10 samples were collected from each group.

120 case samples were collected. 60 cases were dengue without warning signs, 57 were dengue with warning signs and 3 were severe dengue. Samples were processed along with 30 controls. Samples were processed by ELISA technique.

Enzyme Linked Immuno Sorbent Assay (ELISA) is a
biochemical technique used mainly in immunology to detect the presence of an antibody or an antigen in a given sample. Sandwich ELISA, which recognises both natural and recombinant human IL-12, was used. Human IL-12 ELISA kits manufactured by Diacclone were used. It contained 96 well microtitre strip plates, wash buffer, standard diluent buffer, standard controls, biotinylated anti IL-12, streptavidin-HRP. The sensitivity of IL-12 kit was 2.2pg/ml. The specificity of the kit was good that it did not show any cross reactivity when tested for any other protein. The methodology of testing was followed as given in the manual.

Statistical analysis was done using statistical package for the social sciences 17 (SPSS17) software.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics

Children of adolescent age group were the majority and more predominated in complicated dengue (55%).

| Table 1: Clinical features among complicated and uncomplicated Dengue (N=111). |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Diagnosis       | Uncomplicated dengue | Complicated dengue | Total |
| Vomiting        | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Abdominal Pain  | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Decreased Urine | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Mucosal Bleed   | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Hepatomegaly    | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Hemo concentration | Yes         | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| Altered Coagulation Profile | Yes | No | Yes | No | Total |
| ICU Stay        | Yes             | No             | Yes          | No             | Total |
| WBC             | Leucopoenia     | Leocytosis     | Normal       |                | Total |

While 50% of children with complicated dengue had decreased urine output, 50% of them did not have such manifestation. 50 children (83.3%) with complicated dengue had bleeding manifestations while 16.7% did not have such episode during the illness.

Although 42(70%) children with complicated dengue had Hepatomegaly, 30% of children did not have any significant hepatomegaly. 93.3% children with complicated dengue had Hemoconcentration with concurrent thrombocytopenia during the illness. 43 children (i.e.71.7%) with complicated dengue did not have altered coagulation profile while 17 children from the same group had altered coagulation.

When none of the patients with uncomplicated dengue required ICU stay, 26(43.3%) children with complicated

Figure 1: Age group of study group.

Almost 5% (3) children with complicated dengue did not have persistent vomiting. 20% of the children with complicated dengue did not have any significant abdominal pain while 80% of children had.
dengue also did not require any ICU management. Out of 60 children with complicated dengue, 9 (15%) had leucocytosis and 39 (66.6%) had leucopenia while rest of the children 12 (18.4%) had normal leucocytes.

Descriptive statistics

This study was done among dengue patients where 60 complicated cases of dengue and 60 uncomplicated cases of dengue were taken along with 30 healthy controls.

Other characteristics like demographic details, clinical features, and blood investigations were also taken into account. All the study participants were analysed for IL-12.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics.

|   | N  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. deviation |
|---|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| IL-12 | 150 | 0.00 | 2000 | 561.4062 | 260.47321 |

Table 1 shows the mean level for IL-12 in study population 561.40 and the standard deviation was 560.47. Subjects analysed simultaneously with statistical test of significance by applying ANOVA (Analysis of the Variance) between the groups and within the groups where between the group was complicated vs uncomplicated dengue whereas within the group indicates complicated / uncomplicated vs normal healthy controls.

Table 3: ANOVA.

|     | Sum of squares | DF | Mean square | F     | SIG.  |
|-----|---------------|----|-------------|-------|-------|
| IL 12 between groups | 8401199 | 2 | 4200599 | 15.079 | 0.000 |
| within groups | 38404204 | 147 | 251253 |       |       |
| total | 45805403 | 149 |           |       |       |

It has been observed from Table 2 that the mean square difference was higher between the groups when compared within the group.

The difference of observation was found statistically significant in IL-12 (p=0.000) by using F test. F test value was 16.079 times protective when compared to mean square difference. The 95% Confidence Interval of the mean ranges from 588.59 to 847.48 in relation to IL-12. The higher formation of mean value was found to be high with respect to IL-12.

Table 4: Descriptives.

| Diagnosis | N  | Mean | Std. dev | 95% CI for mean | Std error | Minimum | Maximum |
|-----------|----|------|----------|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Uncomplicated dengue | 60 | 703.0385 | 559.16378 | 558.5912 to 847.4858 | 72.18773 | 23.15 | 2000 |
| Complicated dengue | 60 | 655.4762 | 577.48644 | 506.2956 to 804.6567 | 74.55318 | 0.00 | 2000 |
| Normal | 30 | 90.0017 | 98.44926 | 53.2401 to 126.7632 | 17.97429 | 0.00 | 388.95 |

Table 5: Multiple comparisons.

| Diagnosis | Diagnosis | Mean Diff (I – J) | Std Error | Significance | 95% Conf Int | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
|-----------|-----------|------------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Uncomplicated dengue | Complicated dengue | 47.56233 | 93.319 | 0.867 | -0.173.3884 | 268.5131 |
| Normal | Uncomplicated dengue | 613.03683 | 114.29197 | 0.000 | 342.4285 | 883.6452 |
| Complicated dengue | Normal | 565.4745 | 114.29197 | 0.000 | -268.5131 | 173.3884 |
| Normal | Uncomplicated dengue | -613.03683 | 114.29197 | 0.000 | -836.0828 | -342.4285 |
| Normal | Normal | -565.4745 | 114.29197 | 0.000 | -836.0828 | -294.8662 |

Analysis of the study using test of significance.

Mean IL-12 levels in both groups (complicated and uncomplicated dengue) were found to be significantly elevated (p value 0.000) when compared with normal healthy controls. But it was observed that mean IL-12 levels in uncomplicated dengue group was higher than complicated dengue, which may suggest the role of IL-12 in Th1 pathway mediated protective response seen in
uncomplicated dengue. However, the difference was statistically insignificant.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to determine the significance of cytokine IL-12 in children with dengue, dengue with warning signs and severe dengue in comparison with normal children as controls. In addition, the study also aims to determine IL-12 as predictor of dengue severity. In our study, 120 children with dengue were enrolled as cases along with 30 controls. The 120 children in the case group had 60 children with complicated dengue and 60 children with uncomplicated dengue. The normal health controls were divided into 3 groups as 1 month- 6 years, 6 years-12 years and 12 years-18 years. Previously, few studies have reported the incidence of 50 million dengue cases per year occurring worldwide that includes more than 5,00,000 cases of severe dengue.4,5

Why IL-12 was analysed?

In our study, a cytokine from the Th1 pathway, which shows a significant variation during 5-8 days of illness were analysed. In a similar study by Chaturvedi et al similar analysis was carried out along with other cytokines like IL-5, IL-6, and IL-10 etc.6 Similarly, IL-12 is a key cytokine in the Th1 response and therefore has a protective effect with elevated IL-12 levels seen in uncomplicated dengue. Thus IL-12 elevation has been observed in uncomplicated dengue patients. The other interesting feature is significant variation in levels of cytokine IL-12) were observed only during day 5-day 8 of illness. Hence, we studied the level of IL-12 in dengue patients between 5-8 days of illness.

Kumar Y et al, studied 27 cytokines levels in 62 adult patients, showed elevated levels of IL-12.7 IL-12 levels were similarly elevated in our study when comparing dengue children with healthy control.

In a study by Braiser et al, where 55 individuals with dengue were analysed for various cytokines showed significant difference only in levels of IL-6 and IL-10 whereas in present study IL-12 were significant when compared between milder and severe dengue and IL-12 was significant when it was compared with healthy controls.8

A case control study by Sing et al, involving 120 controls and 86 DF patients and 196 patients with DHF/DSS were analysed which showed IL-12 has a protective role against development of severe dengue in patients with milder dengue.9 Although in our study, the levels of IL-12 was low in complicated dengue when compared to children with milder dengue, it was not statistically significant (p value was 0.867).

In line with our study, a case reported by Masaki et al, a Japanese traveller infected by dengue virus serotype 3 showed elevated levels of IL-12 in dengue fever.10 The study also showed a marked decrease in CD4 cells and

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**Figure 2: IL-12.**

**ROC Curve**

This test was done to find out the reliability of IL-12 for application in dengue by using recessive operative characteristics (ROC) curve. Figure 6 depicts ROC curve for IL-12.

**Table 6: Area under the curve.**

| Area | Std. Error | Asymptotic Sig | Asymptotic 95% confidence interval |
|------|------------|----------------|----------------------------------|
| 895  | 0.027      | 0.000          | Lower bound: 0.843                |
|      |            |                | Upper bound: 0.948                |

Figure 6 shows that the area under the ROC curve for IL-12 is 0.895 (89%) which indicate good sensitivity and specificity of the test in diagnosing severity of dengue. Hence it can be observed that the reliability of IL-12 is high in evaluating dengue patients.

**Figure 3: ROC curve of IL-12.**
significant increase in Interferon gamma in DF. In a study involving 66 paediatric dengue patients to establish the relation between soluble ST2 and IL-33 in severe dengue, the results showed higher levels of IL-12 in children with dengue fever. This study done by Guerrero et al, showed similar results with regarding IL-12. Majority of the international and national studies showed an elevation of Th1 mediated cytokine response in the acute phase of dengue infection. Few studies have also demonstrated the predictive role of IL-12 (Th2 mediated cytokine) in non severe dengue patients. Our study was in concordance with the findings of these studies.

Limitations of present study are:

- Relatively low sample size in present study.
- Present study was restricted to a single urban centre where the exact magnitude of the prevailing disease may not be similar.
- No clear cut reference ranges for IL-12 were available and hence control values were taken for reference ranges.
- Values of IL-12 had a wide range of variation. Negative values from ELISA reader were approximated to 0 as minimum.

CONCLUSION

In present study IL-12, the levels are elevated in both complicated and uncomplicated dengue; it is relatively lower in complicated dengue than in uncomplicated dengue children. Hence, IL-12 elevation has a protective role in the evolution of dengue illness and prevents serious forms of illness.

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