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Renal and immunologic markers for chloralkali workers with low exposure to mercury vapor

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Objectives The aim of this study was to investigate renal function and immunologic markers among chloralkali workers with long-term low exposure to mercury vapor.

Methods Forty-seven currently exposed workers were compared with reference workers matched for age in a cross-sectional design.

Results The mean urinary mercury concentration was 5.9 (range 1.1—16.8) nmol/mmol creatinine (Cr) for the exposed workers and 1.3 (range 0.2—5.0) nmol/mmol Cr for the referents. The chloralkali workers had been exposed for an average of 13.3 (range 2.8—34.5) years. The activity of N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase in urine (U-NAG) was higher in the exposed workers (mean 0.18 U/mmol Cr versus 0.14 U/mmol Cr, P=0.02). Associations between current urinary mercury, cumulative urinary mercury, and cumulative urinary mercury per year (intensity) and U-NAG, autoantibodies to myeloperoxidase (anti-MPO) and proteinase 3 in serum, respectively, were observed. The activity of U-NAG and anti-MPO was increased in the workers with the highest exposure, as assessed by their mean intensity of exposure. The highest activity of U-NAG was observed in the exposed workers with the lower concentrations of selenium in whole blood.

Conclusions The study indicates an effect of exposure on the kidney proximal tubule cells, possibly modified by individual selenium status, and an effect mediated by neutrophil granulocytes.

Key terms autoantibodies to myeloperoxidase, urinary N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase.

The kidney is recognized as an important target organ for inorganic mercury toxicity. Toxic effects are related both to the proximal tubular cells and to changes at the level of the glomerular basement membrane (1). The latter changes have been attributed to immunologic mechanisms, which have been extensively studied in animals (2).

Cross-sectional studies of workers exposed to mercury vapor have indicated elevated activity of the kidney proximal tubular cell enzyme N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase in urine (U-NAG) or an association between U-NAG and mercury in urine (U-Hg) (3—7). Although an increased urinary excretion of albumin (U-Alb), indicative of glomerular basement membrane affection, has been reported (8), most epidemiologic studies are nonpositive (3—7, 9—11). An increased prevalence of autoantibodies to the glomerular basement membrane (anti-GBM) has been reported for animals (mainly the Brown-Norway rat). Lympho proliferation, hyperimmunoglobulinemia (mainly immunoglobulin E), and autoantibody production (mainly anti-DNA) occur simultaneously (2). The induction of antinuclear antibodies (ANA) in mice has also been reported (12—14). Generally, transient immunologic alterations occur after exposure to mercuric chloride, and susceptibility is genetically controlled (2). Results from immunologic occupational studies on humans are ambiguous and in contrast to the experience gained from animal studies.

One study reporting an elevation of anti-GBM in humans (10) is outweighed by several nonpositive reports (3, 6, 7, 15—17). Increased immunoglobulin E (IgE) was found in one study (18), but not in others (7, 16, 19). The

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nonpositive studies of antibodies to deoxyribonucleic acid (anti-DNA) (16, 18—20) outweigh the positive ones (7). ANA have not been found (6, 16—20). The human kidney is rich in selenium (21), and the proximal tubule cells have been suggested to be the main source of plasma glutathione peroxidase (22, 23). Selenium can reduce the kidney toxicity of inorganic mercury in animals (24), in particular in the proximal tubule cells (25). Increased lipid peroxidation with concomitant increased glutathione peroxidase activity has been shown in kidneys of rats exposed to inorganic mercury (26). Selenium may also protect the kidney tubule cells in cancer patients receiving cis-platinum (27). These studies could suggest that individual selenium status may modify the toxic kidney effects of inorganic mercury. This study was performed to investigate renal function in chloralkali workers with long-term low exposure to mercury vapor with emphasis on detecting a no-effect level in particular. Furthermore, the study aimed at determining whether current or past exposure could be attributed to the studied effect measures, and finally whether individual selenium status may modify the possible effects of exposure to mercury vapor on the kidney.

Subjects and methods

Study design and subjects

Only men who had been exposed to mercury vapor for at least 1 year in a contaminated area of the plant under study were eligible for inclusion. Sixty-seven subjects working at the plant at the time of the examinations were identified. Four women, 5 workers exposed for less than 1 year, 4 subjects employed as administrative staff, and 3 subjects working outside the contaminated area were not included in the study. Fifty-one workers fulfilling the inclusion criteria constituted the target population. They were offered a voluntary medical examination after having received written information about the study. They were matched for age (±3 years) with the exposed workers in pairs. A potential referent with the closest year and day of birth to the exposed subject who was to be matched was invited as the actual referent.

All 51 invited exposed workers attended the examinations (response rate = 100%). For the match of these 51 workers, 56 referents had to be invited (response rate = 91.1%). Exclusion criteria included alcohol abuse, major head injuries, metabolic disorders, and major psychiatric, neurologic or other diseases causing severe disability. Four exposed workers and 2 referents were excluded due to medical conditions (diabetes mellitus or vascular disorders of the brain). As the study design was based on pair-wise matching and 4 exposed workers were excluded, this report describes the results of 47 exposed workers and 47 referents.

All examinations, including a structured interview emphasizing occupational and medical history, socio-demographic background, and current alcohol consumption (28), were carried out at the local occupational health clinic. Background characteristics are shown in table 1.

Exposure assessment

The workers had been routinely monitored by measurements of their U-Hg since the opening of the plant in 1949. Since the middle of the 1960s cold-vapor atomic absorption spectrometry had been used for this purpose. The results from about 2200 measurements of U-Hg were identified among the 47 included exposed workers (mean 2.9 measurements/worker annually). U-Hg was measured without correction for urinary creatinine until 1982. The mean of the individual urinary creatinine concentrations measured in 1982 and 1983 was used to correct the concentrations measured prior to 1982. We were not aware of the introduction of any other changes in the monitoring strategy at that time.

Table 1. Background characteristics, trace element concentrations in whole blood and urine, and exposure data for 47 male chloralkali workers in whole blood, U-Se = selenium in urine, B-Cd = cadmium in whole blood, U-Cd = cadmium in urine, Cum U-Hg = cumulative index of

| Group          | Age (years) | Current alcohol consumption (1/year) | Current smokers (%) | U-Hg (nmol/mmol Cr) | B-Hg (nmol/l) | B-Hg\textsubscript{cum} (nmol/l) |
|----------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
|                | Mean        | Range                              | Mean                | Mean                | Mean          | Mean                           |
| Exposed        | 42.0        | 24.0—66.8                          | 3.9                 | 0—17.2              | 53.2          | 5.9                           | 1.1—16.8                     | 43.5 | 10.0—108.0 | 20.7 | 2.5—65.0 |
| Referents      | 41.9        | 23.3—64.2                          | 3.9                 | 0—15.1              | 34.0          | 1.3                           | 0.2—5.0                      | 16.5 | 8.0—36.0 | 5.7  | 2.5—18.0 |

\textsuperscript{a} 48 subjects in each group (except 45 subjects for B-Hg\textsubscript{cum} in the reference group).

|                | Mean        | Range                              | Mean                | Mean                | Mean          | Mean                           |
|----------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Exposed        | 42.0        | 24.0—66.8                          | 3.9                 | 0—17.2              | 53.2          | 5.9                           | 1.1—16.8                     | 43.5 | 10.0—108.0 | 20.7 | 2.5—65.0 |
A cumulative index of exposure (Cum U-Hg), based on the historical U-Hg measurements, was calculated. The index was based on the worker’s mean U-Hg for each quarter of the year. If a quarter was without U-Hg measurements, a calculated value for that quarter was obtained as the mean of the U-Hg before and after the missing quarter. Based on these quarterly measurements, a mean U-Hg for each year of exposure was calculated, and all years of exposure were added to yield the Cum U-Hg. Furthermore, an index of the mean intensity of exposure (Cum U-Hg/year) was calculated by dividing Cum U-Hg by years of exposure. The concentrations of U-Hg and inorganic mercury in whole blood (B-Hg\textsubscript{exp}) at the time of examination were the indices used for current exposure. Exposure information is shown in table 1.

**Laboratory measurements**

First-voided morning urine was collected from the day before and the day of the examination in 25-ml NUNC\textregistered containers (Nalge Nunc International, Denmark). The subjects were instructed to store the containers in a refrigerator. Trace elements were measured in the second sample. Blood specimens were obtained from the cubital vein. Heparinized whole blood for measurements of trace elements was collected in 10-ml Venoject\textregistered (Terumo Corporation, Belgium) tubes. Blood specimens for the determination of B-Se and creatinine were collected in 7-ml Vacutainer\textregistered (Beckton Dickinson, United States) and 5-ml Vacuette\textregistered tubes (Greiner Labortechnik, Austria), and 10-ml Vacuette\textregistered tubes for the immunologic assays. One subject refused to give a blood sample. All the samples were stored at -20°C until the analysis.

**Renal markers**

Serum (centrifugation: 1500 revolutions/min for 10 minutes) and urine were stored in 4.5-ml NUNC\textregistered cryo tubes. For the determination of \(\beta_2\)-microglobulin and creatinine, 7-ml Vacutainer\textregistered SST tubes (Beckton and Dickinson, United States) and 5-ml Vacuette\textregistered tubes (Greiner Labortechnik, Austria), and 10-ml Vacuette\textregistered tubes were used for the immunologic assays. A sample was mixed with a buffered solution of Alcian blue (Glyco), 0.5 ml of 87% glycerin was added to 4 ml of urine. \(\beta_2\)-Microglobulin (U-\(\beta_2\)) was measured in urine adjusted at the time of the sampling with 1 mol/l sodium hydroxide to a pH between 6.5 and 8. Urine was stored for the determination of the other compounds without additives. All the measurements were carried out on day 60 after the sampling.

The serum concentrations of creatinine and \(\beta_2\)-microglobulin and the urine concentrations of creatinine, albumin, and enzymes were measured with a Cobas Mira analyzer (Cobas Instruments, Roche Diagnostic Systems, Switzerland) at 37°C (29). Creatinine was measured colorimetrically as an end-point measurement after 125 seconds at 500 nm, using alkaline picrate (Unimate 7, Roche Diagnostic Systems, Switzerland). U-NAG [detection limit (DL) 0.02 U/l] was measured colorimetrically based upon the release of 3-cresol-sulfonphthalein from 3-cresol-sulfonphthaleinyl-N-acetyl-\(\beta\)-D-glucosaminidase at 600 nm, as an end-point measurement (Boehringer Mannheim, Germany). The within- and between-assay coefficient of variation (CV) was 2.8% and 3.0%, respectively. U-\(\beta_2\) was determined by a commercial radioimmunoassay kit (Pharmacia & Upjohn, Sweden), the within- and between-assay coefficient of variation being 3.4% and 6.0%, respectively. Alkaline phosphatase in urine (U-ALP) was measured colorimetrically at 405 nm and a pH of 9.8 by a kinetic method as p-nitrophenol liberated from p-nitrophenyl phosphate (Boehringer Mannheim, Germany). The within- and between-assay coefficient of variation was 1.2% and 2.0%, respectively. U-AAP (DL 0.5 U/l) was measured colorimetrically at 405 nm and a pH of 7.8 as an end-point analysis, based on the release of alanine-4-nitroanilide from alanine-4-nitroanilide-hydrochloride. The within- and between-assay coefficient of variation was 9.0% and 9.1%, respectively. U-Alb (DL 0.02 mg/l) was determined by an immunoturbidimetric method using a commercial kit as an end-point measurement at 340 nm (Unimate 3 alb, Roche Diagnostic System, Switzerland). The within- and between-assay coefficient of variation was 4.0% and 5.8%, respectively. Glycosaminoglycans in urine (U-GAG) was measured after precipitation with Alcian blue (30). The samples were mixed with a buffered solution of Alcian blue containing magnesium chloride and left overnight at room temperature. The complex formed was separated by centrifugation and dissociated in a solution of 7.5% sodium lauryl sulfate. The optical density was measured spectrophotometrically at 620 nm (within-assay CV

| B-Se (\(\mu\text{mol/l}\)) | U-Se (\(\text{nmol/mmol Cr}\)) | B-Cd (\(\text{nmol/l}\)) | U-Cd\textsuperscript{4} (\(\text{nmol/mmol Cr}\)) | Cum U-Hg (\(\text{nmol/mmol Cr}\)) | Cum U-Hg/year (\(\text{nmol/mmol Cr}/\text{year}\)) | Years exposed |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Mean Range | Mean Range | Mean Range | Mean Range | Mean Range | Mean Range | Mean Range |
| 1.48 1.06—2.52 | 31.3 13.9—63.3 | 5.8 0.5—19.7 | 0.70 0.15—1.56 | 123.2 14.5—409.6 | 9.9 4.0—19.6 | 13.3 2.8—34.5 |
| 1.47 0.81—2.23 | 30.9 12.7—77.2 | 5.4 0.5—20.0 | 0.61 0.09—2.28 | ... ... | ... ... | ... ... |

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blood (0.5 ml) was added to 1.5 ml of 95% sulfuric acid. U-Cd and U-Se, respectively, until the analysis.

The urine and whole blood samples were stored in NUNC® 1.8-ml tubes. ANA, anti-GBM, anti-MPO, and anti-PR3 were determined by Distart™ ELISA kits (Shield, Scotland), according to the manufacturer's instructions. Immunoglobulin E (IgE) was assayed in a routine manner by the UniCAP™ system (Pharmacia & Upjohn, Sweden).

**Immunologic assays in serum**

After centrifugation (1500 rpm for 10 minutes) serum was stored in NUNC® 1.8-ml cryo tubes. ANA, anti-GBM, anti-MPO, and anti-PR3 were determined by Distart™ ELISA kits (Shield, Scotland), according to the manufacturer's instructions. Immunoglobulin E (IgE) was assayed in a routine manner by the UniCAP™ system (Pharmacia & Upjohn, Sweden).

**Measurements of trace elements**

The urine and whole blood samples were stored in NUNC® (25 ml) containers and 10-ml Venoject® tubes, respectively, until the analysis.

**Urinary mercury and total mercury in whole blood.** Direct cold-vapor atomic absorption spectrometry was used to measure U-Hg (32). Total mercury in whole blood (B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$) was measured by the same instrumentation after nitric acid-hydrogen peroxide digestion (2 ml of whole blood, 4 ml of nitric acid, 0.5 ml of hydrogen peroxide) in Teflon autoclaves.

**Inorganic mercury in whole blood.** The method for measuring B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ has been described earlier (33). Whole blood (0.5 ml) was added to 1.5 ml of 95% sulfuric acid in glass tubes and heated for 16 hours at 65°C immediately after the mixing. It was then cooled to room temperature before dilution. Mercury was measured using the same instrumentation as for B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ and U-Hg.

**Cadmium and selenium in whole blood and urine.** For the measurement of cadmium and selenium in whole blood (B-Cd and B-Se, respectively) 2.5 ml of ultrapure 65% nitric acid was added to 2 ml of whole blood in a polypropylene digestion tube. After degasification at room temperature overnight, the tube was heated at 95°C for 1 hour, cooled to room temperature, and diluted (13.7 ml). Cadmium and selenium in urine (U-Cd and U-Se) were measured after dilution to 1:1 with 0.5% nitric acid. All the elements were measured by electrothermal atomic absorption spectrometry using a Perkin-Elmer Zeeman 5100 PC/HGA 600 system calibrated with whole-blood and urine-matched standard solutions.

**Accuracy and precision of the trace element measurements**

Accuracy and precision were assessed using Seronorm human whole blood (batches 107, 108 and 109) and urine (batch 4043125) reference materials (Sero Ltd, Asker, Norway). The day-to-day variations of U-Hg (243 nmol/l), B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ (40 nmol/l), and B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$ (39 nmol/l) were typically 1.2%, 5%, and 8%, respectively. The results agreed well with the recommended values: U-Hg: 234 (SD 3) nmol/l (N=22) measured, 239 nmol/l recommended; B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ (3 levels): 14 nmol/l (SD 1) (N=9), 40 (SD 2) nmol/l (N=7) and 75 (SD 3) nmol/l (N=7) measured, 15 nmol/l, 40 nmol/l and 70 nmol/l, respectively, recommended. As no reference material was available for B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$, batch 108 was used for quality assurance [B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$ 39 (SD 3) nmol/l measured (N=12)]. No information on the content of inorganic mercury is given for this product. In the production of this material, a whole blood pool (identical to batch 107) was spiked with 25 nmol/l of bivalent mercury (batch 108). Measurement of the pool by the present method indicated that 11 nmol/l out of the total mercury content of 15 nmol/l was present as inorganic mercury. The estimated concentration of Hg$_{\text{total}}$ in batch 108 was thus 36 nmol/l (25 + 11). The detection limits (3 x standard deviation of the blank) were as follows: U-Hg: 2 nmol/l; B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$: 2 nmol/l; B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$: 5 nmol/l. B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ below the detection limit was set at 2.5 nmol/l for the data presentation. The average concentrations found for B-Cd (batch 107) and U-Cd (batch 101021) agreed with the recommended

| Group | U-Alb (µg/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-γG (µg/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-ALP (U/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-AAP (U/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-NAG (µg/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-GAG (µg/µmol Cr)$^b$ | U-Kal (U/µmol Cr) |
|-------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Mean  | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range | Mean SD Range |
| Exposed | 0.7 0.8 0.2—5.2 | 10.7 9.5 3.1—59.0 | 0.2 0.10 0.05—0.53 | 0.49 0.48 0—2.76 | 0.16 0.09 0.05—0.44 | 1.9 0.6 0.9—3.7 | 1.7 1.5 0—6.9 |
| Ref. | 0.8 1.4 0.2—9.1 | 8.5 4.4 2.5—23.9 | 0.23 0.18 0.06—1.12 | 0.44 0.28 0—1.53 | 0.14 0.10 0.05—0.69 | 1.9 0.8 1.1—5.4 | 1.7 1.9 0—6.6 |
| P-value | 0.42 0.22 0.80 | 0.77 0.02 0.82 | 0.92 |

*Forty-six subjects in each group for the serum measurements (except 47 referents for creatinine and β2-microglobulin and 45 exposed subjects for anti-GBM). Statistical comparisons performed on log-transformed variables.*

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**Table 2. Renal and Immunologic markers for 47 male chloralkali workers currently exposed to mercury vapors and 47 male age-matched controls, a**

U-Hg: 2 nmol/l; B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$: 2 nmol/l; B-Hg$_{\text{total}}$: 5 nmol/l. B-Hg$_{\text{inorg}}$ below the detection limit was set at 2.5 nmol/l for the data presentation. The average concentrations found for B-Cd (batch 107) and U-Cd (batch 101021) agreed with the recommended
the

9.73 0.70 0.90 0.1 8 0.44 0.26 0.69

84.4 11.6 66.0-132.0 1424 237 985-1915 1.17 0.16 0.92-1.68 2.20 1.23 0.65-9.21 0.53 0.13 0.33-0.93 1.00 0.51 0.89-4.37 75.0 139.2 1.0-661.0

Mean SD Range Mean SD Range Mean SD Range Mean SD Range Mean SD Range Mean SD Range Mean SD Range

Creatinine

β2-microglobulin

Anti-GBM

Anti-MPO

ANA

Anti-PR3

Ug E

(μmol/l)

(μg/l)

(U/ml)

(U/ml)

(OD ratio)

(U/ml)

(μ/ml)

85.1 8.3 68.0-106.0 1403 299 950-2575 1.16 0.15 0.95-1.48 1.90 0.51 1.39-3.56 0.56 0.18 0.73 0.70 0.90 0.18 0.44 0.26 0.69

Table 3. Results from the stepwise multiple linear regression analysis for all the subjects. The exposure-related independent variables were entered separately in addition to age, smoking habits (grams/week), alcohol consumption (liters/year), selenium in urine, and selenium in whole blood. (U-NAG = N-acetyl-b-D-glucosaminidase in urine, B-Se = selenium in whole blood, U-Hg = mercury in urine, Cum U-Hg = cumulative index of exposure in urine, anti-MPO = autoantibodies to myeloperoxidase in serum, anti-PR3 = autoantibodies to proteinase 3 in serum, Cum U-Hg/year = exposure intensity).

| Dependent variable | Intercept | Predictor variables | R |
|--------------------|-----------|---------------------|---|
| U-NAG (log)        | = -0.71*** | -0.30*** B-Se        | +0.006** Age +0.01* U-Hg | 0.48*** |
| U-NAG (log)        | = -0.77*** | -0.29** B-Se         | +0.007** Age +0.01* Cum U-Hg/year | 0.51*** |
| Anti-MPO (log)     | = 0.24***  | +0.01** U-Hg         |                   | 0.32** |
| Anti-MPO (log)     | = 0.27***  | +0.01* Cum U-Hg/year | -0.0006* Smoking   | 0.38** |
| Anti-MPO (log)     | = 0.25***  | +0.001** Cum U-Hg    |                   | 0.39*** |
| Anti-PR3 (log)     | = 0.05***  | +0.007** U-Hg        |                   | 0.33** |
| Anti-PR3 (log)     | = 0.05***  | +0.004 Cum U-Hg/year |                   | 0.32** |
| Anti-PR3 (log)     | = 0.05***  | +0.0004 Cum U-Hg     |                   | 0.49*** |

*** P<0.001, ** P<0.01, * P<0.05.

Table 2 shows the concentrations of the renal and immunologic markers for all the exposed subjects and ref-erents. The U-NAG level was statistically significantly higher and the anti-MPO was nonsignificantly higher in the exposed group when it was compared with the refer-ence group.

The U-NAG concentration was positively associated with U-Hg, Cum U-Hg/year, and age in the regression analysis (table 3). B-Se was negatively associated with U-NAG, a finding suggesting that higher B-Se was as-

Statistics

The mean concentrations of the urinary markers of renal toxicity of the 2 consecutive days are presented. Several of the measured variables had skewed distributions. They were log-transformed if the skewness exceeded 2.0 or if the distributions to be compared had different variances (Levene's test). An analysis of variance was used for the group comparisons. If more than 2 groups were compared, the least square difference was calculated post hoc to separate the groups that differed. General factorial analysis was used to control for the covariates. Associations between effect variables, exposure measures, and potential confounders [age, smoking habits (grams/week), alcohol consumption (liters/year), B-Se, and U-Se] were assessed with a multiple linear regression analysis (backward procedure). The exposure measures (current B-Hg, current U-Hg, Cum U-Hg, and Cum U-Hg/year) were entered separately into the models to avoid potential problems of collinearity. The level of statistical significance was set at P<0.05 (2-tailed). The statistical package SPSS®, version 8.0, was used.

Results

values as follows: B-Cd: 6.1 (SD 0.6) nmol/l (N=5) measured and 6 nmol/l recommended; U-Cd: 3.0 (SD 0.4) nmol/l (N=6) measured and 3.1 nmol/l recommended. The day-to-day variation was 10% and 13%, respectively. The B-Se concentration measured in batch 108 was 1.05 (SD 0.06) μmol/l (N=5) and that recommended was 1.04 μmol/l. The corresponding U-Se concentration for batch 4043125 was 21.6 (SD 3.0) μg/l (N=9) measured with no recommended value available from the producer.
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Table 4. Ratio between the geometric means and 95% confidence intervals for chloralkali workers exposed to mercury vapors and their age-matched referents for the activities of N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase in urine (U-NAG) (log) and autoantibodies to myeloperoxidase in serum (anti-MPO) (log) stratified according to the level of exposure as determined by current mercury in urine (U-Hg), intensity of exposure (Cum U-Hg/year) and cumulative index of exposure in urine (Cum U-Hg).

|                  | Low exposure (N=15) | Medium exposure (N=16) | High exposure (N=16) |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
|                  | Ratio | 95% CI       | Ratio | 95% CI       | Ratio | 95% CI       |
| U-Hg (nmol/mmol Cr) |       |              |       |              |       |              |
| U-NAG            | 1.06  | 0.72—1.58    | 1.39  | 1.04—1.86    | 1.41  | 1.02—1.94    |
| Anti-MPO         | 0.91  | 0.72—1.15    | 1.0   | 0.78—1.26    | 1.44  | 1.14—1.82    |
| Cum U-Hg/year (nmol/mmol Cr/year) |       |              |       |              |       |              |
| U-NAG            | 0.96  | 0.64—1.46    | 1.32  | 0.98—1.75    | 1.59  | 1.14—2.20    |
| Anti-MPO         | 0.94  | 0.73—1.20    | 1.11  | 0.90—1.38    | 1.46  | 1.12—1.89    |
| Cum U-Hg (nmol/mmol Cr) |       |              |       |              |       |              |
| U-NAG            | 1.22  | 0.88—1.72    | 1.10  | 0.73—1.64    | 1.51  | 1.12—2.04    |
| Anti-MPO         | 0.87  | 0.68—1.13    | 1.11  | 0.90—1.36    | 1.43  | 1.12—1.83    |

For low exposure mean 2.7, range 1.1—3.7; for medium exposure mean 4.6, range 3.8—5.6; and for high exposure mean 10.0 and range 5.8—16.8.

Figure 1. The activity of N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase in the urine (U-NAG), expressed as the mean and 95% confidence interval, of chloralkali workers exposed to mercury vapor and referents stratified according to selenium in whole blood (B-Se) (Cr = creatinine, low B-Se <1.38 μmol/L, N=31; medium B-Se = 1.38—1.56 μmol/L, N=31; high B-Se >1.56 μmol/L, N=30). Arrows above the bars indicate a P-value of <0.05 when the exposed workers with medium B-Se were used as referents. Arrows below the bars indicate a P-value of <0.05 when workers with high B-Se were used as reference.

Figure 2. Relation between N-acetyl-β-D-glucosaminidase in urine (U-NAG) and the intensity of exposure to mercury vapor for 15 chloralkali workers with low selenium levels in their blood (Spearman’s r = 0.55, P = 0.05). (Cr = creatinine)

Associated with lower U-NAG. U-Cd did not contribute to the models when added as a predictor. Both anti-MPO and anti-PR3 were positively associated with U-Hg, Cum U-Hg/year, and Cum U-Hg. The exposure measures were not associated with any of the other markers.

The exposed workers were stratified into 3 equally large groups according to the different exposure measures and compared with their corresponding age-matched referents (table 4). With the aid of the results from the regression analysis, U-NAG was adjusted for B-Se and age, and anti-MPO was adjusted for smoking habits. The difference is expressed as a ratio and 95% confidence interval (95% CI), because the variables were log-transformed (34). Both U-NAG and anti-MPO were higher in the highest exposure subgroups. The concentrations were similar for the workers with low levels of exposure and their referents. U-NAG was also higher in the exposed subjects with medium current U-Hg levels. No significant differences between the groups emerged for anti-PR3.

U-NAG was associated with B-Se in the regression analysis, and this finding suggests that U-NAG activity decreases as the B-Se increases. Figure 1 presents U-NAG (adjusted for age) for the subjects stratified into 3 equally large groups according to their current B-Se level ("high", "medium", and "low") and, further, according to their exposure status. The lowest U-NAG value was measured for the group of referents in the high B-Se group, whose B-Se level differed statistically significantly from those of all the other groups, except the referents with a medium B-Se level. The highest U-NAG was found for the exposed subjects with a low B-Se level. These subjects differed from the exposed subjects with high (P<0.022) and medium (P=0.056) B-Se and from the referents with low (P=0.11), medium (P=0.003) or high (P<0.001) B-Se. An association between U-NAG, age (P=0.03), and B-Se (P=0.02) was also found for the reference group [U-NAG (log) = 0.77 + 0.006 age - 0.27 B-Se]. An association was found between Cum U-Hg/year and U-NAG (Spearman’s r=0.55, P=0.03) for the exposed subjects with low B-Se (figure 2), but not...
for the exposed subjects with high or medium B-Se. None of the other exposure measures or age was statistically significantly associated with U-NAG in this subgroup (not shown).

High correlations were found between U-Alb and U-NAG (Spearman’s r=0.54, P<0.001) and between anti-MPO and anti-PR3 (Spearman’s r=0.60, P<0.001), respectively, for the exposed workers. Anti-MPO and anti-PR3 were not significantly associated with U-NAG or U-Alb.

Discussion

The main finding in this study was that the exposed workers had higher U-NAG levels than the referents. An increased U-NAG level was mainly detected in the exposed subjects with “high” current U-Hg or “high” past exposure. An association between U-NAG and exposure to mercury vapor has been shown previously (3—7). The subjects in this study, however, were exposed to lower current levels of mercury vapor, as indicated by their U-Hg concentration. Their previous exposure was also low, as their mean U-Hg of 9.0 nmol/mmol Cr during their 13.3 years of exposure indicates. Hence this study may suggest that U-NAG as a marker of potential kidney proximal tubular cell toxicity is increased at lower mercury exposure (as assessed by current U-Hg) than previously recognized.

U-NAG in first voided morning urine from 2 consecutive days was measured because of the considerable day-to-day variation in U-NAG excretion. The Spearman’s r between day 1 and day 2 was 0.48 (P<0.001), and using the mean activity from 2 consecutive days reduced the coefficients of variation from 69% and 71% to 60% and thereby increased the statistical power. U-NAG is unstable when stored at −20°C. After 2 weeks or 2 months of storage, the measured activities were reported to decrease by 13% and 25.6%, respectively (29). All the urine samples were therefore measured 2 months after the sampling to avoid biased results. Generally, exposed subjects are sampled before the referents in cross-sectional studies of exposure. The long-term consequences are not well known, but one epidemiologic study on formerly exposed chloralkali workers suggests that an increased U-NAG level may be more vulnerable to the effects of exposure to mercury vapor with respect to U-NAG.

The increased activity of U-NAG was slight, and above the laboratory reference (0.026—0.284 U/mmol Cr in samples frozen at −20°C for 2 months) in 3 referents and 6 exposed workers. The sensitive indicator of brush border toxicity (U-AAP) was not increased, and this finding could indicate the origin of the changes. The long-term consequences are not well known, but one epidemiologic study on formerly exposed chloralkali workers suggests that an increased U-NAG level may be reversible (38). Our study did not reveal an increased concentration of U-Alb, and this result is in accordance with the findings of several other epidemiologic studies (3—7, 9—11).

Anti-MPO was significantly higher in the highest exposed workers than in their age-matched referents. Furthermore, anti-PR3 was associated with several measures of exposure. The current smokers’ concentrations of anti-MPO were similar to those of the current nonsmokers (P=0.30). Only 1 exposed worker had anti-MPO and
anti-PR3 levels above the cutoff level (both weakly positive). Proteinase 3 of neutrophil granulocytes and anti-PR3 is strongly associated with Wegener's granulomatosis, a severe necrotizing vasculitis (39). Myeloid peroxidase is also a product of neutrophil granulocytes (39), and anti-MPO is clinically associated with autoimmune vasculitis, mainly in the kidneys. The high correlation (Spearman’s r = 0.60, P<0.001) between these 2 autoantibodies in the exposed group could be an indication of the common origin in the neutrophil granulocytes of the 2 substances. We are not familiar with other studies of these markers in humans exposed to mercury vapor. However, a 4-fold increase in the activity of myeloperoxidase was found in isolated glomeruli of rats exposed to mercuric chloride when they were compared with control rats (40). When interpreting our results in this context, one could speculate that the exposed workers may have acquired a tendency toward vasculitis, perhaps in the renal vasculature. Both thickening of the wall and vasoconstriction (36) of renal blood vessels have been reported for rats exposed to mercuric chloride. It has been suggested that mesangial hyperplasia, compressing the capillary tuft, may result in ischemia (40). Anti-GBM, however, reacting with glomerular antigens on collagen type IV, was not increased, and this finding is in accordance with the results of previous studies (3, 6, 7, 15-17). No association was found between anti-MPO or anti-PR3 and U-Alb or U-NAG, respectively. The clinical importance of the exposure-associated increased activity of the immunologic markers, if any, remains to be elucidated.

The exposed subjects and the referents were similar with respect to several background variables (eg, age and current alcohol consumption). However, smoking was more prevalent in the exposed group, but without being associated with U-NAG. All the examined workers were also employees at the same industrial complex, the referents working only a few hundred yards away from the exposed workers. The effects reported in this study would hardly be noticed by the exposed subjects, and therefore the potential general disadvantage of cross-sectional studies (ie, selection of subjects who become ill due to exposure out of the work force) was minimized. The high participation rates further indicate that selection bias may have been of little importance.

In conclusion, this study suggests that even low, but long-term, exposure to mercury vapor can induce untoward effects in the kidney proximal tubule cells, as assessed by the activity of U-NAG. It appears that selenium, assessed by B-Se, may modify the increase. Furthermore, the study showed increased levels of anti-MPO and possibly also anti-PR3. These autoantibodies against constituents of neutrophil granulocytes could possibly be indicators of an inflammatory process in vascular structures, perhaps in the kidney.

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