“FISHed” out the diagnosis: A case of DiGeorge syndrome

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ABSTRACT

Our patient presented with congenital heart disease (CHD: Tetralogy of Fallot), hypocalcemia, hypoparathyroidism, and facial dysmorphisms. Suspecting DiGeorge syndrome (DGS), a fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) analysis for 22q11.2 deletion was made. The child had a hemizygous deletion in the 22q11.2 region, diagnostic of DGS. Unfortunately, the patient succumbed to the heart disease. DGS is the most common microdeletion syndrome, and probably underrecognized due to the varied manifestations. This case stresses the importance of a detailed physical examination and a high index of suspicion for diagnosing this genetic condition. Timely diagnosis can help manage and monitor these patients better and also offer prenatal diagnosis in the next pregnancy.

Q1: Name some hereditary and nonhereditary conditions in which the facial dysmorphisms associated with the underlying heart disease can give a clue to the etiology of the condition.

Ans.: Table 2 elaborates the conditions in which facial dysmorphisms associated with underlying heart disease can give a clue to the etiology of the condition.1,2
Table 1: Past clinical course of the patient

| Age of the child | Important clinical details | Corresponding relevant investigations |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Day 3            | Indirect hyperbilirubinemia – Phototherapy for 3 days | D3: Total bilirubin 290 µmol/L (Direct 32.49 µmol/L)  
D4: Total bilirubin 212.04 µmol/L (Direct 29.07 µmol/L)  
D5: Total bilirubin 160.74 µmol/L (Direct 17.1 µmol/L)  
HGT=1.11 mmol/L  
Serum calcium  
PCV high (partial exchange on the same day)  
CBC: TLC – 13.4×10^9/L (DLC – polymorphs 72%, lymphocytes 28%, ANC 9.64×10^9/L, ALC 3.75×10^9/L)  
Blood culture: Sterile |
| Day 4            | 1 episode of tonic–clonic seizure lasting for 5 min | |
| Day 6            | In view of perioral cyanosis, 2D echo done | 2D echo TOF with PS and a large subaortic VSD  
Discharged from NICU on day 8 of life. Advised oral calcium supplementation (100 mg per kg per day) and oral propranolol (1 mg per kg per day) (On discharge serum calcium 2.275 mmol/L) |
| 5 months         | Underwent a right ventricular outflow tract transannular patch repair, leaving the VSD unreppaired | Preoperative serum calcium 1.775 mmol/L  
Serum calcium corrected to 2.175 mmol/L over 10 days  
Serum magnesium normal  
TLC – 14.3×10^9/L (DLC – polymorphs 18%, lymphocytes 67%. ANC 2.58×10^9/L, ALC 9.60×10^9/L) |
| 6 months         | In spite of compliance with oral calcium, repeat two episodes of hypocalcemic convulsion necessitating IV calcium* | Serum calcium 1.05 mmol/L  
Vitamin D normal  
CRP 277 mg/L  
CBC 17.7×10^9/L (DLC – polymorphs 76%, lymphocytes 20%. ANC 13.45×10^9/L, ALC 3.54×10^9/L) |
| 6.5 months       | In spite of compliance with oral calcium, repeat two episodes of hypocalcemic convulsions (serum calcium 1 mmol/L), necessitating IV calcium* | Serum calcium 1 mmol/L  
Parathyroid hormone 0.80 pmol/L; (normal 1.59-6.89pmol/L)  
T3, T4, TSH — normal  
TLC 13×10^9/L (DLC – polymorphs 70%, lymphocytes 30%, ANC 9.1×10^9/L, ALC 3.9×10^9/L)  
Blood culture — sterile |

Immunized appropriately for age

HGT = Hemoglucotest; PCV = Packed cell volume; CBC = Complete blood count; TLC = Total leucocyte counts; DLC = Differential leucocyte count; ANC = Absolute neutrophil count; ALC = Absolute lymphocyte count; CRP = C-reactive protein; TOF = Tetralogy of Fallot; PS = Pulmonary stenosis; VSD = Ventricular septal defect; *Dose of the IV calcium 2cc/kg/dose, tds for 3 days

Q2: What is DiGeorge syndrome?

Ans.: DGS is a 22q11.2 microdeletion syndrome, associated with the classic triad of conotruncal cardiac anomalies, hypoplastic thymus (resulting in immunodeficiencies), and hypoplasia of the parathyroid glands (resulting in hypoparathyroidism and hypocalcemia). The other synonyms for DGS are 22q11.2 deletion syndrome (preferred terminology), velocardiofacial syndrome, conotruncal anomaly face syndrome, Sedlackova syndrome, and Cayler cardiofacial syndrome. In less than 1% of all patients with DGS, there is complete athymia, resulting in severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID). This is called “complete DGS;” the remaining 99% are “partial” DGS, having some thymic function preserved. In our patient, repeated blood investigations failed to show lymphopenia [Table 1]. Detailed immunological tests could not be carried out in our patient. With a worldwide prevalence of between 1/2000 and 1/4000 live births, DGS is the most common microdeletion syndrome. The actual prevalence may be higher due to high clinical expressivity, accounting for underrecognition.
Mild-to-moderate microcephaly, short palpebral fissures, maxillary VSD, ASD, PDA, TOF

Associated facial dysmorphisms
Conotruncal malformations (TOF, round face, metopic ridging, hypertelorism, epicanthal folds, downslanting palpebral fissures, strabismus, downturned corners of mouth, short philtrum, micrognathia, low-set poorly formed ears, facial asymmetry

Round face, metopic ridging, hypertelorism, epicanthal folds, downslanting palpebral fissures, strabismus, downturned corners of mouth, short philtrum, micrognathia, low-set poorly formed ears, facial asymmetry

AR, MR, CAD

Supravalvular AS, PA stenosis

Hypocalcemia, hypoparathyroidism,
Hearing loss, growth retardation,
Interrupted aortic arch, truncus arteriosus,
Pre- and postaxial polydactyly,
Macrocephaly, frontal prominence, coarse facies with full lips, flared nostrils, low nasal bridge, tendency toward hypertelorism, inner epicardial folds, with or without corneal clouding, hypertrophied alveolar ridge, and gums with small misaligned teeth, enlarged tongue

Short palpebral fissures, depressed nasal bridge, epicanthal folds, asymmetric crying facies

Prominent nose with squared nasal root and narrow alar base, narrow palpebral fissures, hypertelorism, hooded eyelids, deficient malar area, long nose, retrognathia, microcephaly, prominent ears, asymmetric crying facies

Microcephaly, microphthalmia

Q3: How is DiGeorge syndrome caused?

Ans.: DGS is caused due to the deletion of the genes in the DiGeorge chromosomal region (DGCR) on chromosome 22q11.2, secondary to a nonallelic meiotic recombination during spermatogenesis or oogenesis. A great percentage (93%) of the probands have a de novo deletion of 22q11.2, while some (7%) inherit the 22q11.2 deletion from a parent in an autosomal dominant fashion. Rarely, less than 1% of the individuals with DGS have chromosomal rearrangements, such as a translocation between chromosome 22 and another autosome, involving 22q11.2.

Q4: What are the clinical features of DiGeorge syndrome?

Ans.: The clinical features of DGS [Table 3], are exceedingly variable, with over 190 features described in the literature, involving almost every organ system — thus underlining the need for sensitization among physicians and surgeons from all specialties. Of note, no phenotype occurs in 100% of the patients, as the penetrance of each clinical feature is diverse. Thus, one should be wary of excluding differential of DGS solely on the basis of absence of a particular feature. The presence of congenital heart disease (CHD; especially conotruncal anomalies), neonatal hypocalcemia (with hypoparathyroidism), and palatal defects can usually be picked up in the neonatal period, and should serve as red flags for early diagnosis. Authorities in this subject recommend that, given the high frequency of DGS among individuals with conotruncal anomalies,
newborns with these heart anomalies should be routinely screened with fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) for 22q11.2 deletion, once other causes (Down syndrome, trisomy 13) have been ruled out. Other pointers for this condition, such as dysmorphisms, intellectual disability, and psychiatric disorders may appear only years later, often delaying the diagnosis. An emerging area of great interest is the high predilection of psychiatric disorders (including schizophrenia and bipolar disorders) in adolescents and adults with DGS (25 times higher than the general population). Other than serving as a reminder to psychiatrists, this also underlines that pediatricians and geneticists dealing with DGS/suspected DGS should diligently excavate the psychiatric history of the pedigree in detail, along with the other relevant particulars.

Case details (continued): In view of suspected DGS, FISH was performed using TUPLE1 probes on 200 interphase nuclei and 7 metaphases of the cultured blood. All the cells analyzed showed a heterozygous deletion in the 22q11.2 region [Figures 2a and b]. This clinched the diagnosis of DGS in our patient.

Q5: What is the diagnostic modality for DiGeorge syndrome?

Ans.: The most regularly and widely used diagnostic test for detecting the 22q11.2 deletion is FISH using probes for the commonly deleted region. It can pick up around 95% of all deletions causing DGS. However, around 5% of the cases may require more sophisticated and costlier methods such as multiplex ligation-dependent probe amplification (MLPA) and array comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH) to detect the underlying genetic aberration. The presence of a CHD in association with one or more of the following should serve as an important red flag for considering an underlying chromosomal imbalance as the possible genetic etiology: growth failure, intellectual disability, other malformations affecting a second organ, multiple anomalies, and dysmorphic features. In such cases, when the conventional karyotype fails to pick up the underlying genetic condition, an aCGH can lead to increased detection of the underlying causal chromosomal imbalance. The major advantage of this aCGH technique is its increased resolution, which surpasses that of conventional karyotyping by at least fivefold. In an excellent study by Blecak et al., 150 children with an underlying CHD and one or more of the red flags mentioned above were subjected to aCGH, after a genetic diagnosis could not be reached despite a conventional karyotype and ruling out well-defined genetic disorders. Of these 150 children, 24 (17.3%) were detected as having an underlying copy number variation (CNV), that is, a deletion or duplication, as responsible for their syndromic CHD, as detected by aCGH. Some examples of the CNVs detected in this study include 1p36 deletion, 1q21.1 duplication, 1q42 deletion, 1q43 deletion, and 16p13.3 duplication. aCGH can also diagnose, among many other CNV conditions, Williams syndrome and some cases of CHARGE syndrome.

Case details (continued): On admission in our center, the child had leukocytosis (total leukocyte count = 32 × 10⁹/L) and radiological evidence of bronchopneumonia. His blood cultures were sterile during this stay. He was administered intravenous antibiotics for 11 days. However, the child’s condition worsened on day 9, due to congestive cardiac failure precipitated by the infection. In spite of ionotropic support and mechanical ventilation, the child could not be revived and expired on day 11 of hospital stay.

Q6: Does the timely diagnosis of DGS change the management in these patients?

Ans.: Timely diagnosis of this condition can alert the treating physician about the possibility of the associated comorbidities known to occur with this disease. This in turn can help to develop a surveillance plan for these patients. Acute management in neonates and during infancy is mainly focused on the evaluation and treatment of hypocalcemia and the underlying CHD as in our case. Proactive prevention of the secondary complications and a watchful “system-wise” surveillance plan can go a long way in ensuring a healthy life for most of these individuals [Table 4]. Thymic transplantation in those with “complete” DGS, especially if done early, may be beneficial. However, the lack of centers performing thymic transplantation in India and the immunosuppression following the transplant make that a difficult option.

Case details (continued): The parents were offered genetic counseling, the main focus being on the future risk of recurrence, as our patient was the first issue.

Q7: What genetic counseling was offered to the parents?

Ans.: Following the detection of 22q11.2 deletion in the proband, it is of vital importance to screen both the
parents for the same (using FISH or MLPA) in order to ascertain the origin of the deletion, sporadic or inherited.\(^{[10]}\) This information can impact the risk of recurrence and thus the genetic counseling offered.\(^{[10]}\) If either parent is detected with the deletion, then the risk of recurrence in the next pregnancy is 50% irrespective of the sex of the child (autosomal dominant inheritance).\(^{[13,20]}\) However, if the parents of an individual with 22q11.2DS have normal studies, the risk of recurrence in the subsequent pregnancy is low, though greater than that of the general population.\(^{[13,20]}\) This is due to the possibility of germ line or low-level somatic mosaicism in the parents.\(^{[13,20]}\) McDonald-McGinn et al. report retrospectively detecting 30 relatives of probands having a deletion in the 22q11.2 region, following a diagnosis in the proband. Of note, only 32% of the adults and 55% of the children in this case series ever had any major medical problems warranting care.\(^{[10]}\) Thus, the absence of obvious clinical features should not be a reason to exclude the screening for the 22q11.2 deletion in the parents, if their child has been proven to carry the same. Unfortunately, in our case the parents were unwilling to investigate themselves further. In the scenario of one child having DGS, prenatal testing by FISH or MLPA can be offered in the next pregnancy, using fetal cells obtained by chorionic villus sampling (10-13 weeks of gestation) or amniotic fluid analysis (15-18 weeks of gestation).\(^{[19]}\) In pregnancies without any family history of the disorder, the sonographic markers that should prompt one to request for prenatal diagnosis are: CHD (especially conotruncal anomalies) and/or cleft lip and/or cleft palate, congenital diaphragmatic hernia, umbilical or inguinal hernia, tracheoesophageal fistula/esophageal atresia/laryngeal atresia, polydactyly, craniosynostosis, polycytemogryia, and renal anomalies.\(^{[13,5]}\)

**Q8:** What is the long-term prognosis in these patients?

**Ans.:** The prognosis for patients with DGS depends mainly on whether the DGS is partial or complete and on the severity of the underlying cardiac defect.\(^{[3,5,18]}\) Most children with complete DGS who do not undergo a thymic transplant usually die in infancy.\(^{[19]}\) In contrast, the overall mortality rate in children with partial DGS is reported to be <10%, most of them due to the underlying heart disease.\(^{[5,21]}\) However, if the child with an underlying heart disease has a successful repair, then the prognosis may be much better, the majority of the immunological problems settling with time.\(^{[3]}\) The endocrinological problems, too, do not tend to be devastating, most of them being treatable.\(^{[3]}\) Learning disabilities, speech issues, and psychiatric manifestations respond well if remedial and supportive therapy is begun early.\(^{[3]}\)

### Conclusion

DGS is the most common microdeletion syndrome, with a notoriety of being clinically varied. A high index of suspicion is necessary to diagnose DGS. Timely diagnosis aids better management, more holistic counseling, and the opportunity for prenatal diagnosis in a subsequent pregnancy.

### Declaration of patient consent

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent forms. In the form the patient(s) has/have given his/her/their consent for his/her/their images and other clinical information to be reported in the journal. The patients understand that their names and initials will not be published and due efforts will be made to conceal their identity, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

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**Table 4: Prevention of secondary complications and the system-wise surveillance in patients with DiGeorge syndrome**

| Prevention of secondary complications | Surveillance parameters |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Avoid live vaccines in patients with lymphocyte abnormalities, especially those with severe immunodeficiencies. Reevaluation of immune status before every schedule of live vaccines. Practically, in those with mild–moderate immunodeficiencies, live vaccines are frequently given and generally well tolerated. | Serum and ionized calcium |
| Irradiated blood products awaiting normalization of the immune system. Pre- and postoperative — serum calcium | Infant — every 3-6 months |
| Preoperative assessment — platelet number and function, cervical spine abnormalities (for anesthesia/intubation) | Childhood — every 5 years |
| For surgical operations involving the pharynx — preoperative assessment of the carotid arteries. Pre- and postoperative — sleep studies | Adolescence and adulthood — every 2 years |
| Routine psychological evaluation | TFT, CBC — annually |
| Routine evaluation of developmental milestones, regular dental examinations (high risk of caries), and spine examination | Immune system — evaluation at birth, and at 9-12 months. Reevaluation prior to any live vaccine |
| Routine ophthalmological assessment at 1-5 years | Speech assessment to rule out velopharyngeal incompetency |
| | Auditory assessment — infancy and preschool |
| | Ophthalmological assessment at 1-5 years |

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Dr. Milind Tullu works as the Associate Editor for the JPGM and Dr. Mukesh Agrawal is an Editorial Board Member for JPGM.

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