Sporotrichosis: The case series in Thailand and literature review in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Human Sporotrichosis is an infection caused by dimorphic fungus, Sporothrix schenckii complex, via direct inoculation. We are herein report proven 2 cases of sporotrichosis along with a literature review about human sporotrichosis in the southeast Asian region. The first case was a 76-year-old female with a non-progressive erythematous plaque at the right ankle. The second case was a 36-year-old female with sporotrichoid lesion for six weeks. Both were treated with itraconazole with an excellent outcome.

1. Introduction

Sporothrix schenckii is a thermally dimorphic fungus in the division Ascomycota, class Pyrenomycetes, order Ophiostomatales, and family Ophiostomataceae. The fungus is distributed over the tropical and subtropical areas with high humidity and mildly high temperatures, and usually resides in abiotic substrates including soil, plants, and organic matter. It was first isolated in 1896 from a 36-year-old male patient who presented with subcutaneous abscesses at right hand and arm by a medical student, Benjamin Schenck [1]. Regarding clinical manifestations, there are 4 forms of sporotrichosis including 1) cutaneous infection, 2) lymphocutaneous infection, 3) extracutaneous and disseminated infections, and 4) mucosal infection [2]. Regarding cutaneous sporotrichosis, there are three distinct clinical types, including fixed cutaneous, lymphocutaneous, and disseminated cutaneous types.

To date, only 2 cases of human sporotrichosis had been reported since 1990 in Thailand [3,4]. We believe that the infection in our country, which locates in the tropical zone, is underreported probably due to under-recognition and no laboratory availability. In the present study, we report the case series of cutaneous sporotrichosis in Thailand and review the English literature of sporotrichosis in Southeast Asia.

2. Cases

2.1. Case 1

A 36-year-old previously healthy Thai female presented with an unhealed ulcer at the left arm for six weeks. Firstly, she noted a small skin lesion at the left forearm, believing that there was like something pinned her. After that, the lesion had slowly grown bigger. After two weeks of illness, she noted that there was a line of growing skin nodules extending proximally from the primary lesion. During her present illness, there were no fever nor weight loss. She had a healthy cat but claimed that she had not bitten or scratched by the cat before the symptom arose. At day, initial physical examination revealed a shallow ulcer at her forearm with multiple small indurated painless subcutaneous nodules located proximally in the typical sporotrichoid pattern (Fig. 1). Gram stain of skin scraping at the base of the ulcer showed many yeasts (2–4 μm) with elongated cells (cigar bodies) (Fig. 2). A diagnosis of lymphocutaneous sporotrichosis was made, and oral itraconazole solution was initiated at day 0. The pathology of the skin biopsy exhibited necrotizing granulomatous inflammation but without asteroid bodies at day +4. The tissue culture later grew S. schenckii
which was identified by sequencing the internal transcribed sequence (ITS) region of ribosomal RNA as previously described [5], with GenBank BLAST search showing 99.0% identity to *S. schenckii* CBS359.36 ITS region (Accession number NR_147566; 500 base-pair length of analyzed sequence) at day +21. Additionally, the identification of *S. schenckii* was made using matrix-assisted laser desorption ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS). Her skin lesions gradually improved a few weeks after itraconazole treatment and completely resolved at day +90. The patient was followed up until day +360 without recurrence.

### 2.2. Case 2

A 76-year-old Thai female presented with a growing non-tender indurated erythematous plaque on her right ankle for six months without any history of trauma (Fig. 3). After two months of illness, she came to seek treatment. At day 0, skin biopsy was performed and exhibited non-caseous granulomatous inflammation without organisms demonstrated by Gram, acid-fast, and periodic acid Schiff stains. The tissue mycobacterial polymerase chain reaction, as well as fungal and mycobacterial cultures, yielded negative results. She was empirically treated with antituberculous agents (isoniazid, rifampin, ethambutol, and pyrazinamide), but without any clinical improvement after four months of treatment. At day +120, another skin biopsy was performed, and the pathology exhibited pseudoepitheliomatous hyperplasia with dense diffuse mixed polymorphonuclear, mononuclear, and histiocytic infiltration in the dermis with no organisms demonstrated by Gram, acid-fast, and periodic acid Schiff stains. Fortunately, the fungal culture of the tissue grew *S. schenckii* complex at day +141. There was yellow-to-tan creamy yeast (Fig. 4A and B) and mold colonies (Fig. 4C) on blood agar cultures when incubated at 37 °C and 25 °C, respectively. The lactophenol cotton blue stain of the colonies incubated at 25 °C showed branching narrow septate hyphae (1–2 μm in diameter) with slender tapering conidiophores rising at right angles; the apex of conidiophore was swollen and bore small tear-shaped conidia on thread-like denticles, forming rosette-like conidia (Fig. 4D). The species finally turned to be *S. schenckii* which was identified by sequencing the ITS region of ribosomal RNA with GenBank BLAST search showing 99.0% identity to *S. schenckii* CBS359.36 ITS region (Accession number NR_147566; 500 base-pair length of analyzed sequence) at day +162. Additionally, the identification of *S. schenckii* was made using MALDI-TOF MS (Vitek II MS). A diagnosis of fixed-typed sporotrichosis was made, and she was treated with oral itraconazole total three months. At day +260, all of her lesions resolved without recurrence.

For antifungal susceptibility pattern, both clinical isolates were sent to mycology laboratory for antifungal susceptibility testing. Standard powders of itraconazole, voriconazole, caspofungin, and amphotericin B (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) were solubilized in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) or water, according to the manufacturer’s recommendations. 96-well plates with gradient concentrations of each drug in 100 μL RPMI 1640 medium (with glutamine, without bicarbonate sodium, and with phenol red as a pH indicator; Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) were prepared. The range of concentrations tested for the broth microdilution method was 0.0313–16 μg/ml for all drugs. For the broth microdilution method, we performed the test according to CLSI M38 (2017). Briefly, conidial suspensions were adjusted to approximately 10⁶ CFU/ml and 1:50 dilution of the stock solution was made in RPMI 1640 medium to a final concentration of 0.4 × 10⁴ to 5 × 10⁴ CFU/ml. A volume of 100 μL of this final solution was inoculated in each well of a 96-well plate, containing 100 μL of the drug solution. Plates were incubated at 35 °C. Final readings were performed at 48 hours for *Aspergillus flavus* ATCC 204304 as a quality control strain and at around 50 hours for *S. schenckii*. All experiments were performed in duplicates. Results of antifungal susceptibility were shown in Table 1.
3. Discussion

We reported two cases of cutaneous sporotrichosis in Thailand. The first case had lymphocutaneous form, and the second case had a fixed-type cutaneous form. The presumed portal of entry in the present study is a direct inoculation due to prominent skin symptoms and signs. To date, only two cases of human sporotrichosis had been reported since 1990 in Thailand [3,4]. We think there will be underreported due to under-recognition and no widely available laboratory.

Regarding of mode of transmission to humans, there are two categories of sporotrichosis including the sapronosis (the most common category) and zoonosis (mainly feline sporotrichosis). Of sapronotic sporotrichosis, the most common causative agent is *S. schenckii*, which is worldwide distributed. In contrast, zoonotic sporotrichosis, the most common causative agent is *S. brasiliensis*, a feline fungus, which is mostly distributed in South America [6,7]. In the first case of the present study, we previously think that the causative agent should be *S. brasiliensis* due to a history of cat exposure. However, it turned out to be *S. schenckii*. Hence, to our knowledge, there has still been no case of sporotrichosis caused by *S. brasiliensis* in Thailand.

Regarding the English literature review, to date, there have been a total of 19 microbiological confirmed cases of sporotrichosis in Southeast Asia (Table 2) [3,4,8-11]. Most of the cases are female (63.2%), and the age group ranges from 23 to 76 years with the mean age of 50.79 ± 17.19 years. The most reported country is Malaysia (73.7%), followed by Thailand (21.1%) and Laos PDR (5.3%). All cases are otherwise healthy without immunocompromised condition except 1 case from Malaysia with lepromatous leprosy. Most patients are housewives (26.3%). Only 9 cases including our first case (47.3%) could remember their preceding risk of exposure to animals, plants or abiotic substrates including trauma from abiotic substrates (33%) and animal exposure (67%). The most common form is lymphocutaneous (52.6%), followed by fixed (31.6%) and disseminated cutaneous infections (15.8%). The longer duration is observed in fixed type (the mean of 5.875 months), compared with a fixed type (the mean of two months) and lymphocutaneous type (the mean of 1.75 months). Most common affect location in lymphocutaneous form is upper extremities (80%). In fixed form, upper extremities were also the most common affect location (60%). The diagnosis of sporotrichosis was made by using the culture (94.4%), direct tissue examination (33.3%) and the molecular method (16.7%). The most common finding pathology is granulomatous inflammation (57.9%), followed by mixed acute and chronic inflammatory cell infiltration with and without granulomata (31.6%). Itraconazole was used as definite treatment (77.8%), followed by potassium iodide solution (10.5%), and itraconazole followed with terbinafine (10.5%). The mean duration of treatment is 4 ± 1.99 (range from 2 to 8) months. The outcome of treatment is very excellent with antifungal alone; the surgical debridement is performed without systemic antifungal treatment in two cases. Only one case died but due to hospital-acquired infection.

Sporotrichosis in Thailand is probably underreported due to under-recognition and no widely available laboratory. In addition, to date, apart from Malaysia there have been handful reported cases of sporotrichosis in Southeast Asia. Most of the patients with sporotrichosis in our case series presented with upper extremities lesion. We assume that it might be related to a history of trauma by handling abiotic substrates and animal exposure, but only few cases could remember preceding history. Treatment with systemic antifungal has an excellent outcome. We encourage the physicians to have an awareness of this infection when taking care of patients presented with chronic cutaneous or lymphocutaneous lesions refractory to antibacterial treatment.

**Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

**Table 1**

Antifungal susceptibility testing both clinical isolates by broth microdilution methods.

| Antifungal agents | MIC (μg/mL) | *Sporothrix schenckii* (Case 1) | *Sporothrix schenckii* (Case 2) |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Itraconazole      | < 0.0313   | 0.0625–0.125                  |                               |
| Voriconazole      | 0.5        | 0.25                          |                               |
| Caspofungin       | 0.25       | 0.0625                         |                               |
| Amphotericin B    | 0.5        | 0.5                            |                               |

**Fig. 4.** A and B: the colonies of yeast form incubated at 37 °C. C: the colonies of mold form incubated at 25 °C. and D: lactophenol cotton blue stain showing slender hyphae with rosette-like conidia. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)
| Year (Ref.) | Country      | Sex  | Age | Underlying condition                  | Infection site | Form  | Duration  | Occupation               | Diagnosis                          | Tissue pathology                      | Treatment and duration | Outcome   |
|------------|--------------|------|-----|---------------------------------------|----------------|-------|-----------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1990 [3]   | Thailand     | F    | 33  | None                                  | Left elbow     | FC    | 3 months  | Housewife                | Tissue culture                     | NA                                   | Potassium iodide 3 months Itraconazole 6 months | Care       |
| 2005 [8]   | Lao PDR      | F    | 42  | None                                  | Right index finger | LC   | 1 month   | Farmer                   | Tissue for 18S RNA sequencing       | NA                                   | Itraconazole 6 months | Care       |
| 2009 [9]   | Malaysia     | M    | 70  | None                                  | Left leg        | FC (Mass) | 1 month | Farmer                   | Direct tissue examination, tissue culture | Granulomatous and microabcess       | Excision No antifungal           | Care       |
| 2011 [11]  | Malaysia     | F    | 70  | None                                  | Face, upper and lower limbs constitutional symptoms | DC   | 6 months   | Retiree/gardening         | Direct tissue examination, culture (negative for hemoculture) | Epidermal hyperplasia and granulomatous inflammation in the dermis | Amphotericin B 2 weeks then Itraconazole 8 months Switch to terbinafine 4 weeks due to heart failure | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | F    | 59  | Atrial fibrillation                  | Left wrist      | LC    | 1 month   | Retired teacher (cat bite) | Tissue culture                       | Vague granuloma with MGC, Mixed infiltrate with lymphocytes and neutrophils. | Itraconazole 20 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 66  | NA                                    | Right index finger | LC   | 1 month   | Retired police (thorn prick) | Tissue culture                       | No granuloma, Mixed infiltrate with lymphocytes, neutrophils. | Itraconazole 16 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | F    | 32  | NA                                    | Left forearm    | LC    | 2 months  | Admin officer            | Direct tissue examination, tissue culture | Mixed infiltrate with lymphocytes, neutrophils, Suppurative granuloma few MGC. | Itraconazole 24 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 51  | NA                                    | Left wrist      | LC    | 1 month   | Retired police (cat bite) | Tissue culture                       | Epithelioid granuloma. No MGC. Mixed infiltrate with neutrophils and lymphocytes | Itraconazole 20 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | F    | 56  | NA                                    | Right ankle     | LC    | 2 months  | Housewife (cat scratch)  | Tissue culture                       | Epithelioid granuloma with MGC. | Itraconazole 18 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | F    | 65  | NA                                    | Left cheek      | FC    | 1.25 month | Doctor                  | Tissue culture                       | Epithelioid granuloma with MGC. Mixed infiltrate with neutrophils and lymphocytes | Itraconazole 15 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 23  | NA                                    | Left hand       | FC    | 12 months | Student (Fish handling)  | Tissue culture                       | No granuloma. Mixed infiltrate with plasma cells, lymphocytes and histiocytes | Excision No antifungal           | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 28  | NA                                    | Right forearm   | FC    | 12 months | Clerk (Pricked by nail)  | Tissue culture                       | Epithelioid granuloma with MGC. Psoriasiform hyperplasia. Infiltrate with Lymphocytes & plasma cells. | Itraconazole 6 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 46  | NA                                    | Left index finger | LC    | 1 month   | Waiter (Cat bite)        | Tissue culture                       | No granuloma. Lymphoplasmacytic admixed with MGC, eosinophils & neutrophils | Itraconazole 16 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 61  | Lepromatous leprosy with residual deformity | Whole body      | DC    | 3 months  | Flower nursery owner     | Direct examination, tissue culture | Epithelioid granuloma with MGC. Mixed infiltrate with lymphocytes and neutrophils GMS positive | Amphotericin B 17 days then Itraconazole 2 weeks switch to terbinafine 2 weeks (hepatitis from azoles) Itraconazole 14 weeks | Died (Hospital acquired bacterial infection) Improved (still on treatment) | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | M    | 26  | NA                                    | Left thenar      | LC    | 1 month   | Administrative officer (cat scratch) | Tissue culture                       | No granuloma. Mixed inflammatory cells infiltration with lymph, plasma cells, foamy macrophages and histiocytes | Itraconazole 14 weeks | Care       |
| 2012 [10]  | Malaysia     | F    | 71  | Hypertension, Ischemic heart disease  | Face, upper and lower limbs | DC    | 2 months  | Housewife               | Direct examination and tissue culture | Granuloma with MGC. Mixed inflammatory cells with neutrophils, lymphocytes and plasma cells. GMS positive | Itraconazole 1 year then recurrence after stop treatment for 3 months Amphotericin B 18 days Itraconazole 16 weeks | Improved |  | (continued on next page) |
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