Case Report

Methotrexate induced ventricular arrhythmia as a medication error: a case report

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INTRODUCTION

MTX is now the disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARD) of first choice and the standard treatment for most patients, including cases of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (RA). MTX is a dihydrofolate reductase inhibitor having prominent immunosuppressant and anti-inflammatory property. Beneficial effects in RA are probably related to inhibition of cytokine production, chemotaxis and cell-mediated immune reaction. Induction of oral low-dose (7.5-15 mg) weekly MTX regimen has improved acceptability of this drug in RA.¹ Since folic acid plays a major role in cell division, its inhibition is associated with major toxicity to blood cells, the oral mucosa, hepatocytes, and lungs.² MTX toxicity can be manifested as gastrointestinal symptoms, mucositis, cardiotoxicity, hepatotoxicity and bone marrow suppression.

Herein we are reporting a case of medication error in a patient on MTX who ingested Tab. Methotrexate 7.5 mg

ABSTRACT

Methotrexate (MTX) is the most widely used drug in clinical practice for long term treatment of connective tissue disorders. As this drug has narrow therapeutic index, if it goes unmonitored can lead to life threatening complications. Herein we are describing the case of a patient who presented with ventricular arrhythmia, due to failure to execute MTX therapy in the prescribed frequency and took daily dose of MTX which was meant to be taken as a weekly dose pointing to failure of patient education or patient comprehension regarding MTX and finally succumbed due to cardiogenic shock. We concluded this causality as probable/likely category according to WHO-UMC causality categories.

Keywords: Methotrexate toxicity, Mucositis, Ventricular arrhythmia

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BD instead of once weekly for 10 days and presented with ventricular arrhythmia.

CASE REPORT

A 70-year-old hypertensive, diabetic male and a known case of rheumatoid arthritis was brought to Emergency Medicine Department of our hospital with complaint of multiple oral ulcers, vomiting and diarrhoea since 4 days. On arrival suddenly he developed breathlessness, palpitation and dizziness. On examination he was conscious, vitals were blood pressure: not recordable, pulse: 210/min on monitor with rhythm suggestive of ventricular tachycardia, ECG of the patient suggestive of ventricular tachycardia is shown in Figure 1. For which 2 times DC shock of 200 J was given followed by one DC shock of 250 J and inj. amiodarone (150 mg) and inj. lignocaine given stat. Post DC shock vitals were temperature: 98 F, BP: 100/70 mmHg, Pulse: 140/min, Respiratory rate: 22/min, SPO2: 97%. RBS: 325. Patient was given BIPAP support for tachypnoea because he was conscious after cardioversion and was following verbal commands. 2D echo was suggestive of LVEF: 30-35%, anterior wall hypokinesia. Clots, vegetations and effusions are not seen and moderate MR, grade II TR present.

![Figure 1: ECG showing VT.](image)

### Table 1: Laboratory findings.

| No | Investigations     | Findings                                                                 |
|----|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | CBC               | Hb: 5.6 g/dl, WBC: 840/cu mm, RBC: 2.63 mil/cu mm                        |
|    |                   | Haematocrit: 15% (34–52) MCV: 64.8 fl, MCH: 21.2 pg/ml, MCHC: 32.8 g/dl |
| 2  | PT/INR            | 17.5/1.38                                                                |
| 3  | APTT              | 20.3 (Control- 30.0)                                                    |
| 4  | Arterial blood gases (ABG) | pH: 7.11 (7.35–7.45), pCO2: 39.4 mmHg (35–45), pO2: 198 mmHg (80–100), Na: 130 mmol/L, K: 5.3 mmol/L, Cl: 92 mmol/L, HCO3: 12.0 mmol/L (22–26) |
| 5  | Renal function test | S. creatinine: 1.49 mg/dl (0.7–1.3) Blood urea: 109.1 mg/dl (15–45) S. sodium: 125, S. potassium: 4.7, S. chloride: 95 (mmol/L) |
| 6  | Liver function test | SGOT (AST): 104 U/L (0–34), SGPT (ALT): 60 U/L (10–49) S. ALP: 73 U/L (45–129), S. AG ratio: 0.86 (1.5–2.5), S. albumin: 3.0 g/dL (3.2–4.8), S. globulin: 3.5 g/dL (2–3.5) Bilirubin (mg/dL): total: 1.59, direct: 0.90, indirect: 0.69 |
| 7  | TNIU              | Troponin I ultra: 1.43 ng/ml (0–0.1)                                      |
MTX, is a folic acid analogue that inhibits dihydrofolate reductase, thereby blocking DNA synthesis and causing cell death. MTX is now the DMARD of first choice and the standard treatment for most patients, including cases of juvenile RA. Now a days, MTX has gained acceptance among rheumatologists as an effective treatment alternative for patients with RA that is unresponsive to conventional DMARDs, such as antimalarial agents, gold salts, and D-penicillamine.4

Patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), are at an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD). CVD is a leading cause of death in patients with rheumatic diseases.5 MTX elevates the level of homocysteine by inhibiting methionine synthase. Hyperhomocysteinemia is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, leading to the concern that MTX may secondarily increase the risk of CVD.6 In a study done by Perez-Verdia et al, they demonstrate an association between MTX therapy and development of myocardial arrhythmias that could lead to a potentially lethal arrhythmia.7 In one report, a 36-year-old man developed myocardial infarction and ventricular arrhythmias during treatment with low-dose oral MTX 15 mg/week. Cardiac evaluation consisted of a coronary angiogram that showed no evidence of significant coronary disease, an electrophysiologic study that failed to demonstrate inducible tachyarrhythmias, and an endomyocardial biopsy with normal histologic results. Frequency of premature ventricular contractions significantly decreased after discontinuation of MTX treatment, and the patient became asymptomatic. However, his premature ventricular contractions and symptoms returned a few hours after the drug was restarted, and again resolved after discontinuation.8

MTX induced hepatotoxicity is well recognised in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. Intracellular accumulation of methotrexate polyglutamate and consequent depletion of folate stores are suspected to play a role in the mechanism of liver injury. The possibility that MTX causes hepatic fibrosis and cirrhosis only in the presence of other contributing factors such as excess alcohol ingestion, diabetes mellitus, obesity and hyperhomocysteinemia.9 MTX interferes with cellular replication leading to megaloblastic erythropoiesis and in toxic doses to bone marrow depression.10

In study shown by Moore et al, a total of 106 cases of reported medication errors associated with MTX were identified, including errors resulting in 25 deaths (24%) and 48 other serious outcomes (45%). The most common types of errors involved confusion about the once-weekly dosage schedule (30%) and other dosage errors (22%). The most frequently involved indication for use was rheumatoid arthritis (42%). Of the errors, 39 (37%) were attributable to the prescriber, 21 (20%) to the patient, 20 (19%) to dispensing, and 18 (17%) to administration by a health care professional. Overall, 52% of the reported errors involved some form of overdose, with the most
common problem being taking the drug daily instead of weekly (32 cases [30%]).

CONCLUSION

Medication errors leading to toxicity are potentially hazardous. Cardiovascular side effects are life threatening and may not give adequate time to treat and reverse the effects till the drug levels clear and metabolized. So, prescription explanation with exact risks of overdosing should be explained to patient and his relatives.

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