Unusual association between pure red cell aplasia and primary Sjögren’s syndrome: a case report

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Received on May 12, 2006; accepted in revised form on July 27, 2006.
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Key words: Sjögren’s syndrome, PRCA, anti-Ro/SSA, Jaccoud arthropathy.

Abbreviations:
PRCA: pure red cell aplasia
SS: Sjögren’s syndrome
SLE: systemic lupus erythematosus
NSAIDs: non steroid anti-inflammatory drugs
EPO: erythropoietin
JA: Jaccoud arthropathy
PIP: proximal interphalangeal
MCP: metacarpophalangeal

ABSTRACT
Pure red cell aplasia (PRCA) is an acute anemia due to selective suppression of erythropoiesis. We report a case of PRCA diagnosed before the onset of primary Sjögren’s syndrome (SS). A young woman, with autoimmune thyroiditis, developed polyarthritis with ANA and Rheumatoid factor positivity, diagnosed as Rheumatoid arthritis. During the time she developed anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies and deformities at proximal interphalangeal joints. After 4 years, she developed severe acute anemia, without reticulocytes: a bone marrow biopsy indicated a PRCA and she started transfusions, steroids, cyclosporin. A steroid-dependent anemia persisted. After 2 years she developed sicca, parotid swelling, fatigue, mild leukopenia, elevated serum creatinine, hypokalemia, hypostenuria and tubular proteinuria. Lip biopsy and dacrologic tests confirmed a diagnosis of SS, while X-ray revealed a deforming non-erosive arthropathy (Jaccoud type). In present case, PRCA could be considered an autoimmune bone marrow disease within SS, whose extra-glandular manifestations onset before the sicca symptoms.

Introduction
Pure red cell aplasia (PRCA) is an acute normochromic anemia characterised by autoimmune-mediated or T cell mediated erythroblastic suppression (1). In particular, autoantibodies directed to erythroblasts (2), erythroid colony forming units, erythropoietin (3) or erythropoietin receptor (4) were described. Different authors reported an association between PRCA and Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE), with clinical and laboratory features similar to other SLE patients (4-6). PRCA has also been reported as manifestation of lymphocytic lymphoma in one patient with primary Sjögren’s Syndrome (SS) (7). We report here the case of a patient with PRCA diagnosed before the onset of an overt primary SS.

Case report
A young woman, born in 1974, was admitted to hospital, on 1996, due to remitting fever, polyarthralgias, cervical, axillary and inguinal lymphoadenopathy. Laboratory tests showed severe hypergammaglobulinemia, neutrophilic leukocytosis, elevation of ESR and C-reactive protein: all infectious tests were negative, except for urinary E. Coli. Rheumatoid factor and anti-nuclear antibody tests were positive, while anti-dsDNA, anti-ENA and ANCA were negative. TSH elevation with anti-thyroglobulin and anti-thyroperoxidase antibodies were detected. A complete CT scan and a lymphonodal biopsy were performed, showing a necrotizing histiocyte lymphadenitis, without any sign of lymphoproliferative disorder. A diagnosis of Kikuchi disease and autoimmune thyroiditis was made. During the following months arthritis in small and large joints persisted, leading a diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), treated with oral prednisone (10 mg/day), NSAIDs and low dose cyclosporin A. During follow-up, she developed anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies, continuing to show arthritis with remitting-flaring trend and initial deformities swan-neck-like at proximal interphalangeal joints. In November 1999, she developed an acute severe normochromic and normocytic anemia (Hb: 4 g/dl), without reticulocytes’ production. A bone marrow biopsy showed selective erythroid aplasia, signs of erythropagocytosis with normal myeloid and platelet precursors. Pure red cell aplasia (PRCA) was diagnosed, treated with units of packed red cells, high dose of oral steroids, cyclosporin A (3-5 mg/Kg) and erythropoietin (EPO) with partial and steroid-dependent response. In November 2002, she was readmitted to haematological Unit due to uncontrolled anemia and fatigue. She showed swan-neck and ulnar reducible deviations at the hands, parotid glands’ enlargement, subjective xerophthalmia and xerostomia. Laboratory tests showed low neutrophilic count, ESR elevation, polyclonal hypergammaglobulinemia, ANA positivity with anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies, normal complement, elevation of serum creatinine (2.3 mg/dl), partially improved after cyclosporin A withdrawal, hypokalemia, hypostenuria and selective tubular proteinuria (600 mg/day).
Renal biopsy was not performed. Lip biopsy revealed a dense lymphocytic periductular infiltration with elevated focus score. Dacriologic tests showed reduced tears production with corneal focus score. Dacriologic tests showed periductular infiltration with elevated biopsy revealed a dense lymphocytic infiltration. Renal biopsy was not performed. Lip biopsy performance confirmed a selective red cell aplasia with iron deposits in interstitial matrix. Genetic tests for hemochromatosis were normal; so the histologic picture of siderosis at liver and bone marrow could be justified by repeated episodes of acute onset of anemia.

Discussion
We described a case of a primary SS, characterised by glandular involvement, anti-nuclear antibodies with anti-Ro and anti-La specificities (8), and wide extra-glandular features. In particular, she showed a severe activation of immunological system since 8 years before the diagnosis of SS with Kikuchi syndrome and autoimmune thyroiditis, leading to hypothyroidism. Subsequently, she added articular and renal involvement, come out 7 and 2 years, respectively, before SS. The persistent seropositive polyarthritis was initially diagnosed as RA, though associated to anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies and mild neutropenia. Although these antinuclear specificities were detected in RA with rich extra-articular features (9), the radiological absence of erosions and the complete reducibility of deformities suggested a diagnosis of JA. This deforming and non-erosive arthropathy has been frequently considered an articular feature of SLE (10). Actually, some authors considered JA one of the clinical features more associated to anti-Ro specificity than to a specific disease such as SLE (11, 12). Furthermore, the progressive decline of renal function, initially ascribed to cyclosporin toxicity, associated to hypothenuric urine and tubular proteinuria represented the most common clinical manifestations of distal tubular acidosis (13). The occurrence of extra-glandular manifestations before the overt manifestation of primary SS is not uncommon especially in young patients that did not feel subjective dryness of eyes and mouth (13). Autoimmune thyroiditis, distal tubular acidosis, Jaccoud arthropathy are well described in primary SS, either before or after the diagnosis of SS (14). However, it is unexpected the onset of PRCA within 2 years, respectively, before SS. The patient was treated with bicarbonate, folate and potassium supplements, high dose of oral steroids and EPO (for recurrent anemia), maintaining thyroid hormone replacement given for hypothyroidism. Unfortunately she did not tolerate azathioprine, nor 6-mercaptopurine due to severe pancytopenia. At the present time no signs of active arthritis were evident, but she persisted to show distal tubular acidosis with hypokalemia, sicca and scarcely controlled PRCA, characterised by frequent falls of hemoglobin, followed by elevation of the daily dosage of prednisone, as shown in Figure 1, and an increasing weekly dose of EPO. Subsequently, a significant elevation of hepatic and cholestatic enzymes was periodically observed: a liver biopsy, performed on 2004, showed an initial steatosis with parenchimal siderosis. In addition, a new bone marrow biopsy, performed on 2005, confirmed the selective red cell aplasia with iron deposits in interstitial matrix. Genetic tests for hemochromatosis were normal; so the histologic picture of siderosis at liver and bone marrow could be justified by repeated episodes of acute onset of anemia.

References
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