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1 Thyroid-associated orbitopathy and biomarkers: where we are and what we 2 can hope for the future?

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19 Running title: Thyroid-associated orbitopathy and biomarkers: state of the art

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22 Abstract (175 words)

Background: Thyroid-associated orbitopathy (TAO) is the most common autoimmune disease of the orbit. It occurs more often in patients presenting with hyperthyroidism, characteristic of Graves' disease, but may be associated with hypothyroidism or euthyroidism. The diagnosis of TAO is based on clinical orbital features, radiological criteria and the potential association with thyroid disease. To date, there is no specific marker of the orbital disease, making the early diagnosis difficult, especially if the orbital involvement precedes the thyroid dysfunction.

30 *Summary*: The goal of this review is to present the disease and combine the 31 available data in the literature concerning investigation of TAO biomarkers.

Conclusions: Despite the progress done in the understanding of TAO disease, some important pieces are still missing. Typically, for the future, major efforts have to be done in the discovery of new biomarkers, validation of the suspected candidates on multicenter cohorts with standardized methodologies and establishment of their clinical performances on the specific clinical application fields in order to improve the management of the TAO patients but also the therapeutic options and follow-up.

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Keywords: Biomarkers, Thyroid-Associated Orbitopathy, tears, orbital fat, blood,
 inflammation

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45 Clinical significance

Around 25-50% of patients with Graves' disease develop TAO without any predictive factor. Moreover, the ocular disorder usually appears after the thyroid disease or simultaneously, but may precede it. Identifying new biomarkers of this orbital disease could help to an early diagnosis, especially if the orbital involvement precedes the thyroid dysfunction.

51

52 Introduction

Thyroid-associated orbitopathy (TAO), also known as thyroid eye disease or Graves' 53 ophthalmopathy, is an autoimmune disease affecting thyroid, orbits and skin. Despite 54 55 important progress in understanding the pathophysiological mechanisms leading to 56 the development of this disease in the orbits during the last decade, some important questions are still without any answer. The exact nature of the relationship of TAO 57 with thyroid remains enigmatic: hyperthyroidism can be related to the development of 58 this orbital disease but exceptions exist. In contrast, TAO can occur in hypo- or 59 euthyroid patients. Therefore, the prediction of Graves' evolution to TAO is difficult 60 and limits early treatment. At cellular and molecular levels, the reason why only 61 orbital fibroblasts (and not the other fibroblasts of the body), orbital adipose tissue 62 63 and medial and inferior rectus muscles are more often affected during the disease has not been solved yet. Furthermore, the possibility to have unilateral orbital case 64 and the great variety of clinical presentation are not understood. This last point 65 66 highlights also in some cases the difficulty to properly diagnose TAO disease by

cofounding with mimicking diseases such as orbital myositis, amyloidosis, some
 tumors or metastatic cancer and IgG4-related diseases [1-12].

In this context, the discovery of new biomarkers that could definitively assist the physician to diagnose TAO disease as early as possible, predict prognosis and propose early and appropriate treatment will be clinically useful for improving patient management. After a brief recall of the clinical manifestations and the pathophysiology, we review where we are in the potential biomarkers reported in TAO and which vision we can have for the future.

75 Review

The natural history of TAO, without any treatment, is described as the Rundle's curve [13-15]. Symptoms and signs of the orbital disease worsen rapidly during an initial phase, reach a maximal severity, and decrease to a plateau known as the sequellar form. The disease appears 2-6 times more frequent in young women but severe cases occur more frequently in men of more than 50 years old [16].

The manifestations of the orbital involvement are irritation and redness of the eyes and eyelids, lid tumefaction, double vision and rarely visual loss. The bilateral complete orbital examination should look for lid retraction, proptosis (exophthalmos), limitation of ocular motility, fat hypertrophy, deficit of visual acuity or color vision, the signs of corneal exposure, and signs of orbital inflammation [17-19] (Figs 1 and 2).

Clinically, the challenge is to recognize the active, inflammatory phase of the orbital disease. In fact, early diagnosis and rapid introduction of the anti-inflammatory treatment, mainly steroids, improve the final outcome and reduce the functional and disfiguring sequellae of the disease [14, 20]. As in some cases the orbital manifestations precede the thyroid dysfunction and its systemic signs [21], it seems
essential to have a biomarker dedicated to the early diagnosis of the orbital disease.
The detection of Thyroid stimulating hormone-receptor (TSH-Receptor) antibodies
(TSH-R-Abs) may confirm the auto-immunity and the diagnosis of TAO. But these
antibodies are not present in all cases [19, 22, 23].

So far, we use the clinical activity score (CAS) to determine the indication and the 95 duration of anti-inflammatory treatment [22, 24]. We take in consideration the 96 presence or not of pain, lid and conjunctival edema (chemosis), lid and conjunctival 97 redness. Nevertheless, as for all the clinical scales, this one presents some 98 limitations: CAS is based on few items, mixing different types of clinical information 99 100 (inflammation versus vision worsening) and proposing only binary answers, reducing therefore the accuracy of its interpretation. Furthermore, this is a subjective scale 101 depending therefore on the timing of the evaluation, the willingness and objectivity of 102 the patients regarding their clinical situations and on the level of expertise of the 103 practitioner performing the evaluation. Other scales exist including NOSPECS [25], 104 105 VISA [26] and EUGOGO [27] but present also advantages and limitations and are not daily used in our hospital. 106

In some difficult cases, the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) could help to find out the presence of an inflammatory process. Definitely, having molecules that could efficiently complement clinical scores and observation could allow a more precise and rapid diagnosis and also limit the economic burden to useless access to imaging.

All the patients with irritation, lid retraction and proptosis, should benefit of a local lubricant treatment (eye drops and ointment). In presence of orbital inflammation, some treatments such as selenium and steroids are indicated, according to the severity [22]. The goal is to stop the inflammatory process and to improve the final
outcome. In case of resistance or contraindication, low dose external radiotherapy is
suggested. The immunomodulatory treatments such as Tocilizumab (Interleukin (IL)6 receptor antagonist), Teprotumumab (Insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1) receptor
antagonist) or Rituximab (anti-CD20) [28] seem to give promising results in resistant
cases [18, 29-31].

Rehabilitative surgery should be performed in patients with inactive TAO since at least six months. The main steps are orbital decompression for the reduction of proptosis, squint surgery for the treatment of muscular fibrosis and diplopia, lid lengthening and blepharoplasty for lid retraction and fat hypertrophy.

The finding of specific biomarkers of TAO may serve as a predictive factor of development of TAO among patients with Graves' disease, and may also give some information on the severity of TAO.

127 The pathophysiology of TAO is poorly understood. Some classical risk factors 128 including genetic predisposition, environmental factors, infection and stress, have 129 been reported but their real impact on TAO initiation remains debated [32].

Nevertheless, some pieces of the puzzle begin to come together in the literature. B-cells, T-cells and orbital fibroblasts have been shown to be the key players of the pathological event. At the origin, T-cells are responsible for the initiation of the disease [19]. Indeed, T helper cells become activated when they recognize TSH-R peptides on antigen-presenting cells. Upon interactions with such T-cells, B-cells secrete anti-TSH-R antibodies. These antibodies lead to stimulation of both thyroid follicular cells, which produce a great quantity of thyroid hormones, and orbital fibroblasts, which proliferate andinduce orbital changes.

Beside TSH-R, IGF-1 receptor (IGF-1R) was also identified as a potential targeted antigen [32-37] and it seems that the interactions between TSH-R and IGF-1R are more important than individual molecules effect [38]. Furthermore, patients can have either one or both types of auto-antibodies and alternative production of other types of auto-antibodies is not excluded. Indeed, recent studies suggested that autoantibodies against carbonic anhydrase 1 and alcohol dehydrogenase 1B had higher prevalence in orbital fat in TAO compared to controls [39].

Tripartite relationships between orbital fibroblasts, B- and T-cells initiate cascades of immune and chemical reactions [40, 41] resulting in pathological situations: inflammation of the connective tissues, fibrosis and adipogenesis [32, 33].

These phenomena cause fundamental and dramatic ocular tissue remodeling. The 149 increased volume of extraorbital muscles, induced by intensive hyaluronic acid (HA) 150 production [42] and expansive growth of adipose tissue via activation of peroxisome 151 proliferator activated receptor gamma (PPAR-y) [43], leads consequently to the 152 typical eye's protrusion, characteristic of TAO patients. In addition, the compression 153 of orbital tissue causes a compression of vascular structures leading to the reduction 154 of blood flow and subsequent localized hypoxia [44]. In this context, proangiogenic 155 factors seem to be stimulated in order to restore appropriate circulation through the 156 formation of new vessels. 157

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159 Biomarkers

In this context, as previously mentioned, no accurate molecular tool allows to date 160 establishing a rapid, early and robust diagnosis of TAO or predicting the outcome or 161 the efficiency of drug therapy. Nevertheless, the availability of these kinds of tools, 162 objectively measurable and easily interpretable, could greatly enhance the 163 management of TAO patients, especially those with normal thyroid function. 164 However, over the years and regarding the increased number of publications in the 165 166 biomarker field, only relatively few studies have been focused on the discovery of new biomarkers in TAO disease. 167

The term 'biomarker' was officially and accurately defined 15 years ago as a single 168 indicator "that objectively measures and evaluates normal or pathogenic biological 169 170 processes" [45]. Consequently, a biomarker is not restricted to being a protein, but may be any type of specific molecular signature such as a gene, mRNA or a 171 metabolite. Specific clinical features such as demographic and physiological 172 parameters (age, gender, smoking status, or goiter size), imaging (thyroid volume 173 with ultrasonography or IRM) or clinical scores (CAS, Vision, Inflammation, and 174 175 Appearance (VISA)) can also be considered as objective biomarkers. However, only the molecular biomarkers will be considered here. 176

In order to be efficient, biomarker discovery in general but also in TAO context should 177 carefully consider the best source of samples in relation to both the clinical question 178 and the methods of investigations. To be applicable on a large-scale, a good source 179 of biomarkers should take into account the feasibility of sample collection and its 180 relevance. Extremely invasive sample collection (e.g. biopsy of orbital fat or 181 extraorbital muscles), even if it is highly specific due to the close relationship with the 182 location of a disease, must not be taken for granted because of (i) the related 183 discomfort and risks of secondary complications for the patient; (ii) the restricted 184

185 access for clinical diagnosis, and (iii) the great difficulty in collecting such samples186 from healthy control subjects.

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188 Biomarkers – hormones and antibodies - in blood of TAO patients

In TAO disease, traditional biological fluids including blood and urine have been 189 investigated. The majority of the studies rather reported principal actors of the TAO 190 disease as potential biomarkers than discovered new candidates. Considering the 191 dysfunction of the thyroid gland associated to TAO, the traditional circulating thyroid 192 hormones (TSH, triiodothyronine also known as T3 and thyroxine, called T4) used 193 194 for diagnosing thyroid dysfunction or the antibodies against TSH-R (TSH-R-Abs) [22, 46] or thyroid peroxidase (TPO)-Abs [47, 48], would be naively expected to be highly 195 studied and give an interesting insight on the clinical status of the TAO patients. 196

197 Thus, whatever the generation of assays used, TSH-R levels were shown to be associated to activity and severity of TAO [46, 49-51]. The new generation tests 198 allowed to reach up to 97% sensitivity and almost 90% specificity [51]. However to 199 date, some limitations persist for a clinical use of TSH-R in the management of TAO. 200 The heterogeneous pattern of thyroid dysfunction in TAO patients - hyperthyroidism, 201 euthyroidism (6 to 21% depending on the studies [52-54]), or hypothyroidism - and 202 the fact that various other diseases [55] may disturb thyroid hormones greatly limit 203 their clinical relevance in TAO diagnosis. Indeed, a potential interference of treatment 204 with the TSH-R level has been suspected [56-58] and could disturb their 205 performances in TAO prediction. 206

In conclusion, conflicting data related to different types of generation assays and various experimental designs do not allow to definitvely evaluate the clinical performance of TSH-R-Ab on TAO patients and the conditions of its routine use remain to be clarified. In the same context, the association TPO-Ab and TAO is still
questionable as different studies reported various results [47, 59-61].

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213 Biomarkers – cytokines and others - in blood of TAO patients

As the pathology is driven by an acute inflammatory event, the pro-inflammatory 214 cytokines/chemokines including IL-1β [62], IL-6 [63], IL-10 [63], IL-8 [64], C-C 215 chemokine ligand 20 (CCL20) [65] and IL-17 [66] have been studied. The reported 216 data reveal an elevation of their level in the blood of TAO patients compared to 217 control patients that could highlight a potential interest of these molecules as 218 diagnosis markers. Furthermore, their levels seem even able to determine the stage 219 220 of the disease: an active phase is characterized by a higher level of IL1_β, IL6 [62] and IL-17 [66] compared to inactive phase. The data suggested also that the blood 221 levels of some cytokines could reflect the response to treatment: patients presenting 222 refractory TAO have higher level of IL-4, IL-6 and IL-10 than patients in remission 223 [63]. Furthermore, patients present modified blood level of IL-16 (increase) and IL-8 224 225 (decrease) after steroids treatment compared to the previous state [64, 67]. Moreover, a possible association of serum IL-10 polymorphism with incidence of 226 TAO has been reported [68]. 227

Based on only two unique studies, controversial data exist on Interferon-γ (IFN-γ) and its potential disturbance in blood of TAO patients [62, 69]. The cytokines involved as mediators of B-cells and/or T-cells have also been largely investigated due to the key roles of these cells in the initiation and the course of the TAO disease. Interleukin-2 [68], IL-16 [67] and IL-33 [69] have been shown to be highly elevated in the blood of TAO patients compared to controls. Serum IL-33 levels were positively

correlated with T3 and T4, however negatively correlated with TSH [69]. A
polymorphism of IL-2 is suggested to be associated with the disease [68].

Due to their mitogenic and angiogenic properties, the potential value of growth 236 factors has also been investigated. Serum hepatocyte growth factor (HGF) increases 237 in TAO patients compared to control subjects and is sensitive to efficient 238 glucocorticoids treatment. Its level decreases in response to drug administration [64]. 239 Adhesion molecules belong to another class of molecules investigated as potential 240 TAO markers. They play a role in cell/cell or cell/extracellular matrix interaction, 241 activation and migration. Intercellular adhesion molecule-1 (ICAM-1) and soluble 242 vascular cell adhesion molecule-1 (sVCAM-1) have been found elevated in the blood 243 of TAO patients as compared to control patients but their levels seem also to be 244 influenced by the treatment [70]. 245

Selenium is a metabolite implicated in thyroid hormone synthesis and metabolism [71], both actions having high importance in TAO development [72]. Besides, high amounts of selenium are found in thyroid gland. In an Australian population in 2014, TAO patients showed lower levels of selenium in serum than patients suffering from Graves' disease without eye involvement. In addition, selenium levels decrease with TAO increasing severity. The authors conclude that the lack of selenium might be an independent risk factor for TAO [72].

The potential interest of several exotic biomarkers in TAO recently emerged notably because of the use of omics strategies. Among these emerging candidates, none of them has been deeply evaluated to date but several can be mentioned for their biological functions that could be directly related to TAO disease. This is the case of osteopontin [65, 73], a multifunctional protein involved in inflammation, cell

recruitment, cell adhesion and remodeling. It is inversely correlated with TSH level 258 and positively with T3 and T4 [73]. Another protein called cytotoxic T lymphocyte 259 associated antigen-4 (CTLA-4), a member of the immunoglobulin superfamily, which 260 is found on T-cell surface, negatively regulates these cells. So far, many studies have 261 been focused on a polymorphism localized on CTLA-4 gene, as a consequence of its 262 implication in autoimmune diseases [74-76]. Finally HLA-B8, a MHC class I cell 263 surface receptor, has been observed in association with TAO but its role remains to 264 be elucidated [77, 78]. 265

266 Biomarkers in urine of TAO patients

267 Urine and its components have been little investigated as potential source of biomarkers in the context of TAO. However, three compounds showed a potential 268 promising interest and should be more studied in the future. The cotinine level, the 269 main metabolite of nicotine used as marker of tobacco use, seems to correlate in 270 smokers TAO patients with the level of blood TSH-R-Abs, the activity of the disease 271 secondary ocular complication after radioiodine treatment [79, 272 and 80]. Glycosaminoglycans (GAGs), the most abundant heteropolysaccharides, display a 273 urinary levels 2-3 times higher in patients with the active form compared to those with 274 the inactive form [81]. Finally, 8-hydroxy-2'-deoxyguanosine (8-OHdG) has attracted 275 attention of scientist's community. This metabolite is used to measure DNA damage 276 in oxidative stress, event that was related with various ocular diseases such as TAO. 277 High levels of 8-OHdG were found in TAO patients urine compared to control 278 patients, and 8-OHdG level was related to CAS [82]. In short, 8-OHdG might be a 279 good biomarker in the future to evaluate the presence of oxidative DNA damage and 280 therefore the oxidative stress generated in TAO patients. 281

282 Biomarkers in blood and urine of TAO patients: conclusions

In conclusion, these 2 common fluids usually explored for biomarker discovery seem 283 disappointing in TAO. Several explanations could be highlighted: at this stage, only 284 few studies focus on the same molecules and, in the main cases, the candidates are 285 investigated not for their potential role as biomarkers but rather for their central role in 286 the pathological events. This is particularly illustrated by the absence of clinical 287 performances (sensitivity, specificity, positive and negative predictive values) 288 reported in the publications. Nevertheless, with the democratization of the omics 289 methods, we may speculate that, in a near future, new and probably unexpected 290 biomarkers will be discovered and could offer new clinical and management 291 292 strategies for TAO.

Moreover, no standardized protocol is reported for the evaluation of a specific target and different clinical questions are frequently assessed with a unique cohort design decreasing the power of the analyses. Another aspect could be that the modifications of molecular levels occurring in response to this disease may be too subtle to be efficiently measured in these systemic fluids. We assume therefore that fluids or tissues geographically close to the place of the disease (the eyes) will be more valuable.

300 Biomarkers in orbital fat of TAO patients

Exploring the orbital fat content in TAO patients is, to our point of view, highly relevant since the disease directly affects this tissue. In orbital fat, the IL-1 β and IL-6 levels seem to be associated with the smoker status of TAO patients [83]. Besides, a transcriptomics study performed on orbital fat reports a clear upregulation of IFN- γ in

TAO patients [84]. Transforming growth factor- β (TGF- β) and fibroblast growth factor 305 306 (FGF) are elevated in the orbital fat of TAO patients and levels of these factors are correlated with the severity of the disease. In the family of growth factors, platelet-307 derived growth factor (PDGF) is probably the most promising at this stage with a 308 central role in the TAO pathological events. Indeed, several studies have reported its 309 overexpression in orbital tissues of TAO patients [85-87], independently of the activity 310 grade of TAO. In addition, specific isoforms of PDGF improve the TSH-R expression 311 on orbital fibroblasts, amplifying the autoimmune reaction against TSH-R [85]. Drugs 312 blocking PDGF signalling allow opening new therapeutic options [87, 88]. Finally, in 313 314 vitro studies have also highlighted the adipogenic function of PDGF, able to induce the transformation of orbital fibroblasts into adipocytes [89]. This mechanism 315 participates in the extension of orbital tissue during TAO course. Adipogenesis is also 316 induced by IL-1β through an increase of Cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2). This enzyme, 317 known to modulate inflammation, is anticipated to be a central element of the active 318 phase of TAO disease. Its mRNA and protein levels have been shown to be 319 overexpressed in orbital fibroblasts of TAO patients [90] and hyaluronic acid (HA) 320 seems involved in its regulation. Nevertheless, the interest of COX-2 is not 321 322 definitively assessed as others studies revealed no modification of its expression [91]. On the other hand, at the transcript levels, TGF-ß receptor, IGF-1 and insulin-323 like growth factor binding protein-6 (IBP-6) appear to be downregulated [84]. 324

325 Biomarkers in tears of TAO patients

But, from our point of view, the most promising fluid for TAO in the future will be probably tears. Surprisingly, until now, tears and their clinical relevance have been poorly studied. With the non-invasive, easy and rapid collection of samples, tear-

based approaches open up new routes for diagnostic methods and for understanding 329 of both ocular and systemic diseases. Tears play a key role in the correct function 330 and health of the eye. Tears are necessary for the lubrication of the eye surface that 331 ensures the appropriate optical properties and for the nutrition and protection of 332 surrounding tissues. Tears are secreted by lachrymal glands and contain 333 electrolytes, nucleotides, lipids, metabolites and proteins. But these components can 334 also be released from surrounding damaged tissues or by passive transport from 335 blood. The production and composition of tears is therefore a dynamic system that 336 depends on environmental factors, stimulus, infection or disease. Consequently, the 337 338 ability to measure any subtle modification targeting one or several biomarkers in tear contents opens promising opportunities for screening not only ocular but also 339 systemic diseases. 340

The behaviour of the pro-inflammatory proteins in blood could be extrapolated to 341 tears. A profile similar to that observed in the blood, can be highlighted in tears with a 342 net increase of IL-1β, IL-6 and IL-17 in active compared to inactive TAO patients [62]. 343 Another important actor of inflammation, Tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-a, has been 344 measured only in tears. Its concentration is higher in inactive and active TAO patients 345 346 than in control ones [62]. Moreover, two polymorphisms (-1031T/C and -863C/A) of TNF- α gene have been found in samples from a Japanese population with a dramatic 347 increase in patients with Graves' disease suffering from TAO in comparison to those 348 without TAO. In addition, these polymorphisms seem associated to the severity of 349 TAO [92]. Interleukin-7 has also been reported in tears and orbital fat and is 350 suspected to changes according to the different phases of the disease [93]. Finally, 351 using proteomics experiments, potential new candidates have been revealed such as 352 Proline-rich-protein members (PROL1/PRP4) involved in the modulation of the 353

microflora of the eye, and presenting protective function [94, 95], or S100 calcium binding proteins (S100A8/S100A9) modulating inflammation and cell adhesion [94, 95].

357

358 Conclusions

The story of TAO biomarkers is just starting: efficient biomarkers used in routine for TAO have still to be discovered. Ideally, they will offer a new opportunity for improving early diagnosis, follow-up and treatment monitoring. Further, it could help to a better understanding of pathophysiology and permit new personalizedtherapeutic strategies.

Nevertheless, to be a success story, biomarker discovery should carefully consider 364 the best source of samples in relation to the clinical question and the characteristics 365 of the TAO disease. In order to be extended on a larger scale and finally to the whole 366 population, we strongly believe that a good source of biomarkers should take into 367 account sample collection feasibility. Orbital fat or muscles, even if highly specific, 368 will not be easy to obtain and their collection is an invasive method. They can be 369 collected during a surgery of orbital decompression, which is possible only when the 370 inflammation is calming down. It means also that such samples could not be 371 extrapolated for basic diagnosis nor used as preventive tool. In these situations, 372 373 common biofluids such as blood seem to be more appropriate for biomarker investigation. However, considering the past, whatever the disease, there has been 374 little success in translating these findings into clinical applications. 375

More unusual samples including tears have recently emerged as new global source 376 377 of biomarkers and could be promising and innovative clinical tests in TAO disease in the near future. Because tear sampling is a non-invasive and rapid method, tear-378 based approaches open promising avenues for diagnostic method and will allow 379 opportunities for deepening understanding of this challenging orbital disease. In 380 addition, as a complex mixture, tears offer the possibility of discovering not only 381 proteins but also RNAs, lipids, metabolites biomarkers that could interestingly 382 complement the traditional clinical tools available for ophthalmologists. 383

384

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389 Author disclosure statement

390 The authors declare that they do not have any commercial relation that might create 391 conflicts of interest.

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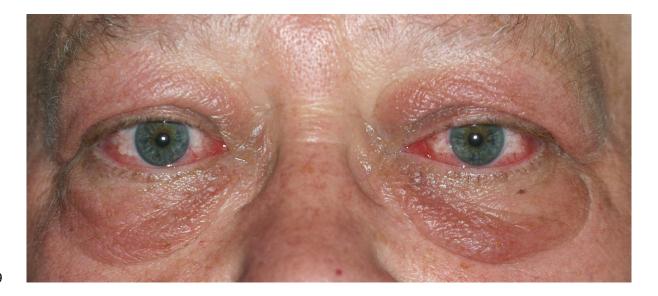
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- 666 Figures
- 667 FIG. 1. Bilateral inflammatory Thyroid-Associated Orbitopathy with oedema and redness of
- 668 eyes and lids



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670 FIG. 2. Left unilateral exophthalmos with limitation in upgaze and diplopia (double vision).

