

Thyroperoxidase and Thyroid Autoimmunity

Thyropoxydase et auto-immunité thyroïdienne

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Contents

Sommaire

- V Preface
- VI *Préface*
- VII Acknowledgments
- VIII *Remerciements*

MOLECULAR BIOLOGY AND REGULATION *BIOLOGIE MOLÉCULAIRE ET RÉGULATION*

- 3 **S. Kimura**
Structure and regulation of the human thyroid peroxidase gene
Structure et régulation du gène de la thyroperoxydase humaine
- 11 **M.J. Abramowicz, D. Christophe and G. Vassart**
Regulation of the TPO gene transcription
Régulation de la transcription du gène de la TPO
- 17 **K.D. Kaufman, S. Filetti, P. Seto and B. Rapoport**
Expression of recombinant, enzymatically-active, human thyroid peroxidase in eukaryotic cells
Expression d'une thyroperoxydase humaine recombinante active dans les cellules eucaryotes
- 25 **H. Francis-Lang, M. Price, U. Martin and R. Di Lauro**
The thyroid specific nuclear factor, TTF-1, binds to the rat thyroid peroxidase promoter
Le facteur nucléaire thyroïdien TTF-1 se fixe sur le promoteur de la thyroperoxydase de rat
- 33 **B. Corvilain, C. Gerard, E. Raspe, A. Lefort, J. Mockel, J. Van Sande and J.E. Dumont**
Hormonal regulation of iodination
Régulation hormonale de l'iodation

- 43 **L. Chiovato, P. Vitti, C. Mammoli, F. Santini, M. Tonacchera, P. Lapi, P. Cucchi, P. Carayon and A. Pinchera**
Regulation by TSH and thyroid stimulating antibodies of TPO expression
Régulation de l'expression de la TPO par la TSH et les anticorps stimulant de la thyroïde
- 53 **R. Zarrilli, S. Formisano and B. Di Jeso**
Thyroglobulin, thyroid peroxidase and iodide carrier display different sensitivities to hormonal induction and to neoplastic transformation
La thyroglobuline, la thyroperoxydase et le transporteur d'iode montrent des sensibilités différentes à l'induction hormonale et à la transformation maligne
- 55 **P.S. Barnett, B. Bhatt, A. Pagliuca, G. Mufti, A.M. Mc Gregor and J.P. Banga**
The thyroid peroxidase gene : accurate localisation by non-isotopic *in situ* hybridisation to chromosome 2p13
Le gène de la thyroperoxydase : sa localisation précise sur le chromosome 2p13 par hybridation in situ non isotopique

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION
STRUCTURE ET FONCTION

- 59 **B. Czarnocka, J. Ruf, M. Ferrand and P. Carayon**
Immunochemical properties of hTPO
Propriétés immuno-chimiques de la TPO humaine
- 69 **A.B. Rawitch, G. Pollock, S.X. Yang and A. Taurog**
The location and nature of the N-linked oligosaccharide units in porcine thyroid peroxidase : studies on the tryptic glycopeptides
Nature et localisation des unités N-oligosaccharidiques dans la thyroperoxydase porcine : études sur les glycopeptides tryptiques
- 77 **M. Nakamura, I. Yamazaki and S. Ohtaki**
Thyroperoxidase selects either one-or two- electron oxidations of iodotyrosine and thyroglobulin, depending on their iodine contents
La thyroperoxydase selectionne des oxydations de tyrosine iodée et de thyroglobuline à un ou deux électrons suivant leur contenu en iode
- 85 **A. Taurog**
Thyroid peroxidase as the target for the mechanism of action of the thioureylene antithyroid drugs

La thyroperoxydase comme cible du mécanisme d'action des drogues anti-thyroïdiennes dérivées du thiouracile

- 95 **C. Dupuy, A. Virion, J. Kaniewski, D. Dème and J. Pommier**
Thyroid NADPH-dependent H_2O_2 generating system : mechanism of H_2O_2 formation and regulation by Ca^{2+}
Le système producteur d' H_2O_2 thyroïdien NADPH-dépendant : mécanisme de la formation d' H_2O_2 régulé par Ca^{2+}
- 103 **Y. Long, J.L. Franc and A. Giraud**
Effect of deglycosylation on human and porcine thyroperoxidase activity
Effet de la deglycosylation sur l'activité des thyroperoxydases humaine et porcine

LOCALIZATION AND TRAFFIC
LOCALISATION ET TRANSPORT

- 107 **L.E. Ericson, V. Johanson, J. Mölne, M. Nilsson and T. Ofverholm**
Intracellular transport and cell surface expression of thyroperoxidase
Transport intracellulaire et expression sur la surface cellulaire de la thyroperoxydase
- 117 **B. Rousset, Z. Kostrouch, J. Pommier and Y. Munari-Silem**
Immunolocalization of fonctionnal thyroperoxidase and expression of thyroid cell differentiation
Immunolocalisation de la thyroperoxydase fonctionnelle et expression de la différenciation des cellules thyroïdiennes
- 127 **P. Fragu, S. Halpern, J.C. Olivo and E. Kahn**
Microscopic imaging of human thyroid hormonosynthesis : digital correlation of ion and optical microscopic images
Imagerie microscopique de l'hormonosynthèse thyroïdienne humaine : corrélation digitale d'images obtenues par microscopie optique et ionique
- 133 **C. de Micco, J. Ruf, M.A. Chrestian, N. Gros, J.F. Henry and P. Carayon**
TPO as marker of malignancy in thyroid tumors : immunohistochemical study
Etude immuno-histochimique de la TPO dans les tumeurs thyroïdiennes : intérêt comme marqueur de malignité
- 137 **D. Gruffat, S. Gonzalvez and O. Chabaud**
Long term iodination of thyroglobulin by porcine thyroid cells cultured in porous bottom culture chambers. Regulation by thyrotropin

Suivi de l'iodation de la thyroglobuline par des cellules thyroïdiennes porcines cultivées en chambre poreuse. Régulation par la thyrotropine

INHERITED DEFECTS
ANOMALIES CONGÉNITALES

- 141 **J. Léger, N. Hoog and P. Czernichow**
Iodine organification defect. Permanent and transient cases diagnosed early in infancy
Défaut de l'organification de l'iode. Cas permanents et transitoires diagnostiqués précocement dans l'enfance
- 149 **J.J.M. De Vijlder, H. Bikker and T. Vulsma**
DNA polymorphisms in the TPO gene and hereditary defects in iodide organification
Polymorphisme du DNA dans le gène de la TPO et défauts héréditaires dans l'organification de l'iode
- 157 **G. Medeiros-Neto, A. Mangklabruks, N.J. Cox, D. Rosenthal, D.P. Carvalho-Guimarães and L.J. DeGroot**
Defective expression of the thyroid peroxidase gene
Expression déféctueuse du gène de la thyroperoxydase
- 165 **M.T. den Hartog, B.E. Sjollema, A. Rijnberk, J.E. van Dijk and J.J.M. de Vijlder**
Loosely anchored peroxidase. A possible explanation for an iodide organification defect in a hypothyroid cat
Ancrage faible de la peroxydase. Une explication possible du défaut d'organification de l'iode chez un chat hypothyroïdien

CIRCULATING TPO
LA TPO CIRCULANTE

- 169 **T.J. Wilkin and J.L. Diaz**
Approaches to the measurement of TPO in serum
Tentatives de dosage de la TPO circulante
- 173 **U. Feldt-Rasmussen, M. Hoier-Madsen, J. Date and M. Blichert-Toft**
Acute release of thyroid peroxidase during subtotal thyroidectomy
Relargage aigu de thyroperoxydase lors de la thyroïdectomie subtotale

CHARACTERIZATION OF TPO AUTOANTIBODIES
CARACTÉRISATION DES AUTO-ANTICORPS ANTI-TPO

- 177 **L.J. DeGroot**
Heterogeneity of human autoantibodies to TPO
Hétérogénéité des auto-anticorps anti-TPO humains
- 183 **J. Ruf, M. Ferrand and P. Carayon**
Cross-reactivity between antibodies to thyroglobulin and thyroperoxydase
Réactivité croisée entre anticorps anti-thyroglobuline et anti-thyroperoxydase
- 195 **N. Fukuma, D. Sarsero, J. Furmaniak, C.A.S. Pegg, S.M. McLachlan and B. Rees Smith**
B and T cell epitopes on thyroid peroxidase
Épitopes de cellules B et T sur la thyroperoxydase
- 203 **R. Elisei, S. Swillens, G. Vassart and M. Ludgate**
Molecular characterization of thyroid peroxidase epitopes
Caractérisation des épitopes de la thyroperoxydase au niveau moléculaire
- 209 **R. Finke, P. Seto, M. Derwahl and B. Rapoport**
Identification of nine amino acids as the epitope for two monoclonal anti-peroxidase antibodies
Identification de neuf acides aminés correspondant à un épitope reconnu par deux anticorps monoclonaux anti-thyroperoxydase
- 211 **D.L. Ewins, J.P. Banga, R.W.S. Tomlinson, P.S. Barnett and A.M. McGregor**
Determination of epitope specificities of monoclonal antibodies to thyroid peroxidase using recombinant antigen preparations
Détermination des spécificités épitopiques d'anticorps monoclonaux anti-thyroperoxydase au moyen de préparations d'antigène recombinant

EFFECTS OF TPO AUTOANTIBODY ON THE THYROID CELL
EFFETS DES AUTO-ANTICORPS ANTI-TPO SUR LA CELLULE THYROIDIENNE

- 215 **Y. Kohno, N. Naito, F. Yamaguchi, K. Saito, H. Niimi and T. Hosoya**
Autoantibodies inhibiting thyroid peroxidase enzyme activity : specificities of anti-thyroid peroxidase antibodies in healthy subjects and patients with systemic lupus erythematosus

Les auto-anticorps inhibiteurs de l'activité enzymatique de la thyroperoxydase : spécificités des anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase chez les sujets normaux et les patients atteints de lupus érythémateux

- 225 **R. Winand and P. Wadeux**
Is TPO the only thyroid antigen involved in the complement dependent cytotoxicity ?
La TPO est-elle le seul antigène thyroïdien impliqué dans la cytotoxicité dépendante du complément

- 233 **U. Bogner, H. Peters and H. Schleusener**
Thyroid cytotoxic antibodies are not identical with thyroid microsomal/peroxidase antibodies
Les anticorps thyroïdiens cytotoxiques ne sont pas les anticorps anti-microsome thyroïdien / anti-peroxydase

CELLULAR IMMUNOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL MODELS
IMMUNOLOGIE CELLULAIRE ET MODELES EXPÉRIMENTAUX

- 243 **F. Akasu, Y. Kasuga, S. Matsubayashi, P. Carayon and R. Volpé**
Induction of CD⁴⁺ T cells from autoimmune thyroid disease by thyroperoxidase (TPO) *in vitro*
Induction in vitro, par la thyroperoxydase (TPO), de cellules T CD⁴⁺ dans les cas de maladies thyroïdiennes auto-immunes

- 251 **H. Tang, E. Baudin and J. Charreire**
Localization in tryptic fragments from thyroglobulin of epitope(s) related to Hashimoto's thyroiditis or experimental autoimmune thyroiditis
Localisation, dans des fragments tryptiques de thyroglobuline, d'épitope(s) impliqué(s) dans la thyroïdite d'Hashimoto ou dans la thyroïdite expérimentale auto-immune

- 257 **N. Yokoyama, A. Taurog, S. Alex, R. Rajatanavin and L.E. Braverman**
Do TPO antibodies play a role in lymphocytic thyroiditis in the BB/Wor rat ?
Les anticorps anti-TPO jouent-ils un rôle dans la thyroïdite lymphocytaire du rat BB/Wor ?

- 267 **C.M. Dayan, M. Londei, A.E. Corcoran, B. Rapoport and M. Feldmann**
Specific recognition of thyroid peroxidase by thyroid infiltrating T cell clones in human autoimmune thyroiditis

Reconnaissance spécifique de la peroxydase thyroïdienne par des clones de cellules T infiltrant la thyroïde dans la thyroïdite auto-immune humaine

**TPO AUTOANTIBODIES IN HUMAN
AUTO-ANTICORPS ANTI-TPO CHEZ L'HOMME**

- 271 **D.I.W. Phillips, L. Prentice, D. Sarsero, S.M. McLachlan, M. Upadhyaya, P.W. Lunt and B. Rees Smith**
Autoantibodies to thyroid peroxidase and thyroglobulin are inherited as an autosomal dominant characteristic in families not selected for autoimmune thyroid disease
Les auto-anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase et anti-thyroglobuline sont transmis comme un trait caractéristique autosomique dominant dans des familles non sélectionnées pour une maladie auto-immune thyroïdienne
- 275 **S. Mariotti, P. Caturegli, G. Barbesino and A. Pinchera**
Serum anti-thyroid peroxidase autoantibody in autoimmune thyroid disease
Les auto-anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase sériques dans la maladie thyroïdienne auto-immune
- 285 **F. Doullay, J. Ruf, P. Carayon and J.L. Codaccioni**
Autoantibodies to thyroperoxidase in various thyroid and autoimmune diseases
Les auto-anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase dans diverses maladies thyroïdiennes et auto-immunes
- 297 **U. Feldt-Rasmussen, M. Hoier-Madsen, K. Bech, L. Hegedüs, H. Perrild, H. Bliddal, B. Danneskiold-Samso, B. Rasmussen, N.J. Kriegbaum, K. Müller, A. Schouboe and E. Hippe**
Anti-TPO antibodies in non-thyroid autoimmune diseases
Les anticorps anti-TPO dans les maladies auto-immunes non thyroïdiennes
- 303 **D. Glinioer, P. de Nayer, B. Lejeune, J. Kinthaert, J. Ruf, G. Servais and P. Carayon**
Antithyroid peroxidase antibodies in normal pregnancy
Les anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase lors de grossesse normale

INVESTIGATION OF THYROID AUTOIMMUNITY
EXPLORATION DE L'AUTO-IMMUNITÉ THYROÏDIENNE

- 315 **H. Bornet, A.M. Madec, P. Rodien, R. Latter, P. Haond, H. Allannic and J. Orgiazzi**
Evaluation of anti-TPO antibody determination in various clinical situations
Evaluation du dosage des anticorps anti-TPO dans différents cas cliniques
- 321 **R. Gutekunst, W. Hafermann, U. Löhrs and P.C. Scriba**
The value of ultrasonography in the detection of lymphocytic thyroiditis
Valeur de l'échographie dans le dépistage des thyroïdites lymphocytaires
- 329 **K. Weber and H. Schatz**
Autoantibodies to thyroid peroxidase and microsomal antigen in autoimmune thyroid diseases
Les auto-anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase et anti-antigène microsomal dans les maladies thyroïdiennes auto-immunes
- 331 **L. Baldet, J. Faure and C. Jaffiol**
Auto-anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase (anti-TPO) en pathologie thyroïdienne
Anti-thyroperoxydase autoantibodies (anti-TPO) in thyroid diseases
- 333 **P. Caron, T. Babin and M. Hoff**
Etude comparative des méthodes de dosage des auto-anticorps anti-thyroïdiens en pathologie thyroïdienne
Anti-thyroid autoantibodies : comparative study in thyroid diseases
- 335 **C. Massart, I. Guilhem, J. Gibassier, M. Nicol and H. Allannic**
Anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase et maladie de Basedow : intérêt dans la surveillance du traitement par anti-thyroïdiens de synthèse
Anti-thyroperoxydase antibodies and Graves' disease : interest in the follow-up of patients treated with anti-thyroid drugs
- 337 **C. Poustis-Delpont, S. Altare, S. Hieronimus, A.M. Guedj, M. Harter and P. Sudaka**
Evaluation d'une technique de dosage des anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase par radiocompétition

Evaluation of a radiocompetition assay for anti-thyroperoxidase antibodies

- 339 **C. Schwartz, H. Larbre, B. Maes, M.J. Delisle and G. Del-tour**
Dosage des anticorps anti-TPO et anti-microsomes dans différentes pathologies thyroïdiennes
Anti-TPO and anti-microsomal antibody assays in several thyroid diseases
- 341 **M. Izembart and G. Vallée**
Intérêt clinique de la détermination des anticorps anti-thyroperoxydase : résultats préliminaires
Clinical interest of anti-thyroperoxidase antibody : preliminary results
- 343 **Y. Fulla, L. Nonnenmacher and B. Weill**
Comparaison entre le dosage des anticorps anti-TPO en radioimmunologie et le dosage des anticorps anti-microsomes en immunofluorescence
Comparison between radioimmunoassay or anti-TPO auto-antibodies and indirect immunofluorescence assay for anti-microsomal antibodies
- 345 **S. Dimackie, P. Courrière, A. Boneu and G. Soula**
Intérêt du dosage des anticorps anti-récepteurs de la TSH (TBII) dans la maladie de Basedow
Usefulness of anti-TSH receptor antibody assay (TBII) in Graves' disease
- 347 **V.J.M. Pop, H.A.M. de Rooy, H.L. Vader and D. Van der Heide**
Prevalence of postpartum thyroid dysfunction in The Netherlands
Prévalence du dysfonctionnement thyroïdien au cours post-partum aux Pays-Bas

MISCELLANEOUS
DIVERS

- 351 **J.P. Banga, D.L. Ewins, P.S. Barnett, R.W.S. Tomlinson, D. Mahadevan, G.J. Barton, B.J. Sutton, J.W. Saldanha, E. Odell and A.M. McGregor**
Thyroid peroxidase autoantigen : localization of autoantigenic epitopes on recombinant protein and prediction of secondary structure
L'auto-antigène thyroperoxydase : localisation des épitopes auto-antigéniques sur la protéine recombinante et prédiction de la structure secondaire

The value of ultrasonography in the detection of lymphocytic thyroiditis

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INTRODUCTION

Lymphocytic thyroiditis (LT) is believed to be a rare disease in Germany that is not well appreciated (13). The aim of this study was to evaluate different diagnostic procedures for the study of LT (10).

SUBJECTS and METHODS

The charts of 106 hospitalized and ambulatory patients with LT treated between January 1984 and December 1987 were reviewed. The diagnosis of LT was based on physical examination and confirmatory findings in at least two of the following four procedures: measurement of antimicrosomal antibodies [TPO(mic)]; TSH; ultrasonography (US) and fine needle aspiration cytology (FNA) of the thyroid. Only patients (n=92, 88 women, 4 men, age 11-81, mean age 47 yr) where all four diagnostic procedures were available, were included in the study.

Clinical manifestations were recorded; TPO(mic) was determined by immunofluorescence (20), TSH run in duplicate by a supersensitive luminescence immunoassay (24), T4 and T3 were measured using commercial kits (Henning Berlin, FRG). Thyroid size and morphology were investigated by ultrasound using SRT, linear Mhz 5, General Electric, Rancho Cordova, CA (9). Sonograms from population studies were used as controls (8). In addition both thyroid lobes were biopsied under sonographic control with a fine needle (od, 0.6-0.7mm). The smears were air dried and stained by the May-Grünwald-Giemsa technique for morphological evaluation.

RESULTS

Clinical manifestations

	PERCENT	n=92
NO SYMPTOMS	29.3	27
INCREASE IN WEIGHT	44.6	41
GOITRE	37.0	34
MENTAL COMPLAINTS	34.8	32
MYXEDEMA	23.9	22
PARAESTHESIA	19.6	18
FATIGUE	18.5	17
ARTHRALGIA	18.5	17
GLOBUS HYSTERICUS	17.4	16
EPIGASTRIC DISCOMFORT	15.2	14
ANAEMIA	11.9	11
DYSPHAGIA	8.7	8
HYPERCHOLESTEROLEMIA	6.5	6
THYROTOXICOSIS	6.5	6

TPO(mic)

In 12 (13%) patients TPO(mic) were undetectable. TPO(mic) titers of 1:32 were found in 5 (5.4%), 1:100 in 11 (12%), 1:320 in 19 (20.7%), 1:1000 in 31 (33.7%) and >1:1000 in 14 (15.2%) patients respectively. The frequency distribution is shifted towards higher titers.

TSH

In 4 patients (4.3%) TSH serum levels were <0.3 μ U/ml (normal range 0.3-3.9). Three of those patients had elevated T₃, but only one of those three had an elevated serum T₄ level. Forty-one (44.6%) patients had TSH levels 0.3-3.9, 26 (28.3%) 4-20, 14 (15.2%) >20 - 50, and 7 (7.6%) >50 μ U/ml.

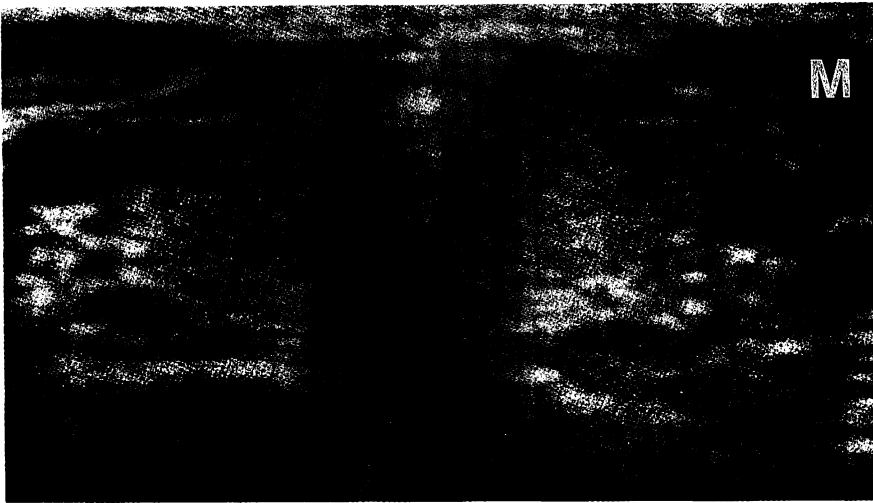
Ultrasonography

Thyroid volume: 43 (48.9%) women had normal thyroid volume (<18ml, range 3-17.8, mean 12), and 45 (51.1%) had enlarged glands (range 18.2- >140, mean 35.3). The four men had thyroid volume (normal >25ml) of 8, 23, 27 and 64 ml.

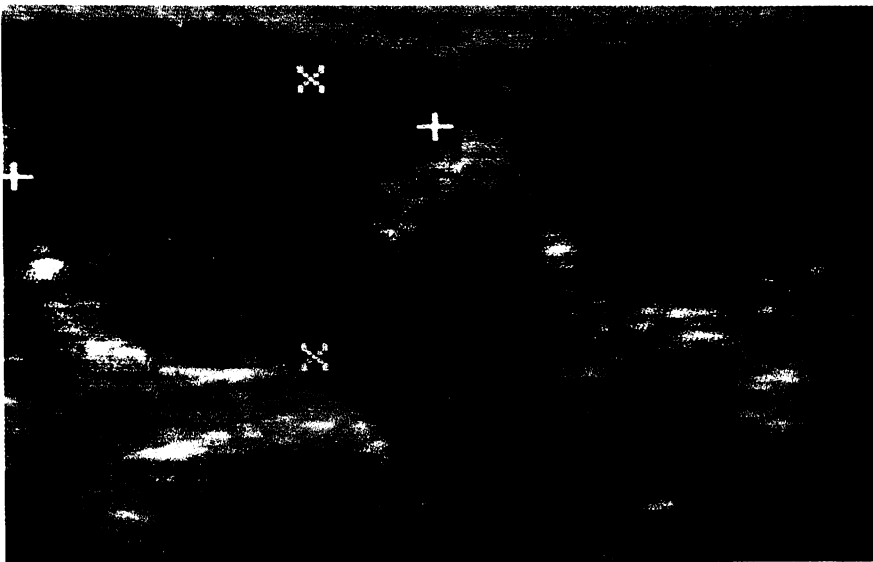
Echopatterns: all except 5 (5.4%) patients had scattered sonolucent echopatterns. In 13 (14%) patients solid nodules were detected. (Fig. 1 A and B).

Figure 1. Transverse sonograms of the thyroid (T):

A. normal echopattern compared to the sonolucent muscles (M) from a healthy person.



B. sonolucent echopattern from a patient with LT.



Cytology

Thirty (32.6%) patients had hypercellular smears; 54 (58.7%) smears presented a scanty to moderate overall cellularity; and 8 (8.7%) smears showed sparse lymphocytes and were not diagnostic for LT alone.

Correlations

There were no correlations between the cellularity of the smear, thyroid function and/or the TPO(mic) titer.

DISCUSSION

As in previous studies (2, 12, 17, 18) we also found great clinical variation. A quarter of the patients had no complaints or physical findings. Many symptoms were nonspecific and subject to the individual bias of the physician.

Determination of serum TPO(mic) is not always conclusive for the diagnosis of LT. In this study TPO(mic) were absent in 13% and low in 17.4% (<1:320), generally considered as negative (1). More than thirteen percent of all cases would have been missed without ultrasound and/or FNA. On the other hand, in 2 - 20% of the healthy population TPO(mic) can be found without apparent thyroid disease (1, 3 - 5, 7, 11, 21, 22); in our area 3% (20). Our data clearly support the assumption, that serum findings only incompletely reflect thyroid status.

Thyroid function is poorly related to LT (2, 3, 12, 17, 18). The prevalence of hypothyroidism underestimates the prevalence of LT. Since TSH and TPO(mic) titers are poorly correlated, the sensitivity of the combination of elevated TSH and detectable TPO(mic) for detection of LT in population studies must be even lower.

Scintiscanning is impractical and rather unreliable as a diagnostic tool for LT, since the uptake of radionuclides depends on thyroid function as well as the iodine content of the gland (13). Although ultrasound does not differentiate between LT and Graves' disease (6, 15, 19, 23), it surely is a useful tool for screening in unselected groups. If a selected population of patients with thyroid diseases is considered, the specificity of ultrasound alone for detecting LT must be low, since this group will contain many patients with Graves' disease. However the combination of ultrasound and clinical evaluation will result in a high specificity even in a selected group.

FNA has a high diagnostic accuracy. Interpretation of the varying amounts of lymphocytes is however difficult (14). These findings could either indicate different LT diseases or merely reflect various inflammatory stages. If only one lobe is aspirated LT may be confused with focal lymphocytic reactions, which are common in endemic goitres (16). Only in rare instances can lymphocytes be found in focal sonolucent or solid alterations. To confirm the diagnosis of LT, FNA from one site probably suffices, if the scan is homogeneously sonolucent. Otherwise both lobes have to be aspirated.

In conclusion, this study confirms that sonography combined with clinical evaluation is rather specific for LT. Ultrasound additionally provides information about the size, topography and the nodularity of the thyroid. In cases where ultrasound is performed primarily, one can proceed to further examinations. Otherwise, it can support the laboratory and/or clinical findings that suggest

LT. When clinical features are inconclusive LT can only be confirmed by appropriate combination of serological and morphological tests. These conclusions have to be confirmed in a prospective study.

SUMMARY

The value of ultrasound (US) compared to established diagnostic procedures was investigated by retrospectively reviewing medical records of 92 patients (88 women and 4 men, age 11-81 yr, mean age 47 yr) with lymphocytic thyroiditis (LT). Clinical manifestations of the disease, serum antimicrosomal antibodies and TSH were determined in all patients. The thyroid was examined by US. Both lobes were aspirated by a fine needle under sonographic control and smears examined cytologically. A total of 27 (29.3%) patients had no clinical symptoms. TPO(mic) were undetectable in 12 (13%) patients, 16 (17.4%) had low titers 1:32-1:100, and 64 (69.6%) $\geq 1:320$. TSH (normal range 0.3-3.9 $\mu\text{U/ml}$) was <0.3 in 4 (4.3%), 0.3-3.9 in 41 (44.6%), 4-20 in 26 (28.3%), and >20 in 21 (22.8%) cases. US revealed a scattered sonolucent echo in 87 (94.6%) patients, and in 45 (48.9%) a normal thyroid volume (women <18 , men <25 ml). Cytology was diagnostic in 84 (91.3%) patients.

In conclusion, US can suggest LT. If TPO(mic) are undetectable or TPO(mic) titers are not significant and/or clinical symptoms are uncertain, fine needle aspiration (FNA) can confirm the sonographic finding. LT can only be confirmed by appropriate combination of serological and morphological tests. Finally, LT is obviously more common in iodine deficient areas than generally assumed.

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Résumé

Une étude rétrospective des dossiers médicaux de 92 patients (88 femmes et 4 hommes, âgés de 11 à 81 ans, moyenne d'âge: 47 ans), présentant une thyroïdite lymphocytaire (LT) a permis une comparaison entre le diagnostic établi par ultrasons (US) et un diagnostic établi par des méthodes habituelles. Les manifestations cliniques de la maladie, les anticorps anti-microsomaux sériques et la TSH ont été évaluées chez tous les patients. Des prélèvements par aiguille fine sous contrôle échographique ont été effectués sur les lobes, et un examen cytologique a été effectué sur les prélèvements. Un total de 27 patients (29.3%) ne présentaient aucun symptôme clinique. La TPO n'était pas décelable chez 12 patients (13%), 16, (17.4%) présentaient une concentration basse de TPO 1:32 - 1:100, et 64 (69.6%) un taux > 1/320. La TSH (zone normale 0.3 - 3.9 uU/ml) était < 0.3 dans 4 cas (4.3%), 0.3 - 3.9 dans 41 cas (44.6%), 4 - 20 dans 26 cas (28.3%), et > 20 dans 21 cas (22.8%). Les US ont révélé une réponse positive diffuse chez 88 patients (94.6%) et un volume thyroïdien normal chez 45 sujets (48.9%) (femmes <18, hommes <25ml). Chez 84 patients (91.3%), le diagnostic a pu être confirmé par un examen cytologique. En conclusion, les US laissent supposer une thyroïdite lymphocytaire. Si les anticorps anti-TPO sont indétectables ou présentent des titres non significatifs et/ou si les symptômes cliniques sont incertains, une aspiration par aiguille fine peut confirmer les résultats échographiques. Les thyroïdites lymphocytaires peuvent seulement être confirmées par une combinaison appropriée de tests sérologiques et morphologiques. En conclusion, les thyroïdites lymphocytaires sont plus répandues dans les zones déficientes en iode qu'on ne l'a généralement supposé.