



The Brazilian Journal of INFECTIOUS DISEASES

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Letters to the Editor

Viral genotypes and human rs12979860 polymorphism of the IFNL3 gene in hepatitis C infected patients in Southern Brazil

Dear Editor,

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is a global health problem and approximately 80% of the patients develop chronic hepatitis C, which can progress to liver cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma. HCV genotype is a classical predictor of the success of the standard treatment (interferon- α in combination with ribavirin). HCV genotype 1 carriers have usually a lower rate of response than patients infected with HCV genotypes 2 and 3.¹ Human single nucleotide polymorphisms near the gene for interferon- λ 3 (IFNL3; formerly known as *IL28B*) were also recently associated with spontaneous HCV clearance and sustained response to interferon-based therapy.² The present study aimed to determine the frequency of the HCV and IFNL3 genotypes in hepatitis C patients from the North region of Rio Grande do Sul state, Southern Brazil.

Adult individuals with chronic hepatitis C attended in referral services for patient care in Passo Fundo (a medium-sized urban center in the North region of Rio Grande do Sul state) were selected from August 2010 to July 2011. Socio-demographic data were obtained from a structured questionnaire and patient medical records were reviewed to obtain clinical and virological information. IFNL3-molecular analysis was performed as previously described.² The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Luterana do Brasil (ULBRA).

A total of 191 HCV-infected patients were included in the study. Patients were predominantly female (52.9%) and had a mean age of 51.6 ± 11.4 years. Approximately half of the

participants ($n = 92$, 48.2%) received blood transfusions and 75 patients (39.3%) reported that this condition was the possible HCV transmission route. Use of sharp objects (26.7%) and needle sharing (17.8%) were also cited as possible transmission factors. HCV genotype 1 was found in 76 (39.8%), genotype 2 in 46 (24.1%) and genotype 3 in 69 patients (36.1%). HCV genotype 1 was significantly more often in users of illicit drugs, while genotype 2 was more frequently found in women and old people. Sixty patients (31.4%) showed the CC, 97 (50.8%) CT and 34 (17.8%) TT IFNL3 genotypes (Table 1).

Some HCV genotypes have a restricted geographical distribution (genotypes 4-6), while others (genotypes 1-3) are more broadly disseminated. HCV genotype 1 is the most prevalent in the world.¹ In the present study, genotype 1 was also demonstrated in the highest frequency, followed by genotypes 3 and 2, respectively. Other studies in Brazil have also shown the occurrence of these three genotypes, but genotype 1 with frequencies over 60%, while genotype 2 lower than 10%.^{3,4} This unusual high frequency of HCV genotype 2 confirms the results observed in a previous study.⁵ In the present report it was further demonstrated the high proportion of old women infected with this genotype. IFNL3 CC genotype, a good human prognostic factor of treatment outcome, was also found in a percentage similar to other Brazilian study.²

In conclusion, the data obtained in the present study have shown a high frequency of HCV genotype 2 in an urban center in Southern Brazil and suggest the HCV genotypes could have different transmission routes.

Table 1 – Distribution of socio-demographic and epidemiological characteristics in patients stratified according to HCV genotypes.

| Variable | Total (n = 191) | HCV genotypes | | | p |
|--|-----------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| | | 1 (n = 76) | 2 (n = 46) | 3 (n = 69) | |
| Male gender | 90 (47.1) | 42 (55.3) | 15 (32.6) | 33 (47.8) | 0.052 |
| Age (years) | 51.6 ± 11.4 | 50.0 ± 10.0 | 55.6 ± 13.8 | 50.7 ± 10.6 | 0.024 |
| Skin color | | | | | 0.204 |
| White | 126 (66.0) | 44 (57.9) | 37 (80.4) | 45 (65.2) | |
| Mixed/mulatto | 54 (28.2) | 27 (35.5) | 7 (15.2) | 20 (28.9) | |
| Black | 11 (5.8) | 5 (6.6) | 2 (4.3) | 4 (5.8) | |
| Educational level | | | | | 0.156 |
| Complete primary education or less | 97 (50.8) | 33 (43.4) | 23 (50.0) | 41 (59.4) | |
| Secondary or higher education | 94 (49.2) | 42 (56.6) | 23 (50.0) | 28 (40.6) | |
| Possible forms of HCV infection ^a | | | | | 0.577 |
| Sex | 19 (9.9) | 8 (10.6) | 1 (2.2) | 10 (14.5) | |
| Blood transfusion | 75 (39.3) | 26 (34.2) | 23 (47.8) | 27 (39.1) | |
| Infected material | 51 (26.7) | 19 (25.0) | 15 (32.6) | 17 (24.6) | |
| Hemodialysis | 2 (1.0) | – | 1 (2.2) | 1 (1.4) | |
| Sharing needles | 34 (17.8) | 19 (25.0) | 5 (10.9) | 10 (14.5) | |
| Occupational exposure | 7 (3.7) | 2 (2.6) | 1 (2.2) | 4 (5.8) | |
| Smoking drug use | 37 (19.4) | 25 (32.9) | 1 (2.2) | 11 (15.9) | <0.001 |
| Snorting drug use | 28 (14.7) | 19 (25.0) | 1 (2.2) | 8 (11.6) | 0.001 |
| Injecting drug use | 21 (11.0) | 13 (17.1) | 1 (2.2) | 7 (10.1) | 0.026 |
| Blood transfusion | 92 (48.2) | 33 (43.4) | 25 (54.3) | 34 (49.3) | 0.491 |
| Hemodialysis | 4 (2.1) | 1 (1.3) | 1 (2.2) | 2 (2.9) | 0.831 |
| Tattoo | 343 (17.3) | 18 (23.7) | 6 (13.0) | 9 (13.0) | 0.163 |
| Piercing | 4 (2.1) | – | 1 (2.2) | 3 (4.3) | 0.129 |
| IFNL3 – CC genotype | 60 (31.4) | 21 (27.6) | 17 (37.0) | 22 (31.9) | 0.339 |

Variables expressed as number (percentage) or mean ± standard deviation.

^a Totals do not coincide due to lack of data from certain participants in the study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Received 25 July 2013

Accepted 5 December 2013

Available online 3 January 2014

1413-8670

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bjid.2013.12.001>