Clinical microbiological case: fever and headache in a heavy consumer of eucalyptus extract

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Please refer to the article on page x of this issue to view the questions to which these answers refer.

CLINICAL OUTCOME

Latex antigen testing of the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and blood were positive for Cryptococcus neoformans with a titre of 1:4096 and the organism grew on Sabouraud agar. Subculture on L-lahavamine glycine bromothymol blue (CGB) agar yielded blue colonies, identifying a C. neoformans var. gattii. This yeast was found to be susceptible, using the E test method, to amphotericin B, itraconazole, fluconazole and 5-flucytosine.

A diagnosis of cryptococcal meningitis was made and a search for risk factors showed that: human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) serology was negative, CD4+ lymphocyte levels were normal in both percentage (30%) and absolute number (700 cells/mL) and total haemolytic complement levels were within normal limits. No cancers were found, nor was there any history of use of immunosuppressive drugs. A contrast-enhanced computerized tomographic scan of the brain and sinuses was unremarkable.

Fluconazole, at the dose of 1200 mg, given intravenously, was started but 1 week later, because of the persistence of fever and headache, treatment was changed to liposomal amphotericin B (5 mg/kg/day). After 4 weeks it was changed again to itraconazole and after 2 more weeks of treatment the patient flew back to the USA, completely recovered from his symptoms.

The cytokine levels (measured using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) on CSF and serum at the beginning of the disease and after 4 weeks of antifungal therapy are reported in Table 1. A remarkable increase of interleukin-10 (IL-10) in the CSF was noted at the beginning of the disease, this cytokine decreased after effective antifungal therapy. Interferon-g (IFN-g) was never stimulated during the disease.

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis was meningitis due to Cryptococcus neoformans var. gattii.

DISCUSSION

Cryptococcus neoformans var. gattii meningitis is rare among immunodepressed people and affects especially immunocompetent patients exposed to the flowering of the Australian tree Eucalyptus camaldulensis [1,2]. This meningitis is rare in Europe [3–5]. The patient described here had travelled in many countries but had never travelled across Australia. The only risk factor for this patient appeared to be the improper and heavy use of eucalyptus extract.

Eucalyptus extracts could contain C. neoformans var. gattii yeasts derived from the eucalyptus trees, but the culture of the gel used recently by the patient was negative for bacteria and fungi. However, this finding might not exclude the possibility that the patient was exposed to C. neoformans var. gattii through eucalyptus extract.

In relation to cytokine levels in patients with cryptococcosis, if we take as reference values in CSF those found by Chaka et al. [6], we observed that at the beginning of the disease in our patient, there were high levels of IL-10 and tumour necrosis fator-a (TNF-a) and low levels of IL-1b, IFN-g and IL-12. In the serum we observed low levels of IL-10, IL-1b, IFN-g, IL-12, but in contrast, a moderate level of TNF-a was observed. It is notable that IL-10 was almost undetectable in the serum; this could mean that the production of IL-10 was not regulated by the presence of C. neoformans var. gattii capsular antigen, because the cryptococcal antigen latex titre was the same in the CSF and the serum. After 4 weeks of therapy there was a reduction of the production of the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 in the CSF, but on the other hand,
Although high-dose fluconazole, but changed to liposomal amphotericin B due to persistent fever and headache. uconazole, but this could explain why this meningitis had a very long evolution. There was an increased production of the pro-inflammatory cytokine IL-12, both in the serum and in the CSF. This finding led us to postulate that IL-10 is stimulated by the yeast and suppresses the inflammatory response [7], but only in the CSF. In fact, IL-10 was also almost undetectable in the serum at the beginning of the meningitis. On the contrary, IL-12 was produced as the fungus burden decreased after effective therapy, counteracting the effect of IL-10 and stimulating an immune response. IFN-\(\gamma\) was never stimulated either in the CSF or the serum; and this could explain why this meningitis had a very long evolution. This finding agrees with those of Lortholary et al. who found increased levels of CSF IL-10 in patients with cryptococcosis but without HIV infection [8]. IL-10 CSF level might be used, after more extensive studies, as a prognostic factor in C. neoformans var. gatti meningitis.

We started antifungal therapy with high-dose fluconazole, but changed to liposomal amphotericin B due to persistent fever and headache. Although high-dose fluconazole might be effective from the beginning of cryptococcal meningitis [9], there are some studies that have hypothesized that amphotericin B may be more effective in the first 2 weeks of therapy because of its more fungicidal effect [10].

In this patient there were none of the common risk factors found in cryptococcal meningitis. However, the improper use of eucalyptus extracts, which might be a reservoir for C. neoformans var. gattii, could be considered a risk factor for this kind of meningitis.

**REFERENCES**


