THE DETECTION OF *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* BY PCR IN SPUTUM SAMPLES FROM LONG-TERM-TREATED LEPROSY PATIENTS: ASSOCIATIONS WITH SKIN TEST RESULTS AND IMMUNOTHERAPY WITH *Mycobacterium vaccae*


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ABSTRACT

As part of a series of investigations at Baba Baghi Leprosarium in Iran, 44 long-treated leprosy patients were selected for our study. Samples of early morning sputum were obtained from each patient, examined by microscopy for acid-fast bacilli (AFB), and cultured for tubercle bacilli. These tests were negative, but the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) for an insertion sequence believed to be specific for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* was applied to each sputum sample and those from six patients were found to be positive. Five of the six positive samples were from the 21 patients producing Koch-type responses to tuberculin, and none were from the 11 patients previously found to have skin-tissue fluid or sputum positive by PCR for *Mycobacterium leprae*. Whereas immunotherapy with killed *Mycobacterium vaccae* given nearly 2 years earlier to 23 of the patients strongly influenced PCR results for *M. leprae* (*p* = 0.01), it had no influence on results for tubercle bacilli. However, at a second sampling date 18 months later, the only 2 patients still positive by PCR for tubercle bacilli came from the placebo recipient group. The possible significance of the findings is discussed.


INTRODUCTION

Tuberculosis and leprosy are among the most common disabling diseases in the world. It is estimated that around 50 million people have, or recently have had, clinical tuberculosis. More than 2 million people suffer from active leprosy, with a larger number suffering from its resultant disabilities. An association between tuberculosis and leprosy in individuals living in areas endemic for both diseases has been suggested, but little documented, although
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It is likely to be common. In some endemic areas the two diseases appear to coexist, whereas in others they seem mutually exclusive. Whether this is by chance, or reflects an interaction between the two diseases remains a matter of debate. It might be related also to the influence on immunity and susceptibility of variably exposed environmental mycobacteria. There is some evidence from the past that tuberculosis commonly afflicted institutionalized leprosy patients. One of the rare studies on this subject was that of Armour Hansen in 1895, which was cited by Glaziou et al. \(^5\) he found tuberculosis to be the most common cause of death among leprosy patients in Norway. Recently it has been shown that tuberculosis is no uncommoner in leprosy outpatients than in the general population, \(^6\) but two studies have suggested that the presence of leprosy might encourage the development of tuberculosis. \(^5\) The reality of the situation is probably that both diseases and the influence of environmental factors all interact, producing different sets of phenomena in different situations.

This investigation was carried out as part of a study of a group of long-treated leprosy patients in Baba Baghi Leprosy Sanatorium, near Tabriz in Iran. These patients had been skin tested and randomized to receive an injection of killed *M. vaccae* as an immunotherapeutic, or saline placebo 18 months before our first samples were taken. Our aim was to find for tubercle bacilli in the sputum by the polymerase chain reaction (PCR), and relate the findings to the skin test and immunotherapy data, and to the results from our previous study \(^7\) of PCR for *Mycobacterium leprae* (LEP-PCR).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Patients**

A group of 279 patients with long histories (more than 10 years) of treatment for leprosy at Baba Baghi Leprosy Sanatorium, near Tabriz in Iran, were subjected to skin-testing with 2 new tuberculins, and randomized to receive an injection of killed *M. vaccae* as an immunotherapeutic, or saline placebo 18 months before our first samples were taken. We aim was to find for tubercle bacilli in the sputum by the polymerase chain reaction (PCR), and relate the findings to the skin test and immunotherapy data, and to the results from our previous study \(^7\) of PCR for *Mycobacterium leprae* (LEP-PCR).

**Skin-testing**

The 2 new tuberculins used were Tuberculin (T) and Leprosin A (LA). These were prepared in the Medical Microbiology Department of UCL Medical School, London from *M. tuberculosis* and *M. leprae*, respectively. The reagents were injected, 10 cm apart, two on the volar surfaces of each forearm. Doses injected were 0.2 µg of T and 1.0 µg of LA. Reactions were read as longitudinal and transverse diameters of the areas of induration 72 hours after injection. The mean diameter was recorded for each reaction and sizes of 2 mm or greater were taken as positive responses with these reagents. \(^8\) Reactions to Tuberculin showing qualitative evidence of incipient necrosis were recorded as Koch-type responses.

**Immunotherapy**

All the patients skin tested were randomized to receive immunotherapy or placebo as a single intradermal injection of 0.1 mL, given high up over a deltoid muscle. The immunotherapy consisted of a suspension of autoclaved *Mycobacterium vaccae* strain NCTC 11659, 10 mg wetweight/mL in borate buffered saline (pH 8.0), to which Tuberculin was added to a final concentration of 0.2 µg/mL shortly before injection. The placebo used was saline. \(^9\)

**Selection of patients and collection of samples**

Forty-four patients in the age range 30-80 years (mean 57.2 years), comprising 31 men and 13 women representative of the two major forms of leprosy, were selected for our study partly on the basis of the quality of their skin test response to Tuberculin. About half of them (23 cases) had received immunotherapy and the remainder (21 cases) had received placebo. Nineteen had scars of past BCG vaccination. According to their clinical records, 22 had initial diagnosis of multibacillary (MB) leprosy, and 22 of paucibacillary (PB) leprosy. A group of 8 healthy members of staff of the Sanatorium volunteered to provide control samples for our study. Early morning sputum was collected from each participant.

At the time of second sampling, to make up for those from the first selection who were not available, additional patients agreed to give samples. They were 3 women and 7 men, with an average age of 51.3 years, two of whom had BCG scars. Eight had original diagnosis of MB and 2 of PB leprosy, and 6 had received immunotherapy with *M. vaccae*. The details of the patients are included in the Table.

**Culture**

All collected sputum samples were decontaminated and concentrated by a method employing Dithiothreitol and 2% NaOH. Deposits of treated samples were inoculated onto Loewenstein-Jensen (LJ) medium and incubated at 37°C for 6-8 weeks. The slopes were examined for growth at weekly intervals.

**Sputum microscopy**

Smears of the treated sputum deposits were prepared, fixed, and stained by the Ziehl-Neelsen (ZN) method for acid-fast bacilli (AFB). After staining, more than 20 fields of each smear were examined carefully under the light microscope using an oil immersion (× 100) lens.

**Isolation of DNA from sputum**

After bacteriological examination, remaining sputum was transferred to small screw-capped bottles, and kept at
Table I. Results of prior skin testing and randomized immunotherapy with *M. vaccae* in relation to PCR for tubercle bacilli (TB-PCR) and leprosy bacilli (LEP-PCR) at both times of taking samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BCG</th>
<th>Skin test results</th>
<th>IT/T</th>
<th>First sampling</th>
<th>Second sampling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MB patients</td>
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<td>no</td>
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<td>PB patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>10K</td>
<td>12K</td>
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<td>16K</td>
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</table>

Abbreviations used in the Table:


Method,^1^ was used as a positive control in every PCR assay.

Selection of primers and PCR

The primers used for the specific amplification were originally designed by Eisenach et al. from sequences repeated several times in the chromosome of *M. tuberculosis*. The sequences of the primers (synthesized by Osweil DNA Service, Edinburgh, UK) from 5' to 3' were: CCTGCAGGCGTACGCGTCGG and CTGCTACGGCGCGCCCTCGG which amplify a 123-bp fragment of the repetitive DNA sequence IS6110. PCR was performed on each sample using the method of Eisenach et al. ^1^.

Statistical analysis of results

Where appropriate, Fisher's exact test and Student's t-test were used to determine the likely statistical significance of our findings.

RESULTS

Initial parameters

The individual skin test results for the forty-four studied patients are shown in the Table. Twenty one (10 MB and 11 PB patients) were selected because they were recorded as having Koch-type responses (mean reaction size 16.6±3.5 mm) to Tuberculin at skin-testing prior to immunotherapy or placebo 18 months before our first set of samples were collected. Twelve of those producing Koch responses received *M. vaccae* and 10 received placebo. Twenty three patients were randomly selected from the 258 other patients in the immunotherapy study. Eighteen of them were tuberculin positive (10 MB and 8 PB patients) with a mean positive reaction size of 11.5±4.4 mm, and 5 had zero responses (p<0.001 for the difference in sizes between Koch and non-Koch responses to Tuberculin). Thirteen patients made positive responses to Leprosin A (1 MB and 12 PB cases). Eleven PB patients were positive to both reagents.

Eighteen months after our first sampling, repeat samples were obtained from the 40 of our patients still at the sanatorium. Of the additional 10 patients (8 MB and 2 PB cases) first sampled at this time, four had positive tuberculin tests (88±4.9 mm), though not of Koch type. Two responded to leprosin A (1 MB, 1 PB), and four were negative to both skin tests.

Of all the patients sampled for our study, 2/30 MB and 13/24 PB patients were positive to Leprosin A (p=0.00013), and the 12 responders to both two reagents were 12 PB patients. Otherwise skin testing showed no difference between the groups.

Bacteriology and molecular results

None of the first sputum samples from the forty-four
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treated leprosy patients or eight healthy controls were positive by direct microscopy or culture for AFB. In contrast, PCR detected the presence of the 123-bp DNA fragment specific for tubercle bacilli in 6 (13.6%) of the sputum samples from leprosy patients (Table). None of the PCR negative specimens were found to be inhibitory. Four of the positive samples were from men and two were from women. There were equal numbers of positive results among patients with MB or PB disease, and amongst those who had received immunotherapy or placebo 18 months earlier.

The results of PCR according to tuberculin testing are shown in the Table. Amongst patients with Koch responses to Tuberculin 5/21 (23.8%) were positive for M. tuberculosis by PCR in comparison with only 1/23 (4.3%) in those with non-Koch responses (p = 0.074). None of the patients PCR-positive for M. tuberculosis were amongst the 11 patients found PCR-positive for M. leprae in the previous study, although this exclusion was not significant (p = 0.16). There was no association between PCR-positivity for tubercle bacilli and reaction to Leprosin A. Similarly, there was no relationship between PCR-positivity for M. leprae and tuberculin positivity, but there was quite a strong association between a positive PCR for leprosy bacilli and a positive response to Leprosin A (6/13 compared with 3/31; p = 0.012).

Samples were collected at the second visit from all but four of the original patients (including all six who were positive for M. tuberculosis by PCR), and from the additional 10 patients. All these second series of samples were tested by PCR and all were negative except for two (1 MB and 1 PB patient) of the original six positives, both of them having received immunotherapy rather than immunotherapy.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained are surprising in that 6/44 long-treated leprosy patients have sputum apparently positive for M. tuberculosis by the PCR technique, though negative by smear and culture. The association between positive PCR results and a Koch response to Tuberculin performed 18 months earlier, together with the negative findings in the staff members suggest that the results are meaningful. There was no relationship between the PCR results for M. leprae reported before and tuberculin responses, but there was a relationship with Leprosin A, probably reflecting the association of positivity to both with PB leprosy.

The PCR used in this and our preceding study apparently shows the efficacy of the technique for the identification of paucibacillary situations for both tubercle and leprosy bacilli, in comparison with the negative results achieved by conventional microscopy and culture.

Although immunotherapy with Mycobacterium vaccae did not appear to have an effect on the PCR for tubercle bacilli at the first time, the only two patients still positive at the second test both came from the placebo recipient group. Immunotherapy did have a significant negative effect on PCR positivity for M. leprae, only 2/23 being positive, both PB patients, among immunotherapy recipients compared with 9/21 in the placebo group (p = 0.01). This observation suggests clearing of the tissues of residual M. leprae deserves further investigation.

Just what do our results mean? If 6 out of 44, admittedly selected, leprosy patients really have bacilli in their sputum, are they failing to cause tuberculosis in the same way that M. intracellulare and M. scrofulaceum seem not to cause disease when they are cultivable from the tissues of MB patients? Are they present as cell wall defective organisms as described for M. scrofulaceum and perhaps unable to induce pathology because of their lack of cell wall-associated adjuvant? Are our results wrong or is the PCR picking up some other resource of the supposed M. tuberculosis-specific insertion sequence in the patients' sputum? If the DNA of tubercle bacilli is present, immunity would seem to have little relationship to its cryptic nature, since PCR-positivity was equally divided between patients originally with MB and PB leprosy. This was not the case for detection of cryptic leprosy bacilli which were associated with PB patients.

Thus our data asks more questions than it answers, but it does suggest a previously unexpected relationship between leprosy patients and tubercle bacilli.

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REFERENCES


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