Lucio’s phenomenon: A report of two cases and review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Leprosy is a chronic, multisystemic granulomatous infection caused by Mycobacterium leprae. Lucio’s phenomenon is an uncommon reaction consisting of a severe chronic necrotizing vasculitis. The purpose of this article is to present two cases of Lucio’s phenomenon and a review of the literature on its clinical presentation and management.

Case Presentation: Two middle-aged men presented with ulcers and ecchymosis in lower extremities, with simultaneous peripheral nerve damage and leonine facies. Both were treated according to World Health Organization recommendations, with a favorable clinical response.

Discussion: The clinical characteristics presented in this article make part of the classical description. A proper history and physical examination allowed for a correct diagnostic approach and prompt confirmation of diagnosis, despite the unspecific nature of these signs and symptoms.

Conclusions: Leprosy and Lucio’s phenomenon are infrequent conditions that are difficult to diagnose. We suspect this condition to be under-registered. Awareness and a high clinical suspicion are necessary in endemic regions.

Key Words: Mycobacterium leprae, Lepromatous Leprosy, Lucio’s phenomenon, Lepra reaction, Colombia

1. INTRODUCTION

Leprosy is a chronic multisystemic granulomatous infection caused by Mycobacterium leprae, a rod-shaped, acid-fast, obligate intracellular bacterium discovered by Gerhard Armauer Hansen in 1873. Infection occurs mainly through close contact with those who are infected. Leprosy may also be transmitted to humans by armadillos. In most cases the infection may be asymptomatic. When overt disease is present, it mainly affects the skin and peripheral nerves and may lead to permanent sequelae if left untreated. Clinical manifestations depend on the immune response to infection, ranging in a spectrum of Tuberculoid (TT), Borderline Tuberculoid (BT), Mid-borderline (BB), Borderline Lepromatous (BL) and Lepromatous (LL) Leprosy according to the Ridley-Jopling classification scheme. In 1998 the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed a more practical classification: paucibacillary (≤ 5 lesions) and multibacillary (≥ 6 lesions).

Up to 30% of people with Leprosy may develop leprosy reactions, manifesting as acute flares of disease activity overlapping the clinical picture due to an imbalanced host immune response in which neurologic, dermal, ocular and even...
visceral (liver, spleen) compromise has been reported, with potential necessity for aggressive immunosuppressive therapy as well as generating disability.[6] There are 3 known types of Leprosy reactions:[5] Type I reactions occur as a result of increased cell-mediated immune response among patients with borderline leprosy (BT, BB, and BL); Type II reactions result from immune complex deposition and is frequent in patients with BL and LL. Type III reactions or Lucio’s phenomenon is an uncommon reaction presenting exclusively in patients with LL and a clinical variety known as the diffuse leprosy of Lucio and Latapí or “Lepra bonita”. Lucio’s phenomenon was first described by Ladislao de la Pascua (1844) and was originally described under the name of “Greek Elephantiasis”, as a severe necrotizing vasculitic reaction characterized by the appearance of ulcerative lesions that affect the extremities of patients with LL or BL typically 1 to 3 years after disease onset without adequate treatment.[2, 5–9]

In this article we present 2 cases of Lucio’s phenomenon, a complex and uncommon condition which is difficult to diagnose and must be identified promptly in order to prevent the adverse outcomes associated with it.

2. Case Presentations

2.1 Case 1

A 49-year-old male presented with a history of 8 years of ulcerative lesions in lower limbs associated with progressive pain, arthralgias, purulent discharge and abnormal gait. On examination ulcerative lesions were found in mid-distal third of both legs (see Figure 1), he was also reported to have generalized hyporeflexia, thenar and hypothenar neural atrophy, painless nodules on forehead, cheekbones and brows, as well as a deformed and hypertrophic auricle with partial loss of skin continuity, madarosis, nasal bridge lowering and thickened alae nasi (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. A, B, C & D. Deep, painful, necrotizing skin ulcers that compromise the mid-distal third of lower extremities

Due to clinical suspicion of Lepromatous Leprosy with superimposed bacterial infection blood tests as well as other laboratory studies were drawn (see Table 1) and a skin biopsy revealed epidermal atrophy, subepithelial collagen bands, thickened anterior tibial nerves and severe dermal infiltrates.

Table 1. Laboratory studies of case 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blood count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White blood cell count</td>
<td>8,500 cells/mm³</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin</td>
<td>8.6 g/dl</td>
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<tr>
<td>Platelets</td>
<td>345,000/mm³</td>
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<tr>
<th>Bacilloscopy and Ziehl/Neelsen staining</th>
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<tr>
<td>Earlobe and nasal secretion specimens</td>
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Figure 2. A & B. Leonine facies: loss of eye brows (madarosis), destruction of the nasal septum and nodular dermak lesions that alter facial configuration. C & D. Thickened and deformed pinna
comprised mainly of foamy macrophages, lymphocytes and plasma cells. Ziehl-Neelsen stain identified a large amount of acid-fast bacilli compatible with Hansen bacilli (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ziehl-Neelsen stain: Large amount of acid-fast bacilli. The clumps of bacilli are arranged in a parallel fashion resembling cigarettes-in-pack

Table 2. Laboratory studies of case 2

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>White blood cell count</td>
<td>15,400 cells/mm³</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutrophils</td>
<td>13,860 cells/mm³, 90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin</td>
<td>14.1 g/dl</td>
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<tr>
<td>Platelets</td>
<td>336,000/mm³</td>
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<table>
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<th>Acute phase reactants</th>
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<tr>
<td>C-reactive protein (CRP)</td>
<td>12.7 mg/dl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR)</td>
<td>80 mm/seg</td>
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<tr>
<th>Bacilloscopy and Ziehl/Neelsen staining</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elbow, earlobe and nasal swab specimens</td>
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2.2 Case 2

40-year-old male with past medical history of Lepromatous Leprosy, presented at the emergency department with 2 weeks of painful ulcers in lower extremities associated with paresthesia, fever, arthralgias, chills and malaise. The patient worked as a farmer and armadillo hunter, was a smoker and had received a complete supervised 6-month course of treatment 5 years prior with rifampin, clofazimine and dapsone. On admission patient was found to have madarosis, ecchymosis on both lower extremities as well as an ulcerative lesion with signs of recent hemorrhage on his right thigh (see Figure 4). Patient was also found to have hypoesthesia below the knees. The rest of the physical examination was normal. Laboratory tests (see Table 2) and a skin biopsy were taken, reporting a thinned epidermis, a recent focal dermal hemorrhage and inflammatory damage to nerve fibers as well as perivascular thickening. Ziehl-Neelsen staining was positive, compatible by Mycobacterium leprae.

Written informed consent and authorization to publish and reproduce confidential information was previously obtained from each patient.

Figure 4. A, B & C. Lower extremities with ecchymoses following a net-like pattern B. Bleeding skin sore is also visible on right knee. C. A pale atrophic scar is also present on right thigh

3. DISCUSSION

Leprosy is a disease of major public health interest, its global incidence has been notably reduced following the introduction of multidrug therapy (MDT) as a treatment approach. Early detection, transmission interruption and prevention of disability are key elements for reducing the burden of disease. In Colombia, 587 cases were reported in 2015, most of which were multibacillary causing higher disability scores.\[10,11\]

We presented two cases with a similar clinical course and characteristics. Both patients presented with a chronic clinical picture of ulcerative lesions and peripheral nerve compro-
The most frequent abnormalities found in laboratory tests are generally located in lower extremities, and vascular wall proliferation and thickening and epidermal variety of skin lesions from painful ecchymosis or macular ZN stains are compatible with the diagnosis. There is noitory changes in neural tissue, vascular necrosis and positive necrosis. In our cases, the presence of chronic inflamma-rect damage and invasion by the bacillus has also been pro-
porting an autoimmune mechanism as a likely etiology. Di-
agnosis can be established through a positive bacilloscopy in body secretion or skin specimens, nerve biopsies with Lepromatous Leprosy, presenting with ulcers and ec-
ching in lower extremities, and vascular wall proliferation and thickening and epidermal necrosis. In our cases, the presence of chronic inflammatory changes in neural tissue, vascular necrosis and positive ZN stains are compatible with the diagnosis. There is no
scientific and academic community.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST Disclosure

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES


