and discontinuation of the involved drug, if necessary, should be the elements considered to guide the interpretation of this laboratory finding.

References


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Rituximab therapy for refractory thrombocytopenia in patients with antiphospholipid antibodies

Uso de rituximab para trombocitopenia refractaria en pacientes con anticuerpos antifosfolípidos

Dear Editor:

Antiphospholipid syndrome (APS) is an autoimmune disease characterised by vascular thrombosis—arterial or venous—or recurrent foetal losses associated with the presence of circulating antiphospholipid antibodies detected on two occasions at least 12 weeks apart. It may be primary, lacking an association to other disorders, or secondary to underlying diseases, most frequently systemic lupus erythematosus. Antiphospholipid antibodies are antibodies that target plasma proteins with an affinity for anionic phospholipids, such as lupus anticoagulant and antiphospholipid and anti-β2-glycoprotein antibodies, which we highlight due to their clinical relevance.

In 1999, the Sapporo criteria were established for the classification of APS, although these are not diagnostic criteria. An update was made in 2006, and while it has been proposed that they be adapted for their use in the paediatric...
population by eliminating the obstetric criterion, this proposed application has yet to be validated (Table 1).

We present the cases of two patients with thrombocytopenia refractory to conventional treatment and very high titres of antiphospholipid antibodies that showed a rapid and sustained response to the administration of rituximab (RTX).

**Patient 1**

Female adolescent aged 13 years with a history of extremely corticosteroid-dependent thrombocytopenia refractory to intravenous immune globulin (IVIG), with associated cyclic neutropenia (minimum, 600 neutrophils/µL) and lymphocytopenia (minimum, 500/µL). The myelogram, autoantibody tests and serum complement levels were normal. Ten months after onset, in addition to thrombocytopenia, the patient exhibited a significantly prolonged aTTP (78s; normal range, 26–38s) with positive tests for lupus anticoagulant, antiphospholipid IgG (>160 IU/mL) and anti-β2-GPI IgG (>160 IU/mL), confirmed 12 weeks later. The associated clinical manifestations were joint pain and headache. The results of the physical examination, neurologic assessment and imaging tests were normal.

Given the lack of response to conventional treatment, and with a baseline count of 10,000 platelets/µL, treatment with RTX was initiated at a dose of 375 mg/m²/week for a period of four weeks, which the patient tolerated well. The level of platelets normalised from the third week of treatment (>140,000/µL) (Fig. 1).

**Patient 2**

Male adolescent aged 14 years presenting with purpura and ecchymosis in the context of thrombocytopenia (8000 platelets/µL), prolonged aTTP (>100s) and presence of lupus anticoagulant and antiphospholipid IgG (>160 IU/mL) and anti-β2-GPI IgG (>160 IU/mL) antibodies that was confirmed 12 weeks later. He received two doses of prednisone, with no response, followed by IVIG, which resulted in a transient increase in platelet levels. In light of the patient’s progress and past history, and with platelet counts as low as 30,000/µL, treatment with RTX at the dose noted above was initiated, to which the patient responded favourably (Fig. 1).

Neither patient developed thrombotic events, *livedo reticularis*, Raynaud syndrome or symptoms compatible with lupus erythematosus or other systemic autoimmune disease, nor had haemorrhagic complications during their followup. The cardiologic and ophthalmologic assessments and abdominal ultrasound performed prior to initiation of RTX were also normal.

Given the risk of thrombotic effects, both patients started anticoagulant therapy with acetylsalicylic acid (100 mg/day) once it had been confirmed that their platelet levels had stabilised. At 20 and 10 months of followup, respectively, and after completion of a single course of RTX, both patients continued to have normal platelet counts, with no associated adverse effects and decreasing titres of antiphospholipid antibodies.

Although thrombosis, especially recurrent venous thrombosis, is the most characteristic manifestation of APS, there are other well-defined “non-classical” clinical manifestations of the disease that are not included in the classification criteria. They include neurologic changes (migraine, chorea), cutaneous manifestations (*livedo reticularis*, Raynaud syndrome), heart valve disease, renal microangiopathy and haematologic disorders (immune thrombocytopenia, haemolytic anaemia). These “non-criteria” findings are
more frequent in the paediatric population compared to adults,\textsuperscript{1} unlike thrombotic manifestations.\textsuperscript{2}

The first line of treatment for immune thrombocytopenia (corticosteroids alone or combined with IVIG) is effective in 60% to 80% of patients. The alternative treatments proposed for refractory cases include anti-D immunoglobulin (Rh+ patients) or splenectomy, but they have limitations, and therefore new therapeutic options need to be investigated.\textsuperscript{3,5}

RTX is a chimeric monoclonal antibody that binds the CD20 antigen. It produces a quick and lasting elimination of peripheral B lymphocytes, and can be used to treat antibody-mediated immune disorders including autoimmune thrombocytopenia.\textsuperscript{6} It remains unknown whether lymphocyte B reconstitution would require repetition of the treatment.

The evidence available to date has shown an adequate efficacy and safety, although the use of RTX requires close monitoring due to its potential adverse effects,\textsuperscript{5,6} which, while rare, are severe—for instance, progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy.

To conclude, as the use of RTX for the treatment of refractory thrombocytopenia associated with antiphospholipid antibodies in paediatric patients grows, it is becoming apparent that this is an effective alternative.\textsuperscript{5,6} Its early use could prevent the adverse effects that result from the prolonged use of corticosteroids, among others.

References


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