Prurigo nodularis due to *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*

Laura Saporito,1 Ada Maria Florena,2 Claudia Colomba,1 Diego Pampinella1 and Paola Di Carlo1

1Infectious Diseases Section, Department of Health Promotion Sciences, University of Palermo, Via del Vespro 129, 90127 Palermo, Italy
2Department of Human Pathology, University of Palermo, Via del Vespro 129, 90127 Palermo, Italy

Prurigo nodularis (PN) is a rare chronic skin disorder of unknown origin. Here we describe what is believed to be the first case of PN associated with tuberculosis. For the first time, culture and PCR analysis of skin biopsy confirmed the presence of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex in PN skin lesions. The pruritus and skin lesions resolved following antitubercular therapy. Our case provides further evidence in favour of a link between PN and mycobacterial infection.

**Introduction**

Prurigo nodularis (PN) is a chronic skin disorder characterized by intensely pruritic papulonodular lesions that mainly appear on the extensor surfaces of the limbs. The disease is relatively rare and can occur at any age, but it is more commonly reported in middle-aged women. The definition and pathogenesis of PN are somewhat confusing. It is described as being associated with a number of disorders. Numerous infectious agents (bacterial and viral) have been suggested as possible triggers. Although several studies have provided important information linking infectious agents to PN, strong evidence for a direct casual association between such infections and PN is still lacking (Mattila et al., 1996; Neri et al., 1998, 1999; Alfatlady et al., 2003; Loffeld & Tan, 2004).

In some cases PN would appear to be the direct result of skin infection, with the infectious organisms identifiable in skin lesions, while in others (e.g. human immunodeficiency virus and viral hepatitis) the lesions are apparently immune-system mediated (Lee & Shumack, 2005; Accioly-Filho et al., 2000). These observations suggest that it is simply a common skin response to a variety of insults. PN is consequently a difficult condition to treat and identifying a treatment strategy can be challenging. To contribute to a better understanding of this skin disorder, we report for what is believed to be the first time a case of PN linked with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex (MTBC) infection in a patient with pulmonary tuberculosis.

**Case report**

In July 2007, a 30-year-old man of Ghanaian origin came to the Emergency Department of Policlinico ‘Paolo Giaccone’ University Hospital, Palermo, Italy, with fever and chest pain that he had been experiencing for 3 weeks. The patient had lived in Italy for 5 years. A review of his medical history revealed no signs of previous chronic diseases. A human immunodeficiency virus test performed on admission was negative.

At the time of admission, the patient was febrile (38.3 °C), and complained of a productive cough and chest pain in his left side. He was also experiencing intense itching in his upper and lower limbs. On chest auscultation, localized crackles and wheezing were heard in the left upper zone. Further examination revealed nodular skin lesions 0.5–1.5 cm in diameter, mainly on his upper and lower limbs. The lesions were hard, hyperpigmented nodules, with a smooth surface. Some of these nodules showed scratch injury. The skin between the lesions was normal (Fig. 1). The patient had suffered from these lesions for 15 months. Laboratory tests revealed: a white blood cell count of 4180 cells mm\(^{-3}\), with 49.3 % neutrophils, 27.5 % lymphocytes, 20.6 % monocytes and 1.9 % eosinophils; a haemoglobin level of 11.7 g dl\(^{-1}\); a platelet count of 145 000 cells mm\(^{-3}\); an aspartate aminotransferase level of 67 IU l\(^{-1}\); a alanine aminotransferase level of 39 IU l\(^{-1}\); a serum protein level of 71 g dl\(^{-1}\), with 49.3 % albumin, 37.2 % globulin and 3.5 % transferrin; a haemoglobin level of 11.7 g dl\(^{-1}\); a creatinine clearance level of 96 ml min\(^{-1}\); a bilirubin level of 0.6 mg dl\(^{-1}\); a sodium level of 133 mmol l\(^{-1}\); a potassium level of 4.1 mmol l\(^{-1}\); a calcium level of 8.9 mg dl\(^{-1}\); a magnesium level of 1.5 mg dl\(^{-1}\); a glucose level of 90 mg dl\(^{-1}\); a albumin level of 3.36 g dl\(^{-1}\); an alanine aminotransferase level of 67 IU l\(^{-1}\); an aspartate aminotransferase level of 39 IU l\(^{-1}\); a serum protein electrophoresis revealed a slightly low level of albumin (3.36 g dl\(^{-1}\), normal range 3.48–5.39 g dl\(^{-1}\)) with polyclonal hypergammaglobulinaemia (2.29 g dl\(^{-1}\), normal range 0.67–1.56 g dl\(^{-1}\)). His blood glucose level, serum electrolyte concentrations and renal function test results were within normal limits.

A chest X-ray showed a bilateral parenchymal hilar and peri-hilar consolidation, with marked interstitial bronchovascular fibrosis and bronchiectasis in the left lung. Thoracic computed tomography images confirmed the presence of multiple bilateral areas of air space consolidation with small nodular lesions and cavitation. Fibrocalcific...
nODULES: A FRAGMENT OF THE FRESH BIOPSY SAMPLE WAS ALSO EXAMINED TO CONFIRM THE CLINICAL SUSPICION OF PN. RELATED TO TUBERCULOSIS WERE OBSERVED. THESE FINDINGS INCLUDED A SUBCUTANEOUS FATTY REPLACEMENT WITH A SCANTY PERIVASCULAR LYMPHOCYTIC INFILTRATE WERE ALSO PRESENT; THE SUBCUTANEOUS FAT WAS NOT INVOLVED AND NO SPECIFIC CHANGES RELATED TO TUBERCULOSIS WERE OBSERVED. THESE FINDINGS CONFIRMED THE CLINICAL SUSPICION OF PN.


HAEMATOCHEMICAL PARAMETERS AND SPUTUM SMEARS WERE EXAMINED MONTHLY. THE ONLY REMARKABLE ALTERATION WAS SEEN IN EOSINOPHIL NUMBER. THIS COUNT WAS INITIALLY NORMAL (<300 CELLS MM⁻³) BUT INCREASED 2 WEEKS AFTER ADMISSION, REACHING A PEAK OF 579 CELLS MM⁻³ 1 MONTH LATER.


DURING THE FOLLOW UP, MTBC CONTINUED TO BE UNDETECTABLE IN SPUTUM SAMPLES EXAMINED WITH ZIEHL–NEELSEN STAINING, AND PCR WAS NEGATIVE AFTER 4 MONTHS OF ANTITUBERCULAR TREATMENT. AT THAT TIME, ONLY A FEW SMALL, NON-ITCHY LESIONS WERE STILL DETECTABLE ON THE PATIENT’S LIMBS; HIS EOSINOPHIL COUNT WAS WITHIN THE NORMAL RANGE. THE PATIENT COMPLETED A STANDARD 6 MONTH COURSE OF ANTITUBERCULAR THERAPY.

**Discussion**

PN IS ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING OF ALL CHRONIC SKIN DISORDERS IN TERMS OF ESTABLISHING ITS AETIOLOGY AND DETERMINING TREATMENT STRATEGIES (ACCIOLY-FILHO ET AL., 2000; ALFADLEY ET AL., 2003). THESE ISSUES ARE RELATED TO WHAT TRIGGERS IT, AS AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP IN THERAPY IS TO IDENTIFY THE UNDERLYING CAUSE AND TREAT THE CONDITION ACCORDINGLY. MATTILA ET AL. (1996) DESCRIBED SIX PATIENTS AFFECTED BY PN DUE TO MYCOBACTERIA OTHER THAN TUBERCULOSIS, IDENTIFIED BY CULTURE OF SKIN BIOPSY SPECIMENS. TWO OF THESE PATIENTS HAD A GOOD RESPONSE TO TREATMENT WITH ANTITUBERCULAR DRUGS.

PN IS A DISTINCTIVE CONDITION AND ITS DIAGNOSIS IS MAINLY CLINICAL (ACCIOLY-FILHO ET AL., 2000). FOR OUR PATIENT, A DIAGNOSIS OF PN WAS MADE BASED ON SKIN MANIFESTATIONS AND AN INTENSE ITCHING THAT HAD LED TO THE LESIONS RAPIDLY BECOMING EXCORIATED OR CRUSTED.

CLINICAL AND INSTRUMENTAL ASSESSMENT ASSOCIATED WITH THE RESULTS OF BACTERIAL ISOLATION FROM THE LESIONS AND THE EARLY IMPROVEMENT OF OUR PATIENT’S SYMPTOMS FOLLOWING STANDARD ANTITUBERCULAR THERAPY PROMPTED US TO ASSERT THAT THIS WAS, TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, THE FIRST REPORTED CASE OF PN LINKED TO MTBC. INDEED, A RELAPSE OF SKIN LESIONS
Prurigo nodularis and tuberculosis

occurred during the active tuberculosis infection, and improvement was evident after 40 days of effective antitubercular therapy. Interestingly, the clinical remission of skin lesions coincided with the negativization of microbiological markers of systemic infection.

In the differential diagnosis of our patient we considered erythema induratum of Bazin (EIB), also called tuberculids. EIB is a subcutaneous panniculitis and vasculitis, which occurs mainly on the lower extremities of middle-aged women with signs of vascular insufficiency. Like other forms of cutaneous tuberculosis, it is considered to be a hypersensitivity immune reaction to MTBC and biopsy culture is always negative. Similar to our patient, symptoms associated with EIB can improve with antitubercular therapy (Mascaro & Baselga, 2008; Segura et al., 2005). Nevertheless, unlike in our patient’s case, EIB lesions are not pruritic but painful, and the nodules are confluent and erythematic, whereas in PN lesions the nodules are rarely erythematic and, when erythema is reported, it is in a precocious phase as the nodules rapidly become pigmented (Accioly-Filho et al., 2000). Furthermore, histological examination of biopsy specimens obtained from our patient did not reveal any of the typical features described in patients with EIB, but rather showed the characteristic changes in epidermis and derma consistent with PN (Segura et al., 2008; Lee & Shumack, 2005; Mobini et al., 2005).

It has been suggested that eosinophils play a pathogenic role in PN (Accioly-Filho et al., 2000; Tanaka et al., 1995). In our patient, the number of circulating eosinophils increased during the course of antitubercular therapy. Conversely, there was no increase in number of eosinophils in the affected skin. We assumed that blood eosinophilia was a drug-induced side effect, as reported by Wong et al. (1995).

Cutaneous tuberculosis can be acquired either exogenously (directly through injured skin) or endogenously (spreading from other organs). Skin trauma due to scratching easily introduces pathogens into the skin. However, in our case the positive response to antitubercular therapy suggested that *M. tuberculosis* spreading from the pulmonary infection might have been the primary cause of the skin disorder.

These findings suggest the need to consider a tubercular aetiology for atypical chronic skin manifestations such as PN, especially in patients coming from tuberculosis-endemic countries, as systemic infection could be concomitant. Early diagnosis could prevent the development of a more severe clinical picture.

In conclusion, this is believed to be the first documented report of PN due to MTBC. Two recommendations arise from our case: (i) it is opportune to consider PN as one of the various patterns of cutaneous tuberculosis; (ii) it is important to carry out specific microbiological investigations for MTBC (e.g. PCR and/or culture) combined with histopathological analysis of PN lesions in patients with risk factors associated with latent or active tuberculosis.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Professor Caterina Mammina, Department of Health Promotion Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy, for providing technical assistance.

References


