Interferon treatment of multiple pulmonary malignancies associated with papilloma virus

S Aaron MD1, E Wong MD1, D Tyrrell MD1, M Duggan MD2, E Vallieres MD3, L Jewell MD1, B Romanowski MD1, Patient John Doe*

Over a period of four years, beginning in spring 1988, a previously healthy man developed a primary squamous cell carcinoma of the tonsil, treated with radiotherapy, followed by 10 distinct, primary bronchial squamous cell carcinomas. Four of the cancers were surgically resected, all of which were positive by hybridization for human papilloma virus (type 16). Following the institution of alpha interferon, three smaller lesions disappeared and a larger one shrank in size, facilitating surgical resection. Over the following seven years no new ones have appeared. The finding of papilloma virus in malignancies should prompt consideration of antiviral therapy.

Key Words: Interferon; Lung; Papilloma virus; Squamous cell carcinoma; Tonsil

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is associated with malignancy of the oropharynx and respiratory tract (1-8). This was first described in the context of juvenile polyposis of the trachea (4). More recently, the virus has been described in the context of adult respiratory tract cancers (5-8). We describe an adult patient who developed dermatomyositis (treated with steroids), a tonsillar carcinoma (treated with radiotherapy) and then multiple primary squamous cell carcinomas of the bronchial tree. These malignancies have all been found to hybridize for HPV, and the patient has responded dramatically to high-dose interferon therapy.

CASE HISTORY

In spring 1988, a previously well 37-year-old man was diagnosed as having dermatomyositis on the basis of increasing proximal weakness, typical rash, elevated creatine kinase (CK), abnormal electromyogram and muscle biopsy. His only previous medical history had been recent severe grief reaction and depression, followed by periodontal surgery complicated by gingivitis. He never smoked, and had not noted any genital, oral or airway lesions. There was no family history of malignancy or autoimmune disorders.

The patient was placed on high-dose oral steroids with improvement in CK levels and weakness, but he was unable to consistently reduce the dose because of relapsing symptoms. In April 1989, a tonsillar abscess was drained and pathological examination of the tissue removed revealed a squamous cell carcinoma. He was treated with further surgery and radiotherapy (50 Gy over 25 treatments).

Over the next year his condition remained unstable with recurring malignancies. He, in turn, urged his physicians to pursue first this diagnosis and then the possibility of immune therapy, without orders.

*It was the patient’s own perseverance and research that first indicated the possibility that a papilloma virus infection might underlie his recurring malignancies. He, in turn, urged his physicians to pursue first this diagnosis and then the possibility of immune therapy, without which he would have surely died. This included both interferon and intravenous immunoglobulin to prevent further immunosuppression. Since 1992, he has been the driving force behind this investigation and paper in the hope that it will ultimately save lives by alerting physicians treating similar patients suffering from malignancies with suspected viral origins. It was also the patient’s idea to check his papilloma titres. The patient’s recovery and contribution to this effort have been remarkable.

1University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta; 2University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta; 3Swedish Cancer Institute, Seattle, Washington, USA

Correspondence: Dr Stephen Aaron, 562 Heritage Medical Research Centre, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2S2.
Telephone 780-407-6762, fax 780-407-6055, e-mail stephen.aaron@ualberta.ca

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The lesion in the left lung was followed until May 1991, when a thoracotomy and left upper lobe wedge resection was performed, revealing a squamous cell carcinoma 1.8 cm in diameter. Postoperatively, he lost 8 kg and had difficulty regaining or maintaining weight despite high caloric intake. For the rest of that year his myositis remained active and he was continued on steroids with the addition of low-dose methotrexate for three weeks. In September, radiographs revealed a new lesion in the right lung. A right upper lobe wedge resection was performed in October 1991, showing the presence of a new squamous cell carcinoma of 2.4 cm as well as evidence of a distinct adjacent focus of carcinoma in situ. In February 1992, the patient noted a productive cough with blood streaking. Three areas of carcinoma in situ were found on endoscopic biopsy of the left bronchial tree. Lung imaging fluorescence endoscopy analysis of his bronchial tree did not reveal additional lesions. Following treatment of intercurrent zoster with acyclovir, the patient was treated with photodynamic therapy and retinoic acid with success. In May, he began on intermittent intravenous immunoglobulin for his persistent myositis.

In July, bronchoscopy showed no new lesions. In September 1992, a new mass near the left hilum and three other, smaller, left-sided lesions became apparent on x-ray and computed tomography. Bronchial washings confirmed the presence of malignant cells.

Specimens of the lung tumours resected in 1991 and 1992, as well specimens from the tonsillar malignancy were submitted for analysis with probes for HPV in July 1992. Both lung tumours were positive by in situ hybridization and polymerase chain reaction amplification for HPV 16. In addition, the tumour that was resected in 1992 was found positive for HPV 35. The tonsillar malignancy was similarly positive for HPV 16.

As a result of the analysis, he was placed on alpha interferon, (3,000,000 units, four times a week) in September 1992. All but the larger lesion seen near the left hilum resolved over the following eight months. This remaining lesion (3.5 cm) was resected by left upper lobectomy in July 1993. Sections were analyzed and were also found to be positive for HPV 16. Cis retinoic acid was added to his therapy for 12 weeks (September 20 to December 20).

The patient was continued on the interferon until May 1993 and has been monitored by regular bronchoscopies, chest x-rays and analyses for residual HPV.

From 1992 to July 2003, no new malignancies have appeared. The most recent bronchial wash was negative for HPV (May 10, 2001). Genetic testing performed on skin biopsies taken in October 1992 failed to reveal any independent predisposition to malignancy. In early 1993, the patient was diagnosed with hyperthyroidism (Grave’s disease) which was treated surgically to avoid further radiation. In that year he was also noted to have hypogonadism with reduced testosterone. This was found to be secondary to reduced pituitary activity.

The patient’s strength has stabilized, but has not returned to premorbid levels. His CK remains elevated in the range of 500 IU to 700 IU.

A specimen of serum collected from the patient in March 2003 was tested for antibodies to HPV 16- and HPV 18-like particles by quantitative enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). Testing was performed at GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals, Belgium, using a modification of the methods reported by Evans et al (9). The quantity of antibody was expressed in ELISA units per mL (EL U/mL) based on an internal reference standard established for each ELISA; the positive cut-point was 8 EL U/mL or greater for HPV 16 and 7 EL U/mL for HPV 18.

The test for antibody to HPV 16 was positive at 30 EL U/mL. The test for antibody to HPV 18 ELISA was negative at less than 7 EL U/mL. To assess the meaning of detecting 30 EL U/mL of serum antibody to HPV 16 in the patient, a panel of serum specimens from women with and without HPV 16 cervical infection was tested. Virginal women without HPV 16 cervical infection had a geometric mean titre of 4 EL U/mL. Nonvirginal women with no HPV 16 DNA detected in cervical cells by polymerase chain reaction had a GMT of 5 EL U/mL. Nonvirginal women with abnormal cervical cytology and HPV 16 DNA detected in cervical cells by polymerase chain reaction had a geometric mean titre of 20 EL U/mL (F Dessy, personal communication).

DISCUSSION

This patient had developed 11 primary malignancies of the oral cavity and bronchial tree in the three years before the institution of antiviral therapy in 1992. Seven of those primaries appeared in rapid succession in the nine months before therapy with alpha interferon. Four of the tumours were surgically resected and all of these were found to have evidence of HPV 16 infection. These include the original tonsillar cancer and the three surgically resected lung cancers. In addition, at least one of the tumours and several of the bronchial washings were positive for other HPV types. At least four of the lesions first became apparent after the time that immunosuppressive therapy with steroids for his dermatomyositis was replaced by intravenous immunoglobulin. However, from the time that interferon was begun, the patient has had no new malignancies and has had spontaneous resolution of several suspicious radiological lesions.

The histological examination of the multiple tonsillar and pulmonary lesions removed from this patient all showed moderately differentiated squamous carcinomas of papillary configuration. Areas of in situ carcinoma were identified adjacent to the main invasive lesions, which grew with a broad ‘pushing’, both in the tonsil and in the lung. This finding suggests that the lesions originated in a multicentric fashion in different portions of the aerodigestive tract. No benign papillomatous lesions were found anywhere in the airway, nor did the tonsil exhibit benign squamous papilloma or features suggestive of a condylomatous lesion. Accordingly, there was no pathological evidence to support the notion that this multicentric HPV-associated lesion originated from malignant transformation of a pre-existing benign laryngeal papillomatosis or related condition (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Almost certainly this patient’s malignant diathesis, including his original tonsillar tumour, was due to infection with papilloma virus. This relationship seems likely given the disappearance of lesions and the absence of new ones after therapy with interferon commenced. The development of multiple
pulmonary malignancies over a short period of time may well have been associated with radiotherapy of a HPV-induced tumour. There are multiple reports of malignant conversion of benign papillomatous lesions following radiotherapy (4,5,7,10,11). There had been previous reports of the response of HPV-induced lesions to interferon in both the cervix and respiratory tract (12-14).

We sought to avoid broadly immunosuppressive therapy in view of the acceleration of HPV associated with malignancies in the cervix and patients treated with these agents. (15,16). This intravenous immunoglobulin was used for our patient's myositis with some success. However, several new lesions appeared even after the time that this change was made (September 1992).

The frequency of HPV carriage in lower airway malignancy has been reported to be anywhere from 5% to 30% in various series. This finding seems to be mainly confined to squamous cell carcinoma. The method by which the presence of HPV is documented or suspected varied enormously.

The antibody results in our patient are similar to those observed in women with established cervical HPV 16 infection. They are consistent with a systemic antibody response elicited by HPV 16 infection of the oropharynx and lower respiratory epithelium (9).

This finding supports the existence of an HPV 16 infection of these tissues, diagnosed by detection of virus genome using polymerase chain reaction.

In younger patients, particularly those who have minimal to no history of tobacco exposure, awareness of the possible viral pathogenicity of these lesions is warranted (10,17-21). As indicated above, radiotherapy for the initial lesion likely played a role in the multiple squamous cell carcinomas that subsequently developed.

The response of this patient to the institution of interferon would recommend consideration of these measures for patients in similar clinical circumstances (22).

REFERENCES