Clinical Expression of Homozygous Sickle Cell gene in Yemeni Children

Saeed Thabet Nasher MD¹, Abdul Ghafoor Kasem MD¹, Khaled Ameen El Nihary MBBCH²

Abstract

In this study the demographic and clinical profile of 105 Yemeni children under 16 years old with sickle cell anemia (SCA) were studied. They were 53 males (50.4%) and 52 females (49.5%), aged between 0.5 and 15 years (mean 7.4ys). The most serious crisis as vaso-occlusive, hemolytic, sequestration and aplastic crisis were seen in (83.8%), (52.3%), (6.6%) and (5.7 %) respectively. The hand-foot syndrome was found in (21%) of all patients and in (51%) of children less than 3 years old. The most serious complication was the respiratory tract infections which was the most frequent in these patients, being encountered in (65.7%). The rate of hospitalization was of (76%). Our findings show that SCA has a severe clinical course in Yemenis, resembling that in black Africans and in black Americans.

Keywords: Sickle cell severity, Yemen, HPLC.

Introduction

Sickle cell anemia (SCA) is a hereditary and chronic hemolytic anemia characterized by varying degree of hemolysis and intermittent episodes of vascular occlusion. Hemoglobin S (HbS) in its reduced form [deoxy-hemoglobin S] precipitates and forming polymers within the red blood cells causing deformation of their membrane which take the characteristic form of sickle red blood cells. This property of HbS is the result of a point mutation in which a single nucleotide in the 6th position of the β globin gene is replaced with another nucleotide that led to replacement of glutamic acid in the 6th position of the β globin chain by a molecule of valine (β⁶ GLU->VAL)¹,². SCA is prevalent through many parts of the world particularly where the malaria, caused by plasmodium falciparium, is highly endemic such as in tropical Africa, Middle East, Mediterranean countries, Arabian Peninsula and parts of India. The population migrations have ensured that it is now encountered in Europe and America¹. SCA is characterized by periods of remissions and exacerbations called crises. Its manifestations include chronic and acute hemolytic anemia with frequent blood transfusion requirements, vaso-occlusive crisis and a great susceptibility to infection³. The anemia in SCA patients is complicated by other crisis such as: aplastic crisis, acute sequestration in spleen and hyper- hemolytic

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Clinical Expression of Homozygous Sickle Cell........................ Saeed Thabet Nasher et al.

Despite the unicity of the genetic mutation that is responsible, the clinical expression of HbS is reported to be variable according to regions and even within the same population. It ranges from a severe disease with painful crisis and life threatening complications to a disease with mild symptoms. The heterogeneity of the phenotypic presentations were linked to the differences among haplotypes of beta globin gene (5,6).

Few studies have been published from Yemen on SCA. This study, however, is the first study dealing with clinical presentation of SCA from Taiz governorate which is located in the south-western region of Yemen with population of about 2.5 millions (7).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the demographic and clinical profile of SCA in Yemeni children from Taiz governorate and to compare our results with the results published in the literature.

Patients

Our study includes one hundred and five children under 16 years old, attended the martyr Mohamad Al-Dura clinical center for blood diseases in Taiz during the period June 2007 - June 2008. The age range was between 0.5 - 15 years old with a mean age of 7.4 years. Distribution of the patients according to age groups and sex is shown in table (1). The diagnosis of SCA was done by clinical presentation suggesting SCA and confirmed by laboratory tests as mentioned in the methods. Cases of SCA associated with β or α-thalassemia were excluded from this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age groups in years</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods

On every patient physical examination was carried out, personal and family history was taken including the history of the extent of previous hospitalizations and the number of blood transfusions received in the past. Chest X-ray and Abdominal sonography were done to all patients under evaluation. All data were filled in standard forms. Five milliliters of blood was drawn into EDTA tubes. Sickling test was used for sickle screening. The blood smears were prepared and air dried and the red cell morphology was studied after staining with Giemsa stain (8). The whole blood was used for the estimation of hematological parameters on Coulter Counter SYSEMEX JAPAN. The red cell indices were obtained from the Coulter Counter (8). The hemoglobin electrophoresis was carried out in all sickle cells positive samples using Helena TITAN III instruments on cellulose acetate plate in alkaline buffer (8). Confirmation of the presence of hemoglobin S and quantification of Hemoglobin S, A2 and F were done by BIO-RAD D10 instruments using the method of
Results

The patients had around equal sex distribution. They were 53 males [50.4%] and 52 females [49.6%] as seen in table (2). Twenty one of patients were children under 3 years of age (20.9%). Sixteen patients (15.2%) lived in Taiz city and 89 patients (84.7%) came from different rural regions of Taiz governorate. Sixty patients (57.1%) had positive family history of sickle cell disease, with one affected family member in (34.3%), two affected family members in (16.1%) and three affected family members in (6.6%) of patients.

At the time of diagnosis, the hemoglobin level of less than 6 gm/dl was found in 17 patients (16.1%), a level between 6 to 9 gm/dl in 72 patients (68.5%), and between 9 and 12 gm/dl was found in 16 patients (15.2%). The mean hemoglobin was 7.3 g/dl and the mean percentage of HbS was 75.6% as seen in table (2). About 76% of cases (80 patients) were hospitalized. Forty four patients (41.5%) had been hospitalized twice to four times per year. Eighty patients (76.1%) received blood transfusion of whom (46.6%) were transfused more than three times per year. Vaso-occlusive crisis occurred in 88 patients (83.8%) of whom 78 patients (74.2%) had joints and bones pain; 65 patients (61.9%) had back pain; 44 patients (42.3%) had chest pain; 43 patients (40.9%) had abdominal pain. The Hand-foot syndrome was seen mainly in half of the children under 3 years of age, and in 22% of all patients studied. Acute sequestration crisis was seen in 7 patients (6.6%); all of them were below 7 years. The aplastic crisis was diagnosed in 6 patients (5.7%). Hyper hemolytic crisis occurred in 55 patients (52.3%). Severe pneumonia that required hospitalization had been registered in 29 patients (27.6%). Meanwhile, upper respiratory tract infection was diagnosed in 69 patients (65.7%). Malaria parasites were seen in the peripheral blood films of 27 patients (25%). Biliary stones were seen in 4 children (3.8%). Table (3) shows the major clinical presentation of our cases with SCA from Taiz.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N=105</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hb g/dl</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HbS%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>76.50</td>
<td>42.00</td>
<td>80.00</td>
<td>95.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HbF%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>11.23</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>28.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HbA2%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Clinical presentation in 105 Yemeni children with SCA from Taiz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical Manifestations</th>
<th>Number of patients</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain crisis</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anemia</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfusion</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone and Joint pain</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>74.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clinical Manifestations | Number of patients | %
---|---|---
Fever | 70 | 66.7
Upper respiratory tract infections | 69 | 65.7
Back pain | 65 | 61.9
Jaundice | 57 | 54.3
Splenomegaly | 48 | 45.7
Chest pain | 44 | 41.9
Abdominal pain | 43 | 41
Hepatomegaly | 40 | 38.1
Joint swelling | 31 | 29.5
Pneumonia | 29 | 27.6
Malaria | 27 | 25
Hand foot syndrome | 22 | 20.9

Discussion

In Yemen HbS gene has been reported to occur in several regions of the country. The prevalence of sickle cell gene in patients originated from Taiz governorate was reported to be the highest and is around 8.2% (9). The clinical manifestations of the sickle cell anemia in Yemenis was shown to be sever resembling the disease severity in black Africans as reported by Alsaqlady et al., and El hazmy et al., (10,11).

All the patients included were diagnosed on clinical presentation suggesting SCA and latter on was confirmed by laboratory tests. Twenty one percent of our patients were diagnosed before the age of 3 years and this may reflect the disease severity in early life. The morbidity of SCA can be estimated from the frequency of the major clinical presentations of the SCA which include: painful crisis due to vaso-occlusive events, hemolytic crisis and hand - foot syndrome (in early childhood) and frequency of patient’s hospitalization and blood transfusion given (3,4,5, 12).

The hospitalization rate of (76%) in this study is similar to (77%) reported from Oman (13) and is higher than (20%) reported from Eastern Saudi Arabia (14). Painful crisis was the commonest cause of hospitalization in our patients (83.8%) which is a very high rate, compared to the rates reported in Yemeni children from Aden (70%) (10), Eastern Saudi Arabia (21%) (14), Jamaica (18 %) (15), and south London (35%) (16). The rate reported from Oman (90%) was higher than our rate (13). The incidence of hand foot syndrome was found in (51.2 %) of our children under 3 years of age. This rate is similar to (54%) reported from Yemeni children from Aden (10). However, it was higher than (43%), (14%) and (40%) reported from Oman (13), Eastern Saudi Arabia (14) and Jamaica (15) respectively. This may be considered as an evidence of increased disease severity in our patients.

Abdominal crisis occurred in (41.1%) of our cases which is lower than (80 %) reported in Omani cases (13), but It was higher than (5%) and (18%) reported from Eastern Saudi Arabia and Jamaica respectively (14, 15). These different rates are example of variable clinical
Clinical Expression of Homozygous Sickle Cell................. Saeed Thabet Nasher et al.

manifestations in different populations. Table (4) shows the clinical presentation in our SCA children and those from Aden, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Jamaica.

### Table 4. Major Clinical presentation of Yemeni children with SCA from Taiz Yemen as compared to other studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>parameter</th>
<th>Taiz Yemen %</th>
<th>Aden Yemen %</th>
<th>Oman %</th>
<th>East Saudi Arabia %</th>
<th>Jamaica %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Painful crisis</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand and foot syndrome</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal crisis</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splenic Sequestration crisis</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aplastic crisis</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemolytic crisis</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splenomegaly</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepatomegaly</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Nigeria, hemolytic crisis in SCA children was reported to be the major cause of morbidity, mortality and hospital admission (5). Anemia in those children was complicated by hyper-hemolytic, sequestration and aplastic crisis and 90% of all children under study were severely anemic.

Anemia was present in 87 patients (82.9%) of our cases. The incidence of hyper-hemolytic crisis in our children was (52.3%). This rate is higher than (16%) reported from Aden Yemen (10) and (2%) from Eastern Saudi Arabia (14), but is less than (59%) reported from Oman (13). The association of SCA and G6PD deficiency was found in (32%) of Omani children (13) which could, to some extent, explain the increased rate of hyper-hemolytic crisis in those children. The status of G6PD in our patients was not evaluated. Further study is required to investigate the possibility of co-existence of G6PD deficiency in causing hyper-hemolytic crisis in SCA Yemeni patients. Hence, the malaria infection is endemic in Yemen (17). Another explanation of the increased hemolytic crisis rate in our children is perhaps due to malaria infection which was found in blood films of (25%) of them. The malaria impact on clinical presentation and complications of SCA is unknown in our patients, and this may be a good subject for future research in Yemen. In Nigeria, malarial parasites were seen in the blood films of some SCA children, and has been particularly implicated as causing hyper-hemolysis in those children (5).

Splenomegaly was common presentation in this study (45.7%) and this, in some patients, may progress to rapid blood sequestration in spleen causing acute splenic sequestration. Splenic sequestration crisis occurred in (6.6%) of our patients as compared to (7%) in Omanis (13), (1%) in Eastern Saudi Arabia and (2.2%) in South Western Saudi Arabia (14,18). All these rates are much lower than the reported rate of (25%) from Jamaica (15) as seen in table -4. The incidence of aplastic crisis was (5.7%) in our cases which is more than that reported in Omanies (2%) (13), and Eastern Saudi Arabia (2%) (14) but markedly lower than the incidence reported from Jamaica (9%) (15).
Splenomegaly was palpable in (45.7%) of our children, compared to (40%), (38%), (33%) and (80%) reported from Aden\textsuperscript{(10)}, Oman\textsuperscript{(13)}, eastern areas of Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{(14)} and Jamaica\textsuperscript{(15)} respectively. Meanwhile, hepatomegaly was palpable in (38.1%) of our children which is lower than (72%) reported from Aden\textsuperscript{(10)}, and higher than (24%), (21%) reported in Omani\textsuperscript{(13)} and Saudi children from eastern provinces\textsuperscript{(14)}. The most frequent reported infection in our patients was the infection of the upper respiratory tract (65.7%), followed by pneumonia (27.6%).

Blood transfusion as therapy and prophylaxis in SCA should be given only in absolute necessity. Its indications include: hyper-hemolytic crisis, splenic sequestration, aplastic crisis, fulminant infection, and elective or emergency surgery\textsuperscript{(19)}.

Actually, most of these complications were reported in our patients as seen in table (4). This explains the high rate of blood transfusion given to (76.6%) of our cases compared to (42.9%) in Saudi patients from eastern provinces\textsuperscript{(12)}, and the (45%) in Omani patients\textsuperscript{(13)}. Another explanation for this high rate in Yemeni SCA children compared to others, might be due to the difference in hospital policy in different countries for anemia correction.

The previous discussed findings indicate the severity of SCA in Yemeni children and also show the variable clinical presentation in different ethnic groups as shown in table (4). Furthermore, Our findings highlight the nature of the SCA in Yemenis. In fact, they are in concordance with the previous studies which showed that the Yemeni SCA haplotype is of African origin which is characterized by a sever course of disease\textsuperscript{(9,10,11)}.

**Conclusion**

This is the first study on sickle cell anemia in Yemeni children from TAIZ governorate. Although the study represents the governorate of Taiz, it highlights the severity of SCA in Yemeni patients, resembling the black Africans or black Americans. These similarities between Yemenis and Africans regarding the SCA haplotype and the clinical presentation might be due to the intermarriage of Africans with Yemenis who emigrated and lived in Africa for several generations. Then, they returned to Yemen after the political and economical instability in African countries as well as the geographical neighborhood between the two nations.

**Recommendations**

Further population-based studies are required to build a solid scientific data which will help in creating a national registry of Hemoglobinopathies, thalassemia and enzymopathies in Yemen. In addition, studies about the malaria impact on the severity of SCD in Yemen will help in the treatment of SCA.

**References**

Clinical Expression of Homozygous Sickle Cell.................. Saeed Thabet Nasher et al.


الأعراض السريرية التي يعاني منها الأطفال اليمنيون المصابون بفقر الدم المنجلي

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الملخص

تمت دراسة العوامل البيئية والأعراض الإكلينيكية في 105 أطفال يمنيين منهم 53 ذكرًا (50.4%) و52 أنثى (49.6%), وترارقت أعمارهم بين 6 أشهر و15 عامًا، ومتوسط العمر لديهم 7.4 سنة. وقد بينت الدراسة أن هؤلاء المرضى عانوا من النوبات الإكلينيكية المصاحبة لمرض فقر الدم المنجلي، مثل: النوب المسدة للأوعية الدموية، ونوب زيادة تحلل الدم ونوب تكسُد الدم في الطحال، ونوب خراج العظام بنسب: 83.3%, 6.6%, 5.7%, 5.6% على التوالي. أما متلازمة اليد والقدم، فقد تم رصدها في 21% من مجموع المرضى تحت الدراسة، و51% من مجموع المرضى تحت سن ثلاث سنوات. وبين أن اصابة الجهاز التنفسي العلوي بالحمى كانت من أهم المضاعفات في 65.7% من المرضى، وأن 76% من المرضى تم إدخالهم إلى المستشفيات.

وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى أن الصورة الإكلينيكية لدى الأطفال المصابين بمرض فقر الدم المنجلي في عزل ذات طابع حبيث، وتشبه الصورة الإكلينيكية لدى المصابين بمرض فقر الدم المنجلي في إفريقيا وأفريقيا.

الكلمات الدالة: حدة فقر الدم المنجلي، الأعراض السريرية، الأطفال اليمنيون.