Serum Pseudocholinesterase Variants in Mexican-Born Patients with Lepromatous Leprosy

Thomas H. Rea and Won G. Ng

Study of apnea induced by succinylcholine led to recognition of variants in serum pseudocholinesterase (synonyms: plasma cholinesterase, serum cholinesterase) \(^5\). At present, serum pseudocholinesterase is considered to be regulated genetically by two loci, \(E_1\) and \(E_2\). Four allelic genes have been recognized at \(E_1\) locus \(^10\), one coding for the usual \((u)\) enzyme or \(E_1^u\), one coding the atypical enzyme \((a)\) or \(E_1^a\), one coding for the fluoride resistant \((f)\) variant or \(E_1^f\); and, finally, the silent \((s)\) gene or \(E_1^s\) associated with extremely low activity. Measurement of serum enzyme activity with a cholinesterase substrate will identify an individual homozygous for the silent gene, \(E_1^sE_1^s\), if the absence of activity is not due to organophosphorus poisoning or other drug intoxication. However, in order to distinguish other variant forms of the enzyme, specific inhibitors of pseudocholinesterase must be used in measurement of enzyme activity. At certain concentrations, dibucaine was found to inhibit the atypical enzyme to a lesser extent than the normal enzyme \(^6\). Similarly, fluoride inhibits the fluoride resistant variant to a lesser extent than the normal enzyme \(^7\). The extent of enzyme inhibition is expressed in terms of a number, i.e., percent inhibition. Thus the terms Fluoride Number or Dibucaine Number have been employed. Individuals homozygous for the usual gene, \(E_1^uE_1^u\) (97% of most populations) have a Dibucaine Number greater than 70, i.e., considerable inhibition. Individuals heterozygous for atypical enzymes, \(E_1^uE_1^a\) (3% of most populations) or \(E_1^aE_1^f\) (usually rare) have both gene products and show only partial inhibition, Dibucaine Number from 40 to 70. Individuals homozygous for atypical enzymes (0.03% of most populations) have a Dibucaine Number of less than 40, or little inhibition. The \(f\) variant is identified by substituting fluoride for dibucaine. The \(E_2\) locus gene product (the \(C_5\) variant) is identified by electrophoresis on starch gels \(^8\). The \(C_5\) variant is associated with relatively high serum pseudocholinesterase activity.

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Therefore, it is not associated with apnea, but its contribution to total serum pseudocholinesterase activity must be considered when making genetic interpretation of data on families.

Because susceptibility to and mode of expression of leprosy are probably determined by genetic factors, serum pseudocholinesterases have been measured in leprosy in an effort to clarify the nature of genetic influences in leprosy. Thus, Thomas and Job (18) measured serum pseudocholinesterase activity and Dibucaine Number in 390 Indian leprosy patients and in 343 Indian controls. Esterase activity was similar in patients and controls but Dibucaine Numbers were statistically significantly decreased, i.e., less than 70, in tuberculoid and lepromatous patients. The decrease was particularly striking in lepromatous patients. A subsequent study by Thomas et al. (19), was confirmatory. Agarwal et al. (1) in a study from Ethiopia found that the distribution of serum Dibucaine Numbers was similar in 150 controls and in 206 leprosy patients whether classified as tuberculoid, borderline, or lepromatous. In a study of 580 Africans with leprosy and 1,034 controls, Whittaker, et al. (21) did not find the E1 E1 phenotype. However, the fluoride variant, E1 E1, was present in 11% of controls and 6% of leprosy patients, an insignificant difference. Of particular interest was the low incidence of the E1 E1 phenotype, three percent in 312 patients with tuberculoid leprosy, a statistically significant difference, compared with controls.

We have studied serum pseudocholinesterase variants in 29 Mexican-born lepromatous leprosy patients, and 30 Mexican-born controls.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Mexican-born patients were selected as lepromatous, following the criteria of Ridley and Jopling (14) and Ridley and Waters (15). By histologic criteria, patients were either polar lepromatous or subpolar lepromatous. By clinical criteria patients were polar lepromatous and had no sharply defined skin lesions of tuberculoid or borderline type and no nerve trunk palsies. Controls were Mexican-born, dermatology clinic patients judged to be in good health.

Serum pseudocholinesterase activity was determined by a spectrophotometric procedure employing benzoylcholine chloride as the substrate. The methods used for identification of atypical variant and fluoride variant were according to Kalow and Genest (7) and Harris and Whittaker (7), respectively. The enzyme activity is expressed in empirical units as O.D. change per minute at 240 nm with plasma diluted 1:200 and a time factor of 1000.

**RESULTS**

The results are summarized in Table 1. There is no statistically significant difference in serum pseudocholinesterase activity between lepromatous leprosy patients and controls. Furthermore, the two heterozygous

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serum pseudocholinesterase activity:</th>
<th>Polar lepromatous leprosy (29)*</th>
<th>Controls (30)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>18.7-38.1</td>
<td>17.5-32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>27.58</td>
<td>25.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>3.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dibucaine Number:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;70%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-40%</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;40%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* E1 E1 phenotype. Numbers in parentheses represent number of subjects.
atypical variants in the patient group do not represent a statistically significant increase over the controls.

**DISCUSSION**

Studies of the relationship between leprosy and serum pseudocholinesterase variants suggest that the two are linked genetically, not causally. Thus, Thomas and Job (19) found a statistically significant incidence of low Dibucaine Numbers in leprosy, especially in the lepromatous form (but did not distinguish between the atypical E<sub>1</sub><sup>a</sup> and fluoride, E<sub>1</sub>, variants). However, Whittaker et al (21) found no atypical variants in leprosy patients but did find a statistically significant lower incidence of the fluoride variant in tuberculoid patients. In contrast, Agarwal, et al (1) found no evidence of a relationship between pseudocholinesterase variants and leprosy. Similarly, we have found no relationship between variants and lepromatous leprosy.

This diversity of findings appear to parallel those studies of prevalence rates of HLA-A and HLA-B histocompatibility antigens in leprosy. Two studies showed significant evidence of associations (9,20); three showed equivocal evidence of an association (2-4, 11); and three showed no evidence of an association (12,13,16). Subsequently, De Vries et al (3), measuring HLA-A and HLA-B haplotype inheritance, presented evidence that susceptibility to leprosy was linked to the major histocompatibility region, even though linkage to a specific HLA-A or HLA-B antigen evidently was not demonstrable. In explanation, De Vries et al (3) reasoned that the diversity of previous findings could be understood as differing pressures for genetic disease polymorphism in different populations. This attractive idea could also reconcile the diverse findings concerning leprosy and pseudocholinesterase variants. However, at present there is no evidence to suggest if the hypothetical linkage between leprosy and pseudocholinesterase variants lies within or outside of the major histocompatibility region.

**SUMMARY**

No difference in the distribution of serum pseudocholinesterase variants could be found in lepromatous leprosy patients as compared with controls. The variety of reported relationships of pseudocholinesterase variants in leprosy suggests that only in some populations is a locus regulating pseudocholinesterase genetically linked to a hypothetical locus regulating susceptibility to leprosy.

**RESUMEN**

Se compararon los niveles de las variantes de pseudocolinesterasa sérica en pacientes con lepra lepromatosa, con aquellos encontrados en controles sanos. No se encontraron diferencias. La diversidad de correlaciones publicadas entre las variantes de pseudocolinesterasa y lepra, sugiere que sólo en algunas poblaciones, un locus regulador de pseudocolinesterasa está ligado genéticamente al locus hipotético que regula la susceptibilidad a la lepra.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Aucune différence dans la distribution des variante de la pseudocolinesterase sérique n'a pu être mise en évidence chez les malades souffrant de lépre lepromateuse, lorsqu'on les compare à des témoins. La diversité des relations qui ont été rapportées concernant des variantes de pseudo-cholinestérase dans la lépre suggère que ce n'est que dans certaines populations qu'il existe un locus réglant la pseudo-cholinestérase, et qui serait lié génétiquement à un locus hypothétique qui déterminerait la susceptibility à la lépre.

**Acknowledgments.** This work was supported in part by the Michael J. Connell Foundation, Los Angeles, California. We wish to thank Helen Fry for technical assistance.

**REFERENCES**


