Detection of cobalamin deficiency using the urinary methylmalonic acid test by gas chromatography mass spectrometry

In their recent paper Chanarin et al.\(^1\) state that urinary methylmalonic acid (MMA) concentrations are not an early sign for the detection of cobalamin (Cbl) deficiency. They base their opinion on a study that used gas chromatography as a means to quantify urinary MMA. Methodology using gas chromatography only lacks the specificity and sensitivity to accurately differentiate slightly increased concentrations of urinary MMA from normal amounts of urinary MMA.

Thus, the tumor of urinary MMA by gas chromatography mass spectrometry (GC/MS) is a highly sensitive and specific test for detecting Cbl deficiency.\(^2,3\) Norman et al.\(^4\) identified 54 consecutive infants with Cbl deficiency using the urinary MMA assay by GC/MS and 20% had a normal hematocrit at diagnosis. In a prospective clinical evaluation of the urinary MMA test by GC/MS Matched infants with obvious Cbl deficiency and Cbl deficient patients. They determined the assay to have a sensitivity of 100% and a specificity of 99%. Specker et al.\(^5\) used the urinary MMA assay to detect Cbl deficiency in a non-anaemic strict vegetarian population. More recently, the high sensitivity of the assay was demonstrated by identifying Cbl deficient non-anaemic persons over the age of 65 of whom 40% had serum MMA concentrations in the normal range.\(^6\)

False negative results have not been reported for the urinary MMA assay by GC/MS.\(^2,7\) It should be noted, however, that a negative MMA test for Cbl deficiency does not exist because neither the Schilling test nor the serum total Cbl assay is a functional test. The serum MMA assay lacks specificity because the test can give falsely high values in patients with renal insufficiency or intravascular volume depletion. The urinary MMA test by GC/MS is normalised to urinary creatinine, and falsely high urinary MMA concentrations have not been reported in patients with renal insufficiency or intravascular volume depletion. Thus the urinary MMA test by GC/MS detects early Cbl deficiency, can routinely identify non-anaemic Cbl deficiency and is perhaps the "gold standard" for identifying true functional Cbl tissue deficiency.

ERIC J NORMAN
Monarch Foundation, 400 Oak Street Connaught, Ottawa K1G 2V9

Acanthamoeba keratitis

The case report on Acanthamoeba keratitis\(^8\) and subsequent response\(^9\) require elaboration.

Acanthamoeba is a ubiquitous free-living protozoon which occurs in a wide range of environmental niches including domestic tap water. Inhalation of the organism or its penetration into open wounds can lead to development of granulomatous amoebic encephalitis, in chronic systemic nervous system infection with a prolonged clinical course in which some circumstances may prove fatal.\(^10\) Acanthamoeba has been cultured from the nasopharynx of normal, healthy subjects and there are a significant number of people with antibody against the organism.

Acanthamoeba keratitis was first recorded in 1974.\(^11\) Most presentations are from soft lens wearers, increasingly with so-called "disposable" contact lenses, where these have been immersed in inappropriate disinfecting systems.\(^11\) For example, commercially available chlorine systems will fail to detect Acanthamoeba cysts if the latter are present in the reusable contact lens storage case.\(^11\) The condition is more frequently detected in young immunocompetent persons who wear contact lenses for cosmetic purposes who have poor compliance with contact lens disinfection regimens. In one study, about 7% of contact lens cases contained viable cysts of Acanthamoeba.\(^11\) The incidence of Acanthamoeba keratitis in contact lens wearers in the USA is of the order of 1:250,000.\(^11\)

Recognition of early ocular disease in contact lens wearers due to Acanthamoeba is all important as clinical diagnosis is a punctate or dendriform epitheliopathy and may proceed to stromal invasion. Acanthamoeba keratitis is therefore most often diagnosed initially as herpes simplex keratitis and treated as such with antiviral agents and possibly corticosteroids. If such treatment fails the next diagnosis is often of fungal infection. Definitive diagnosis of Acanthamoeba keratitis from superficial corneal scrapings may prove inconclusive, because the organism can be present deeper within the stroma. In such circumstances corneal biopsy extending deeper into the stromal abscess is required, excised tissue should then be subjected to light and transmission electron microscope examination and cultured for the presence of viable amoeba.

For routine culture, a non-nutrient agar (1.5%), prepared at least 24 hours in advance, is seeded with heat-killed Escherichia coli or Klebsiella aerogenosa. Corneal scraping or tissue is gently spread across the central area of two separate plates, one to be incubated at 25°C and the other at 33°C. If the specimen is to be forwarded to a reference laboratory, it should be placed in sterile isotonic saline and kept at room temperature before despatch. Often clinical specimens which contain Acanthamoeba, and amoebae which have been subjected to topical chemotherapy or corticosteroids, require supplements to promote growth and development of the amoeba in culture. If necessary, various biochemical or molecular biological methods can be used to provide unequivocal speciation and strain identification of the pathogenic Acanthamoeba.

Medical treatment with combined topical treatment comprising propamidine isethionate plus neomycin at an early stage can be successful.\(^11\) If unrecognized, or if infection progresses to a ring abscess when medical treatment is often unsuccessful and a corneal graft, including on occasion, a second graft, is required. Anti-amoebic drugs at this stage may result in emergence of temperature sensitive and drug resistant strains of the organism.\(^11\) Sensitivity testing of cultured clinical isolates must therefore be performed.

\(^2\) Corneal Medicine, Norfolk Foundation, London W2 1PG
\(^3\) BAIN

Factors affecting the maintenance dose of warfarin

James et al.\(^\text{12}\) have confirmed the observations of Woodhouse\(^\text{13}\) that even if AChE inhibition with warfarin is given to younger patients to achieve the same intensity of anticoagulation,\(^\text{14}\) they suggest that the age dependency of dose should perhaps be taken into account in judging initial dose. We have already studied this question and have demonstrated that if a flexible induction dose regimen such as that of Fennerty et al.\(^\text{15}\) is used elderly patients can safely be started on the same initial dose as other patients. Should a fixed dosage schedule be used this might not necessarily be so.

\(^12\) BAIN

Correspondence

University of London, St Mary's Hospital Medical School, Department of Haematology, Norfolk Place, Paddington, London W2 1PG
Book reviews

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Electron microscopy is often regarded by those who are not well versed in the ultrastructural approach as the ultimate method of diagnosis on a tissue sample. It is therefore salutary to read in the introduction that useful ultrastructural information can be obtained in only 1-5% of samples received in a teaching hospital laboratory. The figure is even less if tumours are excluded. Why then do we need such a weighty tome (3-25 kg; 7-15 lb) tome? It is needed because it fills a gap in the general ultrastructural appearance of cells (Ghadially) and the ultrastructural appearance of tumours (Henderson, Papadimitriou and Coleman), and is welcome for that reason.

The editor has gathered a variety of experts who have written concisely or extensively and have illustrated sparingly or profusely. As a consequence the coverage is uneven. For example, in vitro fertilisation has 40 references and 31 figures, while the eye has 426 references, eight tables, and only two figures, clearly inadequate for an atlas of ultrastructure. Other chapters are more even.

There are chapters on technique, scanning electron microscopy, general cell pathology, stromal pathology, viruses, infectious agents, parasites, tumour-like disorders, connective tissue disorders, digestive system (746 references; only 21 figures, liver, endocrine system, kidney, breast, CNS, PNS, muscle, bones, joints, lymphoid system (with light microscopy immunohistochemistry included in the text but not illustrated), and blood and bone marrow. I found the chapter on storage disorders disappointing because this is one area where electron microscopy is most helpful and uses many different tissues for diagnosis. The coverage could have been more extensive. The chapter on skin is an invaluable source of reference.

The choice of sizes of illustrations is very variable and many pages are nearly half empty. The quality of the illustrations is generally good. References are up to 1990. As a working atlas and text this book should be available to all those involved in diagnostic electron microscopy, especially if they read the introductory short chapter.

FD LAKE


This book consists of 37 clinicopathological case studies prepared for American medical students. Each is presented in "parallel text" form with an account of the patient in one column and discussion and clarification of important points in the parallel column. This section is followed by some general text on the main disease in the patient and some reference material. Some of the cases include history (recent and previous), examination findings, and the results of investigations. Progress is recorded, sometimes to recovery but mainly to necropsy. Illustrations are mainly in colour and of histological sections, though there are some of macro-specimens and some radiology.

These mini CPCs are generally very good for their purpose, but it is easy to disagree with individual comments and interpretations. The aim of this collection is, however, not to give dogmatic teaching but to involve the students in clinicopathological thinking. Would I recommend this book to medical students in the UK? Yes, as additional reading late in the clinical course—or for postgraduates for professional examinations. The cases do require familiarity with clinical terms and clinical medicine. If it were used early in clinical courses there would need to be considerable input from a tutor (or much work with a medical dictionary). An additional problem for the European student is that haematological and chemical data are not given in SI units. It is the sort of book which ought to be very valuable but, with truncated pathology courses given early in the clinical years, it may find its niche in medicine rather pathology.

DR DAVIES


Since publication of the first edition in 1985 this book has become one of the standard reference texts for lymph node pathology, certainly in the United Kingdom. Quite apart from the quality of the writing, a major reason for this is that many pathologists are attracted to the terminology and general looseness of the Kiel classification of malignant lymphomas. Much has happened over the past seven years, however, not least the updating of the Kiel system to accommodate most of the more recently delineated types of T cell neoplasia. Other notable changes include the introduction of more antibodies applicable to paraffin wax sections and the increasing contribution of molecular genetics to the unravelling of lymphoid neoplasia. The new two chapters dealing with these developments are therefore appropriate as is the recognition of new entities such as monocytoid, angiotropic, and T cell rich B cell tumours. The demise of the myelomonocytic as a major entity is acknowledged as is the reciprocal emergence of the concept of anaplastic lymphoma. Within the realm of Hodgkin's disease new concepts regarding the lymphocyte predominance subtype and the recognition that certain nodular sclerosing are well documented. As before the illustrations are of a generally high quality, and the only minor quibble one might have about the excellent descriptions of these entities is that even at the risk of duplication they might have included more immunocytochemical data. This apart, however, one can see no reason why this second edition should not continue to occupy its pre-eminence place in one of the innumerable and least dispensable reference books both in diagnostic and research laboratories.

FD LEE


This monograph is a compilation of the proceedings of the first seminar on renal involvement in systemic vasculitis held in Vimercate, Italy, in September 1990. It comprises a series of chapters of variable length and quality, somewhat haphazardly arranged. It would be far better if the editors had tried harder to establish some sort of continuity. The book largely documents our current lack of understanding of the basis of systemic vasculitis with renal involvement.

Several papers deal with observations on the emboli found in one of the arteries which react with anti-neutrophilic cytoplasmic antigens (ANCA) confirming that c ANCA antibodies tend to be found in Wegener's granulomatosis and that ANCA antibodies in microscopic polyarteritis nodosa, but there is no clear message as to whether they are primary in the cause of the vasculitis or merely an epiphenomenon which is, perhaps, more likely.

The aim of the text is said to be to identify more effective therapeutic schedules for patients patients with various forms of vasculitis and, given the relative lack of scientific clarity in this area, it is fortunate that the empirical regimens used continue to improve the prognosis for patients with the vasculitic syndromes.

If you want to read what we don’t know about vasculitis this is the book for you.

From the pathologist’s point of view Systemic Vasculitis edited by Andrew and Jack Chung and published by Igaku Shoin, New York, 1992 is, in my opinion, much better value for money.

DR TURNER


This book aims to highlight recent advances in the diagnosis of gynecological pathology.
Factors affecting the maintenance dose of warfarin.

B J Bain

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