Detection of myocardial infarction by immunohistological staining for C9 on formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded sections

J P Doran, A J Howie, J N Townend, R S Bonser

Abstract

Aims—To evaluate an immunohistological stain for complement component C9 as a method of detecting early myocardial infarction and to compare this with (1) an enzyme histochemical method and (2) conventional histological staining.

Methods—(1) Eight hearts taken at necropsy were stained using the nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate method and an immunohistological stain for C9. (2) Twenty five hearts from cases of suspected or confirmed myocardial infarction and 25 from cases without conventional evidence of infarction were stained for C9 and by haematoxylin and eosin.

Results—(1) The histochemical method indicated myocardial necrosis in five hearts and the C9 method in seven, all of which had clinical evidence of myocardial damage or a reason for it. The histochemical method required fresh myocardium, was difficult to use and was difficult to interpret. (2) Of 25 hearts with suspected or confirmed infarction, 24 were stained by the C9 method. Staining with haematoxylin and eosin showed infarction in 16 of these, all with infarcts at least 24 hours old; the other eight had clinical evidence of infarction less than 24 hours old. The heart not stained by C9 was from a patient who, on review, had no evidence of infarction. Of the 25 control hearts, none had infarction on staining with haematoxylin and eosin, but three were stained by the C9 method. These three were from patients with septicaemia or another reason for myocardial damage.

Conclusions—The immunohistological method for C9 is a simple, reliable and sensitive method for the detection of early myocardial necrosis that could be used on formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded necropsy material. This had advantages over a histochemical method and conventional staining with haematoxylin and eosin.

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Recent myocardial infarction can be impossible to detect either by direct examination at necropsy or using conventional stains on histological sections. Histochemical techniques can show early infarction, but these are difficult to interpret and rarely used. A method of detection of infarction that could be used on formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded sections would be of great value.

Complement component C9, part of the C5b-9 membrane attack complex of complement, is a reliable marker of complement deposition and can be detected immunohistologically on formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded sections of renal biopsy specimens. This membrane attack complex has also been found in necrotic skeletal muscle fibres and in infarcted myocardium. We wished to see whether the immunohistological stain for C9 could be used as a routine method for demonstrating recent myocardial infarction, by comparing it with an established histochemical technique, the nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate reaction, and against conventional staining with haematoxylin and eosin.

Methods

Histochemical study

Transverse slices, about 1–2 cm thick, were taken from the left ventricle of eight patients at necropsy (table 1).

Nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate method

The slices of myocardium were rinsed and stored at 4°C in Sorensen's phosphate buffer (0·1 M, pH 7·4) containing 0·1 M ascorbic acid. Fresh slices were cut just before staining. These were incubated in Sorensen's buffer containing nitroblue tetrazolium, 50 mg/100 ml, and phenazine methosulphate, 2·5 mg/100 ml, for 15 minutes at 37°C. The slices were rinsed, immersed in 10% formal saline, and photographed.

Immunohistological method for C9

After fixation for at least 18 hours, histological blocks were cut from the myocardial slices, using the photographs as guides to the sites of blocks. Blocks were embedded in paraffin wax on a Shandon Hypercenter with a routine processing schedule. Sections were cut at 5 μm, dried on glass slides at 60°C for 30 minutes, rehydrated, and immersed in 1% hydrogen peroxide in methanol to block endogenous peroxidase. Sheep antiserum to C9 (The Binding Site, Birmingham, UK) was used at a dilution of 1 in 500 in 0·15 M phosphate buffered saline.
Table 1  Comparison of staining of myocardium with haematoxylin and eosin with the histochemical technique and immunohistology for C9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient (sex/age in years)</th>
<th>Clinical details</th>
<th>Haematoxylin and eosin</th>
<th>Nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate staining</th>
<th>C9 immunohistological staining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F/33</td>
<td>Died 24 hours after heart transplant</td>
<td>One group of contraction band necrosis</td>
<td>Patchy pink/red</td>
<td>Extensive patchy staining of single cells and groups of cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/44</td>
<td>Died two months after heart transplant</td>
<td>Severe acute rejection with patchy necrosis</td>
<td>Patchy pink/red</td>
<td>Extensive patchy staining of single cells and groups of cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/50</td>
<td>Died one hour after collapse from dysrhythmia: no clinical evidence of myocardial infarct</td>
<td>No infarction identified</td>
<td>Dark blue</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/55</td>
<td>Died from septicaemic shock in liver failure</td>
<td>No infarction identified</td>
<td>Dark blue</td>
<td>A few scattered cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/62</td>
<td>Died seven days after myocardial infarct</td>
<td>Infarcted area</td>
<td>White area</td>
<td>Heavily stained area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/68</td>
<td>Died two days after myocardial infarct</td>
<td>Infarcted area</td>
<td>White area</td>
<td>Heavily stained area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/73</td>
<td>Died 24 hours after myocardial infarct</td>
<td>No infarction identified</td>
<td>Patchy pink/red</td>
<td>A few groups of cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/83</td>
<td>Died six hours after myocardial infarct</td>
<td>No infarction identified</td>
<td>Dark blue</td>
<td>Scattered single cells</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1  Slice of left ventricle from a 62 year old man stained by the nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate method seven days after a myocardial infarct. Non-infarcted myocardium appears dark and infarcted myocardium appears white. The junction between the dark and white areas is irregular, producing a mottled pattern at the edges of the main white area.

Figure 2  Histological section taken from the heart in fig 1 at the junction of macroscopically dark and white areas, stained by the immunohistological method for C9. Infarcted myocardial cells appear dark.

STUDY OF CONVENTIONAL STAINING

Necropsy records were reviewed and 25 consecutive cases with clinically suspected or confirmed myocardial infarction were identified. Another 25 cases without clinical or conventional pathological evidence of myocardial infarction were also identified. Sections of formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded myocardium, stained with haematoxylin and eosin, were inspected. The immunohistological method for C9 was applied to sections cut from the same blocks.

Results

HISTOCHEMICAL STUDY

Myocardium without obvious infarction stained dark blue with the nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate method (table 1). Unstained areas, virtually white, were seen in two hearts with well established infarction (fig 1). Intermediate staining with patches of pink to red coloration was seen in three hearts.

Intracellular deposition of C9 was detected immunohistologically in the areas of infarction as defined by the enzymatic method, with
greater intensity of staining at the edges of infarcts (fig 2). There was patchy staining with C9 in the hearts that had pink/red histochemical staining. Scattered single cells stained with C9 in two hearts that had dark blue histochemical staining. C9 was not deposited in muscle cells in one heart which had no clinical, conventional pathological or histochemical evidence of infarction. C9 was detected in arterial walls in viable myocardium and was a useful internal positive control in all hearts.

STUDY OF CONVENTIONAL STAINING
Comparison of conventional staining with immunohistology for C9 is presented in table 2. The eight hearts in the group of suspected or confirmed myocardial infarction stained by C9 but with no conventional evidence of infarction were all from patients with clinical evidence of infarction less than 24 hours old, whereas the 16 identified by staining with haematoxylin and eosin and also stained with C9 had infarcts from 24 hours to 20 days old (fig 3). The single heart in this group that seemed to be normal on staining with both haematoxylin and eosin and C9 was from an 81 year old man who was thought to have had a myocardial infarct but on review of clinical records had unstable angina without electrocardiographic evidence of infarction. Three hearts in the control group were C9 positive. These were from a 43 year old man with septicaemic shock caused by an intra-abdominal abscess, a 57 year old man with peritonitis caused by a perforated gastric ulcer, and a 78 year old woman with Henoch–Schoenlein purpura. In these three cases a few single myocardial cells scattered throughout the sections stained positively with C9 (fig 4).

Discussion
Immunohistological staining for C9 was better than the nitroblue tetrazolium/phenazine methosulphate method for detecting myocardial infarction. The C9 method had the advantage that formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded material could be used. Unlike the technical difficulties of the histochemical method, there was no need for special storage or treatment of samples from hearts. The histochemical method was unreliable on an infarct under 24 hours old, whereas the C9 method stained this infarct. The histochemical method is a macroscopic test whereas the C9 method is microscopic and permitted much finer resolution, detecting staining of single cells. The C9 method was so sensitive that it detected scattered single myocardial cell necrosis in three of the 25 hearts without other evidence of myocardial damage, but with an adequate clin-
Detection of myocardial infarction

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Detection of myocardial infarction by immunohistological staining for C9 on formalin fixed, paraffin wax embedded sections.

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