Myelopathy:
An Unusual Presentation of Toxoplasmosis
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ABSTRACT: Central nervous system toxoplasmosis is a well known disease of immunocompromised patients. Neuropathologic examinations have only rarely demonstrated spinal cord involvement. This report describes a fatal case of toxoplasmosis that presented with a subacute myelopathy. Toxoplasmosis should be considered in immunocompromised patients, including patients with the acquired immune deficiency syndrome, that develop intramedullary lesions of the spinal cord.

RÉSUMÉ: La myélopathie: un mode de présentation inusité de la toxoplasmose
La toxoplasmose du système nerveux central est une maladie bien connue chez les patients immunocompromis. L'atteinte de la moelle épinière a rarement été démontrée à l'examen neuropathologique chez ces patients. Nous rapportons un cas de toxoplasmose fatale dont le mode de présentation a été une myélopathie subaiguë. La toxoplasmose doit être envisagée chez les patients immunocompromis, incluant les patients atteints du syndrome d'immunodéficience acquise, qui développent des lésions intramédullaires de la moelle épinière.

Case Report
A 58-year-old female presented with left-sided weakness and sensory loss. An idiopathic autoimmune hemolytic anemia was diagnosed five years earlier. She was initially treated with prednisone, and one year later she was switched to cyclophosphamide 150 mg/day. Two months prior to admission she developed burning discomfort inferior to her left breast that involved her left lower trunk and left leg. The discomfort persisted and became associated with mild left leg weakness which progressed until she was unable to walk. She also had a 30 pound weight loss over six months prior to admission. She had a domestic cat.

On examination she had mild proximal weakness of the right leg and severe left leg weakness that was more marked proximally. There was sensory loss to pinprick below T5 level with greater involvement on the right side, and a loss of light touch below T6 level on the left. Position sense was impaired in the left leg. Abdominal reflexes were absent and deep tendon reflexes were brisk in the legs. The left toe was upgoing.

On admission a pancytopenia was present with a leukocyte count of \(1.8 \times 10^9/L\) and a platelet count of \(66 \times 10^9/L\). The hemoglobin level was 101 g/L. A bone marrow aspiration showed moderate marrow hypoplasia and dyserythropoiesis. A CT myelogram revealed mild enlargement of the spinal cord at T5. A CSF examination revealed 8 \(\times 10^6/\)L mononuclear cells, and the protein and glucose levels were 0.76 g/L and 3.1 mmol/L, respectively. No atypical cells were present and cultures were negative.

She was treated with corticosteroids (initially prednisone 100 mg/day), which did not result in significant improvement in her weakness or sensory loss. On her 11th hospital day she became irritable and developed flaccid paraplegia with urinary and fecal incontinence. She had fever (39°C, rectal) on the following day that persisted despite intravenous antibiotics. She also developed persistent hematuria, and cyclophosphamide was discontinued.

She became comatose on her 16th hospital day and developed left arm weakness and nuchal rigidity. A CT head scan revealed low density lesions bilaterally in the frontal lobes with minimal enhancement, and a low density lesion in the right basal ganglia (Figure 1). A repeat CSF examination revealed 20 \(\times 10^6/L\) white cells (58% polys, 42% mononuclear cells), protein was 1.16 g/L, glucose was 2.1 mmol/L, and cultures were negative. The platelet count dropped to 33 \(\times 10^9/L\). A brain biopsy was not performed because of the high risk of a hemorrhagic complication. She was given broad antimicrobial coverage with intravenous penicillin, ceftriaxone, metronidazole, and amphotericin B for a suspected CNS infection. She died on her 22nd hospital day.
Horizontal sections of the brain showed additional areas of necrosis in the occipital lobes, both basal ganglia, cerebellum, right side of the midbrain, and the right side of the basis pontis (Figure 3). On microscopy, these areas showed active ongoing inflammation, similar to that seen in the spinal cord.

Examination of other body organs did not reveal evidence of toxoplasmosis. The heart showed a few areas of interstitial inflammation which were consistent with toxoplasma myocarditis, however, no organisms were identified on special stains. Examination of the hematopoietic system showed pancytopenia and mild hypoplasia and dyserythropoiesis of the bone marrow and lymphoid atrophy of the spleen and lymph nodes. These findings are related to the immunosuppressive effect of chemotherapy. The liver and spleen showed mild hemosiderosis consistent with autoimmune hemolytic anemia.

Postmortem serum had an antibody titre of 1/4096 to Toxoplasma (immunofluorescent antibody test). Human immunodeficiency virus serology was negative.

**DISCUSSION**

This patient with fatal CNS toxoplasmosis was immunosuppressed from treatment of an autoimmune hemolytic anemia with cyclophosphamide. She developed a left-sided intramedullary thoracic cord lesion that subsequently became bilateral. After initiation of corticosteroids, there was extension of the spinal cord lesion and the development of symmetric multifocal brain lesions. It was clinically uncertain whether the spinal cord and brain lesions were part of the same pathologic process. The development of thrombocytopenia prevented a specific diagnosis of the cerebral lesions with a brain biopsy, and the patient died despite treatment with multiple antimicrobial agents for a suspected CNS infection. Neuropathologic examination showed that the spinal cord and brain lesions were due to *Toxoplasma* infection.

Patients with impaired immunologic defense mechanisms are at risk of developing CNS toxoplasmosis. These patients often have underlying systemic diseases and are treated with immunosuppressive therapy. Autoimmune hemolytic anemia has been reported as an underlying condition in toxoplasmosis in one other case. Toxoplasmosis has been frequently observed in patients with AIDS. In fact, toxoplasmosis has been recognized as the most common cause of focal brain lesions in patients with AIDS.

Pathologic evidence of spinal cord involvement in CNS toxoplasmosis has been recognized infrequently. At autopsy, spinal cord involvement was observed in only one of 16 patients with CNS toxoplasmosis and AIDS. Townsend et al. found spinal cord involvement in one of 6 cases of CNS toxoplasmosis without AIDS. It is unclear whether spinal cord lesions were recognized clinically in these two cases.

There have been three previous reports of patients presenting with a myelopathy associated with *Toxoplasma* infection. Mehren et al. reported an AIDS patient who presented with a cervical myelopathy. This patient also had localized enlargement of the spinal cord on myelography and a CSF pleocytosis. At autopsy, *Toxoplasma* tachyzoites and cysts were found in the cervical spinal cord and brain. This is the only other well-documented case of *Toxoplasma* myelitis. Mishra et al. described a patient with a myelopathy and myelographic blocks at T7 and
Figure 2 — (A) An area of active inflammation showing necrosis of the neuropil and a severe polymorphonuclear response. Fibrin is present in the lumen and wall of a microvessel. Tachyzoites of Toxoplasma were easily identified in areas of necrosis (B). The grey matter of the cord at C8 level showing a microglial nodule at the periphery of which a Toxoplasma cyst (arrow) is present. (A) x 300; (B) x 57,000; inset x 400, Geimsa stain; (C) x 400.

L2. A biopsy of granulation tissue in the epidural and subarachnoid space showed toxoplasmosis. Koh et al. reported a patient with an acute transverse myelopathy, mild CSF pleocytosis, and serologic evidence of Toxoplasma infection. However, there was no pathologic confirmation that this was a toxoplasmic myelitis.

Although toxoplasmic myelitis is uncommon, it should be suspected in immunocompromised patients presenting with intramedullary lesions of the spinal cord. Determinations of serum and CSF titers of Toxoplasma antibodies may be helpful in making an antemortem diagnosis of CNS toxoplasmosis. Cerebral toxoplasmosis can respond to therapy with the combination of sulfadiazine and pyrimethamine, and it would be expected that this therapy might also be beneficial in cases of toxoplasmic myelitis.

Figure 3 — Horizontal section of brain showing areas of necrosis in both frontal lobes and basal ganglia and in multifocal areas of the cortex and cerebellum. The centrum semiovale is enlarged due to cerebral edema associated with the frontal lobe lesions.
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