A Comparison of Morphoea and Lichen Sclerosis et Atrophicus In vitro: The Effects of Para-aminobenzoate on Skin Fibroblasts

MAUREEN R. GRIFFITHS and GRAHAM C. PRIESTLEY
Department of Dermatology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

To study the effects of para-aminobenzoate on the dermis, fibroblast cell lines derived from lesions of lichen sclerosis et atrophicus, from morphoea and from normal skin were incubated with Potaba in vitro. Monolayer cultures containing Potaba showed a dose-dependent inhibition of proliferation beginning at 1,000 ng/ml with total inhibition at 10,000 ng/ml. Mean ID₅₀ values for the three groups were not significantly different. There was a similar dose dependent inhibition of glycosaminoglycan secretion in all 3 groups, except at 10,000 ng/ml where secretion by lichen sclerosus et atrophicus and morphoea fibroblasts was significantly more inhibited than normal skin. Inhibition of the glycosaminoglycan secretion at 10–1,000 ng/ml was a direct effect of the drug rather than an indirect effect of changes in cell density, and lichen sclerosus et atrophicus fibroblasts produced about 40% more GAG than the morphoea or normal lines growing at similar densities. Collagen synthesis was increased in both lichen sclerosus et atrophicus and morphoea cell lines, with increased non-collagenous protein in morphoea lines. These results confirm that there are differences between lichen sclerosus et atrophicus and morphoea, and suggest glycosaminoglycan secretion as a possible target for the therapeutic action of Potaba. Keywords: Glycosaminoglycans; Collagen; Fibrosis.

(Accepted June 5, 1991.)


M. R. Griffiths, Department of Pathology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland.

Potassium para-aminobenzoate (Potaba) has been used to treat several fibroses, and successful results have been reported in scleroderma (1), dermatomyositis (2), Peyronie’s disease (3), rheumatoid arthritis (4), morphoea (4) and most recently in lichen sclerosus et atrophicus (LSA) (5), although other trials have been less favourable. The mode of action of Potaba is unknown, although it has been suggested that monoamine oxidase activity is involved (6). It is likely that therapeutic effects of Potaba will involve alterations in the metabolism of several connective tissue components. The aim of this work was to isolate fibroblasts from normal skin and from lesions of morphoea or LSA, and to compare their production of GAG and collagen. We also examined the effects of Potaba on fibroblast metabolism to determine some therapeutic actions of the drug.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sources of cells
Normal skin fibroblasts were obtained from punch biopsies taken from the forearm of five adult volunteers and from two foreskins obtained at adult circumcision. Seven morphoea fibroblast lines from back (n = 3), arm (n = 2), thigh (n = 1) and abdomen (n = 1); and eight LSA fibroblast lines from the arm (n = 2), neck (n = 3) and genital area (n = 3), were grown from portions of skin biopsies taken for histological diagnosis. The mean age of the patients was: LSA 57 ± 3.3 (± s.e.m.); morphoea 37.4 ± 6.1; normal 40.2 ± 7.4. Tissue fragments were grown under glass coverslips in Dulbecco Eagle medium supplemented with 100 units/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin, 4 µM glutamine and 20% foetal calf serum, for 48 h, until first passage and thereafter with 10% FCS (all from Gibco BRL, Paisley, Scotland). The cells were grown in Falcon plastic flasks flushed with 95% air/5% CO₂ at 37°C and medium was changed three times weekly. Cells were harvested with trypsin-versene for counting in an electronic cell counter (Coulter model DN).

Proliferation tests
On Day 0, 28 flasks (each 25 cm² growth area) were seeded with aliquots of cells (1 x 10⁶). All cells were used between passages 4 and 8. On Day 3 four flasks were withdrawn for cell counts while the rest were grouped in fours for treatment with Potaba at 6 concentrations (0, 10, 100, 1,000, 5,000 and 10,000 ng/ml). Media were renewed on Day 4 and on Day 6 the cells were harvested and counted in all flasks. The increase in the numbers of cells in each treated flask was expressed as a percentage of the mean increase in control flasks between Days 3 and 6. Viability was measured by trypan blue exclusion.

Measurement of GAG secretion
GAG present in culture medium was measured as its uronic acid moiety. Medium (7 ml) collected on Day 6 of the proliferation tests, and 2 ml of phosphate buffered saline used to rinse the cell layers, was dialysed against 0.1 M sodium acetate buffer (pH 4.5) for 15 h and concentrated to approximately 4 ml with Lyphogel (Gelman Sciences Ltd). Each sample was digested with 2 mg testicular hyaluronidase (Sigma, type I) overnight at 37°C before precipitation of protein in cold 5% trichloroacetic acid (TCA). After centrifugation at 18,000 g for 30 min, the supernatant was removed and its uronic acid content was assayed using metachromatic diphényl reagent with a glucuronolactone standard (7). Uronic acid output per culture was calculated by subtracting the uronic acid value of the unused medium and values were finally expressed as µg uronic acid/10⁶ cells/48 h. Values for cultures containing Potaba were expressed as percentages of those from untreated controls (same cell line) in the same experiment.

Protein synthesis
Total protein synthesis was measured as the incorporation of [H]-proline into TCA-insoluble protein and collagen synthesis as incorporation of [H]-proline into collagenase-sensitive protein. Six-well culture dishes (Linbro, Flow Laboratories, Paisley) were seeded with fibroblasts at a density of 10⁶ cells/well. Two wells per dish were allocated to each cell line, and each experiment used one cell line from each of the three passage number. Cell lines were selected to match donor ages, sex, site and passage number. A total of seven dishes were used in each experiment. After two days the dishes received medium with 2% FCS supplemented with 50 µg/ml ascorbic acid. Forty-eight hours later, 370 kBq/ml [H]-proline (Amersham, England) in 1 ml antibiotic-free medium with 2% FCS was added to each well in five dishes. The remaining two dishes received the same treatment without the radioactive activity. All seven dishes were then incubated for 24 h. Protein was precipitated and the [H]-collagen was distinguished from the other labelled protein by the use of collagenase (Advance Biofactures, Lynbrook, USA). Labelled protein was measured as previously described (8).
**Fig. 1.** Effects of Potaba on fibroblast proliferation rates. x: normal; ○: LSA; ●: morphoea. *p < 0.05* Values shown are the mean of 4 flasks ± SE at each drug concentration. Proliferation rate of untreated cells = 100%.

**Urinary GAG excretion**

GAG and total uronic acid were measured in 24-h urine samples collected from 11 female patients with LSA (mean age 46 years) and from 8 normal women of similar age (mean age 42 years). The GAG was precipitated with cetyltrimethyl ammonium bromide and measured with m-hydroxydiphenyl (9).

**RESULTS**

Potaba produced a dose-dependent inhibition of fibroblast proliferation, beginning at 1000 µg/ml for normal and LSA fibroblasts, and at 100 µg/ml for morphea fibroblasts. Proliferation was completely inhibited at 10,000 µg/ml (Fig. 1). There was no significant difference between the mean ID₉₀ levels of the three groups, (p > 0.05 Student’s t-test: normal 4411 ± 574; morphea 3353 ± 952; LSA 3605 ± 551; mean ± SEM. n = 7). All groups displayed a 90% cell viability at every drug concentration and all cells had normal morphology when examined microscopically, indicating a cytostatic rather than a cytotoxic effect.

The inverse relationship between cell density (cells per cm²) and GAG secretion in human skin fibroblasts (10) was confirmed in the present study using 19 observations from 4 normal cell lines. The relationship was linear and can be described by the equation y = -0.03x + 2.35 (r = -0.85; df = 17; p < 0.0005) where y is log GAG/10³ cells and x is cell density at 10³ cells per 25 cm² growth area. This equation was used to calculate the GAG values to be expected at a given cell density, and the predicted values for each cell line were compared to the observed values (Table 1, Fig. 2). In this way, it is possible to separate the effects of cell density from the direct effects of Potaba. Each of the LSA fibroblast lines secreted significantly greater amounts of GAG than was predicted (p < 0.05; paired t-test) but this difference was not found in morphea cell lines. In cultures containing Potaba there was a significant decrease in GAG at 10,000 µg/ml for LSA and morphea lines and at 100, 1000 and 5000 µg/ml for normal cells (Fig. 3). The net drug response was expressed as the predicted GAG values subtracted from the observed value (Fig. 4). Using this technique, Potaba caused a significant decrease in GAG secretion at all drug concentrations for normal cells, and at 10 µg/ml and 100 µg/ml for LSA and morphea lines, respectively. In all cases, the response was dose-dependent. The urinary excretion of GAG was also measured. There were no significant differences between patients and age-matched controls for total GAG, uronic acid or creatinine values; GAG/creatinine ratios were 2.68 ± 0.19 mg/gm for controls and 2.78 ± 0.26 for patients with LSA.

Collagen and other protein synthesis was measured in three cell lines from each group (Fig. 5). The amount of collagen produced by the LSA and morphea cells was 40% and 18% higher than in normal skin fibroblasts (p < 0.02). The amount of other protein produced by morphea fibroblasts was 97% higher than in controls (p < 0.005). Approximately 60% of the ³H collagen and 48% of the other ³H protein was secreted into the medium in all three groups.

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<th>Table 1. Comparison of GAG secretion in three fibroblast groups</th>
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<td><strong>HSF</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Number of cell lines</strong></td>
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<td>GAG µg/10³ cells/48 hrs</td>
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<td>Predicted GAG from Fig. 2 µg/10³ cells/48 hrs</td>
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<td><strong>Observed/Expected ratios</strong></td>
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Values given as Mean ± SEM. LSA, lichen sclerosus et atrophicus; M, morphea; HSF, normal skin fibroblasts.

*Acta Derm Venereol (Stockh) 72*
DISCUSSION

A previous study (6) examined the effects of Potaba on the excessive collagen synthesis of skin fibroblasts from scleroderma lesions and the abnormal GAG secretion of rheumatoid synoviocytes. We have now examined LSA and morphea fibroblasts to see if similar alterations were detectable, and if these were affected by treatment with Potaba. The LSA cell lines displayed an increase in GAG secretion over normal fibroblasts which was not found with morphea cell lines. Juhlin et al. (11) reported greatly increased levels of hyaluronic acid in suction blisters raised in the skin of two LSA patients, which agrees with the increase in total GAG in the cultures, since fibroblast GAG consists predominantly of hyaluronic acid (8).

Once the levels of GAG secretion had been established in the normal cell lines, it was possible to measure the effect of treatment with Potaba. The net drug response showed significant decreases in GAG secretion at low drug levels (10–100 μg/ml) obtainable during treatment of patients with Potaba. Peak blood levels of Potaba measured by Priestley et al. (12) were in the range of 29–138 μg/ml. It is important to note that GAG secretion was depressed at concentrations of Potaba which did not affect cell proliferation.

There were differences in protein synthesis between the three groups of cell lines. Both the LSA and morphea cell lines synthesised more collagen than the normal fibroblasts, with the morphea lines giving the highest values. This is compatible with the fibrotic nature of the skin lesions observed in these conditions. The morphea lines also synthesised more non-collagenous protein. Vuorio et al. (13) described an increase in fibronectin production by morphea fibroblasts. It has been suggested that this connective tissue glycoprotein may act as a collagenase inhibitor. It seems possible that fibronectin may account for some of the increase in non-collagenous protein seen in this study.

For many years there has been disagreement on whether LSA and morphea are variants of one disease. Patterson & Ackerman (14), however, defined pathological differences between the two conditions and declared them to be separate entities. Our experiments have shown different alterations in metabolism in fibroblasts from LSA and morphea patients. In LSA fibroblasts, GAG metabolism was primarily affected and in morphea fibroblasts it was collagen metabolism. If treatment with Potaba can reduce excess GAG secretion in vivo, this might be a useful therapy for LSA.

In conclusion, this study has identified abnormalities in the metabolism of LSA and morphea fibroblasts in vitro, and has confirmed a difference between the two conditions. A possible therapeutic mechanism, which is effective at the blood levels of Potaba achieved during oral treatment of patients, is suggested by the drug's inhibition of glycosaminoglycan secretion by skin fibroblasts.
REFERENCES

Hypertrichosis Lanuginosa Acquisita

A. BÉGÁNY and K. NAGY-VEZEKÉNYI

Department of Dermatology, University of Debrecen, Hungary

Hypertrichosis lanuginosa acquisita was observed in a female patient with stage IV malignant melanoma and also diffuse melanosis of the skin. The patient died within 2 months after the appearance of HL. Key words: Malignant melanoma; Paraneoplastic symptom.

(Accepted May 21, 1991.)

A. Bégály, Department of Dermatology, University of Debrecen, 4012 Debrecen, HUNGARY.

Hypertrichosis lanuginosa (HL) is characterized by generalized or localized excessive growth of lanugo hair (1). The acquired form is often associated with malignancies of different organs, which is why it can be regarded as a paraneoplastic symptom. According to the literature available to us the association of malignant melanoma with HL has not been previously described.

CASE REPORT

A 32-year-old woman was operated on account of an ulcerated tumour, which had been expanding on the inner surface of her left knee. The histological examination of this tumour (1987) verified a malignant melanoma of the superficial spreading type, Clark level V and 3.3 mm invasion.

Dacarbazine was given for half a year, during which a regional lymph node metastasis developed. After the removal of the latter, combined cytostatic treatment was administered (Elobromol and Adriamycin). She was reoperated because of the recurrence of the regional metastasis. After a symptom-free period of 6 months there was another recurrence in the regional lymph nodes.

She was admitted to the Dermatological Clinic in Debrecen in March 1989. At that time, in spite of her good general condition, in the left lower part of the abdomen an immobile, non-tender tumour of the size of a baby’s head was palpated, and in the left inginal region two tumours covered with bluish pigmented skin were found. The inguinal tumours were immobile. No other metastases (chest, skull, bone) were discovered. Surgeon’s and gynecologist’s opinion: inoperable metastases. Combined cytostatic therapy was given again after routine laboratory investigations. The treatment caused serious leucopenia (WBC 1.2 G/L), so the treatment had to be interrupted. Co 60 irradiation was given to the abdominal and inguinal metastases (doses 2x200 Gy), after which the metastases became smaller.

In May 1989, the patient’s skin became bluish-silvery all over her body, and light coloured thin, 1-cm-long hair began to grow on her face (cheeks, forehead, chin) (Fig. 1). Her general condition and the size of the tumours mentioned above were unchanged. The values of testosterone, estrogen hormones and urine 17-keto-steroids showed no alterations.

From June 1989 she complained of weakness, and was therefore given symptomatic therapy. Anaemia and abdominal pain were also