Aspergillus/Allergic Bronchopulmonary Aspergillosis in an Irish Cystic Fibrosis Population: A Diagnostically Challenging Entity

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BACKGROUND: Patients with cystic fibrosis (CF) can become chronically colonized by a multitude of organisms, of which the genus Aspergillus can be particularly troublesome. Aspergillus is thermo-tolerant, resilient, and ubiquitous; its pulmonary manifestations in CF are complex and poorly understood; it is a diagnostic challenge; and it causes a spectrum of disease, from saphrophytic infestation to invasive (life-threatening) and allergic disease (including hypersensitivity pneumonitis). When it acts as an allergen, aspergillus can induce a hypersensitivity reaction in the CF lung, leading to allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis (ABPA). Although A. fumigatus has been implicated in the majority of cases, allergic bronchopulmonary fungosis may also occur in association with other fungi (Stemphylium lanuginosum, Helminthosporium species, Candida species, Curvularia species, Schizophyllum commune, Dreschslera hawaiiensis, Fusarium vasicinfestum) and other species of aspergillus (A. niger, A. flavus, A. nidulans, A. orizaes, or A. glaucis).1-3 Ireland has the highest prevalence of asthma in Europe, and the highest incidence of CF in the world, which makes the Irish population an interesting one in which to study ABPA. CF remains the most common life-threatening genetically inherited disease; it affects 1 in 1,400 live births. This is the first study to evaluate the rate of aspergillus colonization and

Introduction

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ABPA during CF exacerbations in an Irish population at a major tertiary referral center.

Methods

Between January 2001 and December 2005 we consecutively analyzed 50 adults with CF exacerbation in our tertiary referral center, for the presence and frequency of aspergillus in their sputum cultures. A pulmonary exacerbation was defined as the presence of at least 4 of the following: change in sputum production, new or increased hemoptysis, increased coughing, increased dyspnea, increased fatigue or lethargy, fever > 38°C (measured orally), increased chest discomfort, anorexia or weight loss (> 5% of ideal body weight in 2 weeks), ≥ 10% reduction in forced expiratory volume in the first second (FEV1) or forced vital capacity, new findings on chest radiograph, or new findings on chest auscultation. All individuals with forced vital capacity, new findings on chest radiograph, or increased fatigue or lethargy, fever > 38°C (measured orally), increased chest discomfort, anorexia or weight loss (> 5% of ideal body weight in 2 weeks), ≥ 10% reduction in forced expiratory volume in the first second (FEV1) or forced vital capacity, new findings on chest radiograph, or new findings on chest auscultation. All individuals with CF who presented with exacerbation in the period January 2001 through December 2005 had their sputum evaluated for aspergillus species at presentation or in the following 12 months. Sputum samples were sent at 3-month intervals (4 samples annually) from each patient. Aspergillus species were isolated in the laboratory. Sputum loops were streaked over a plate of Sabouraud’s dextrose agar, which was incubated at 37°C. All patients were evaluated for ABPA at the time of sputum positivity and at 6-month intervals (twice annually) thereafter. ABPA was defined by criteria set out by the CF consensus conference on ABPA in CF. The diagnostic criteria were:

- Acute or subacute clinical deterioration (cough, wheeze, exercise intolerance, exercise-induced asthma, decline in pulmonary function, increased sputum) not attributable to another etiology
- Total serum immunoglobulin E (IgE) > 1,200 ng/mL (if total IgE was 480–1,200 ng/mL, we repeated the testing in 1–3 months)
- Immediate skin-test reactivity to aspergillus or in vitro presence of anti-aspergillus IgE antibodies
- And one of: serum precipitins or IgG antibody to A. fumigatus, or new or recent abnormalities on chest radiograph (infiltrates or mucus plugging), or chest computed tomography [CT] (bronchiectasis) that did not clear with antibiotics and physiotherapy

The exclusion criteria were steroid use within the year prior to this presentation, and any prior aspergillus colonization. Routine screening for ABPA is performed twice annually on all patients, via measurement of serum IgE (irrespective of sputum culture results), but only sputum-positive patients were selected and included in this study. The patients with aspergillus-positive sputum were matched for age, sex, genotype, microbiology, and disease severity to a non-aspergillus group; lung function (FEV1 % predicted) was measured via spirometry, and the 2 groups were compared. A Wilcoxon test was applied to the data, with statistics software (Prism 4.0, GraphPad Software, San Diego, California).

Results

Fifteen patients (30%) grew aspergillus species in their sputum culture on at least one occasion. Ten (66.7%) of those 15 grew aspergillus on more than one occasion, and 2 (13.3%) of those had positive sputum cultures on ≥ 10 occasions (Table 1). All the patients grew A. fumigatus on at least one occasion, and A. fumigatus was the most common aspergillus species grown. Other aspergillus species (A. flavus, A. terreus, A. versicolor, and A. niger) occurred in 4 patients, either alone or in combination with A. fumigatus.

Six (12%) of the 50 patients screened had ABPA. Six (40%) of the 15 patients with aspergillus-positive sputum had ABPA per consensus conference criteria. Of the 6 with ABPA, 3 had aspergillus-positive sputum at diagnosis. The remaining 3 did not have aspergillus in the sputum at initial diagnosis but subsequently were found to have aspergillus-positive sputum cultures. Thus, all the patients diagnosed with ABPA in the study grew aspergillus in the sputum at some point in the study period. Only sputum-positive patients were considered in this study; however, in our CF population there were instances of “questionable ABPA” that were deemed sputum-negative (and did not meet consensus conference criteria) and were thus excluded. Such cases included exacerbations (with clinical and radiological deterioration) that despite negative sputum cultures did not respond to antibiotics but did respond to a course of corticosteroids, suggested by clinical, radiological, and pulmonary function variables. In such cases, their IgE remained between 300 ng/mL and 1,000 ng/mL, which is far below the accepted range in the consensus conference criteria. Such individuals were diagnosed as having ABPA but did not meet current diagnostic guidelines.

In 4 of the 6 patients diagnosed with ABPA, the serum IgE rose above baseline (range 511–4,337 ng/mL), but in all cases considered for this study, consensus conference diagnostic guidelines were met. Furthermore, 4 patients who were initially treated with antibiotics for infective exacerbations had no improvement until administration of corticosteroids. In the remaining 2 patients (notably 1 patient who had 5 ABPA episodes), diagnostic suspicion at presentation was high, so corticosteroids were commenced as initial treatment.

Chest radiograph, although performed in all patients in this study, is rarely useful in the diagnosis of CF ABPA, so those findings were excluded from this study (it is men-
The aspergillus-positive-sputum group (mean age 23.7 y) was matched to an aspergillus-negative-sputum group (mean age 23.9 y). Each group included 10 males and 5 females, 12 patients with ΔF508 mutations, and 3 with R117H mutations. These groups had identical numbers (12) of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* colonizers, but 3 in the aspergillus-positive group were also colonized with *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia*, whereas only 2 in the non-aspergillus group were dual-colonized. No staphylococcus colonization was detected in either group. The 2 groups were comparable in disease course and severity; their average number of exacerbations in the year preceding the study was almost equal: 2.54 versus 2.32, respectively.

There was no significant difference in percent of predicted FEV₁ between the aspergillus-positive group and the similar aspergillus-negative group. However, there was a trend toward lower lung-function abnormalities in those with aspergillus-positive sputum. The analysis between the 2 groups was performed on first appearance of aspergillus in the sputum. The mean percent predicted FEV₁ in the aspergillus group was 50.2% (standard error 6.95) versus 67.5% (standard error 6.76) in a matched non-aspergillus group (*P = .09*). Subjects with ABPA experienced sharp short-term deterioration in lung function (mean FEV₁ 6.7% predicted), which returned to baseline following at least 4 weeks of treatment with systemic corticosteroids. Each of the 6 patients who experienced ABPA demonstrated reversibility (to differing extents) in their lung function following treatment (Fig. 1).

**Discussion**

This descriptive study of an Irish CF population analyzed sputum cultures at initial presentation for exacerbation and then for a 1-year period thereafter for aspergillus and ABPA. Identification of aspergillus in sputum from an individual with ABPA does not necessarily mean that the fungus is implicated in disease. In fact, aspergillus is detected in only approximately 50% of ABPA patients. It therefore remains mainly a clinical diagnosis, an under-recognized entity, and must always be considered even if sputum culture yields no growth. Furthermore, *P. aeruginosa* may inhibit the growth of aspergillus and therefore explain the high percentage of negative aspergillus cultures in CF ABPA.

Nearly one third of our patients had aspergillus in their sputum on at least one occasion. There was a trend toward declining lung function in those with aspergillus-positive sputum. The incidence of ABPA in the young adult CF population was reported by Nepomuceno et al as approximately 9%, which is similar to the 12% at our center, but the literature has reported a wide range in the incidence of CF ABPA, which reflects the different populations studied. ABPA produces short-term reversible de-

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**Table 1.** Sputum Culture Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Number</th>
<th>Number of Times Aspergillus Was Isolated in Sputum</th>
<th>Aspergillus Species Isolated</th>
<th>Number of Episodes of Allergic Bronchopulmonary Aspergillosis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A. fumigatus</td>
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<td>A. fumigatus</td>
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<tr>
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<td>A. fumigatus</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>A. fumigatus</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A. fumigatus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cline in lung function. The frequency of aspergillus isolates did not correlate with the occurrence of ABPA.

Although our study number was small, it illustrates the diagnostic difficulty of CF ABPA. Patients who had aspergillus-positive sputum within 1 year of presenting with an ABPA exacerbation were considered in this study, but we encountered instances of sputum-negative “questionable ABPA” (did not meet consensus conference criteria) during the study and excluded those from the study.

The factors that underlie the development of ABPA remain unclear, which makes the identification of at-risk individuals difficult, and most often retrospective, by which time lung destruction has already occurred. One of the risk factors for ABPA is genetic\textsuperscript{11,12} (pre-activation of airway epithelial cells, such as in asthma or CF). The extent to which this activation facilitates development of aspergillus spores into hyphae, bronchial penetration of aspergillus, the immune response, and bronchial inflammation and destruction remains poorly understood. Another independent risk factor is mucus quality:\textsuperscript{13} thick, viscid mucus associated with impaired clearance in the CF airways allows easier aspergillus colonization. Patients with ABPA but without CF have higher frequencies of the cystic fibrosis transmembrane regulator mutation,\textsuperscript{14} which make that mutation itself an independent risk factor.

The high incidence and severity of bacterial infection in CF leads to more use of antibiotics, which has been suggested to “pave the way” for fungal infection.\textsuperscript{15} The severity of an ABPA episode depends on the quantity and virulence of the inhaled organism,\textsuperscript{6} which explains why some individuals may develop more ABPA episodes with fewer positive sputum cultures, as we saw in our population. The effects of long-term exposure to aspergillus spores in the environment are still unclear. Recent studies of specific IgE against recombinant antigens of \textit{A. fumigatus} have contributed to earlier diagnosis of ABPA, with high sensitivity and specificity, and described a new group of patients: aspergillus-sensitized without ABPA. Nevertheless, before that method can be used for diagnosis, a longitudinal study with a larger number of patients is required.\textsuperscript{16}

Generally, it is stated that IgE to recombinant \textit{A. fumigatus} allergens rAspF1 and rAspF3, are markers for sensitization, and that rAspF4 and rAspF6 indicate serologic ABPA. Used in conjunction with the consensus criteria, a larger number of ABPA sufferers may be detected. Ritz et al\textsuperscript{17} assessed risk factors associated with ABPA and aspergillus sensitization and found that patients with CF and ABPA had more frequent \textit{S. maltophilia} in sputum than did controls. Furthermore, longer duration of \textit{P. aeruginosa} colonization and higher cumulative dose of inhaled corticosteroids were found to be risk factors for \textit{A. fumigatus} sensitization.

ABPA classically affects patients with persistent asthma and most work involving diagnostic criteria has been done in such cases. Table 2 shows the classic criteria for the diagnosis of ABPA.\textsuperscript{18-20}

Based on the criteria in Table 2, the diagnosis of CF ABPA is difficult and often delayed because several of the diagnostic criteria overlap with common manifestations of CF (bronchial obstruction, pulmonary infiltrates, and bronchiectasis occur routinely in CF, because of recurrent and chronic bacterial infection). Patients with CF also have immune responses to aspergillus (IgE, IgA, and IgG antibody production and elevated total serum IgE) in the ab-
sence of ABPA, which makes it difficult to define the separating boundary from ABPA. It is noteworthy that a staging system has been used for patients with asthma and ABPA, although this is not often applied to patients with ABPA and CF.

Clinical suspicion should always supersede any laboratory or radiologic test, and the workup in any suspected case of ABPA in CF should include skin, serologic, radiologic, and sputum tests.

**Cutaneous Skin Test for Aspergillus**

The cutaneous reaction (wheal > 3 mm) to *A. fumigatus* antigen is a good tool to support a diagnosis of ABPA. The antigen is subcutaneously injected into the patient’s forearm, and any reactions (namely, immediate [type I] or late [type III]) at 48–72 hours are noted. A person who is allergic to aspergillus will experience swelling, itching, and reddening of the injection site, usually within 20 min, but the skin reaction may take as long as 8 hours to develop in some people. For the wheal of immediate skin sensitivity some authorities have suggested that a diameter of > 4 mm should be considered a positive result, whereas others have stated that it should be > 3 mm with surrounding erythema. Reactions may be found in up to a third of CF patients without ABPA, which again confirms that the results have to be interpreted in the context of the clinical setting and concomitant symptoms and together with other diagnostic tests for ABPA.

**Total Serum IgE and Serum *A. fumigatus* Antibody (IgE/IgG)**

Total IgE is an easily accessible test to most clinicians and is valuable for diagnosing ABPA in CF; however, the value varies with age. Various diagnostic cut-offs have been suggested, including total IgE > 500 IU/mL, and even > 1,000 IU/mL. Like other diagnostic tools in CF ABPA, IgE and IgG have to be interpreted along with the constellation of other clinical and laboratory variables to reach a diagnosis.

**Specific Antibodies**

The presence of specific antibodies (via serum measurement) is a sensitive indicator of ABPA in CF. Such antibodies are generally of the IgG isotype (in particular the IgG1, IgG2, and IgG4 subclasses). There have been reports of specific IgA and IgM antibodies, but these are not routinely used in CF. In CF, IgE and IgG are the subtypes most markedly elevated. In addition, the IgG isotype pattern described above is very suggestive of a diagnosis of ABPA in CF and may be of great value to the clinician. The availability of these tests may be restricted at some centers.

**Serum *A. fumigatus* Antibody Precipitins**

Precipitating antibodies are antibodies specific to aspergillus that bind with the spores and form tiny solids (precipitates) that can be detected. These are a sensitive marker in CF ABPA. However, although they are a key diagnostic feature of CF ABPA in the consensus criteria, they have been found in CF patients without ABPA. Furthermore, of importance to the clinician, the levels of these antibodies fluctuate over time, which complicates their use in diagnosis.

**Chest Radiograph**

Although use of chest radiography has been advocated in the diagnosis of ABPA, its use is limited in CF, as compared to patients with asthma who (between exacerbations) would be expected to have relatively clear radiographs. This is in stark contrast to the status quo CF chest radiograph, which shows substantial lung damage, especially in the later stages, which makes it difficult to detect a new infiltrate and thus fulfill the stated diagnostic criteria. We believe that in advanced CF chest radiography has a very limited—if any—role in the diagnosis of ABPA.

**High-Resolution CT**

High-resolution CT is much more useful than radiography, but inter-observer differences in interpretation must be considered. Though a radiology opinion from an expert in aspergillus lung disease is useful, such expertise is not readily available in some centers. Transient findings may include pulmonary infiltrates, presence of fluid/inflammation in bronchi (“ring sign”), and lobar/segmental collapse linked to mucus plugs (“glove finger appearance”). Permanent patterns include bronchiectasis (most frequently...
in the upper lobes, but also more centrally, which suggests
ABPA, evidenced by “parallel lines” or “tram tracking”).
But, again, even in the baseline CF chest CT, such findings
may occur because of recurrent bacterial infections, and
only an experienced eye can differentiate this from ABPA.

Pulmonary Function Testing

Pulmonary function tests are helpful in identifying re-
versibility and response to treatment, so they are most
useful once a diagnosis has been reached. Deterioration in
lung function differs among ABPA patients; in some, lung
function remains stable, whereas others have progressive
deterioration in FEV₁, forced vital capacity, functional re-
sidual capacity, and occasionally diffusion capacity. It is
suggested that co-existent pseudomonas infection contrib-
utes to a more marked decline in lung function during an
ABPA episode,²⁷ so it is useful to document most current
colonizers prior to interpreting lung function test results.

Sputum Test

Sputum testing is not essential, because ABPA may be
present despite negative sputum. However, sputum spec-
imens are an important screening tool for the presence of
aspergillus and thus the consideration of the diagnosis in a
patient who is not improving with antibiotics. Sputum spec-
imens are also useful to identifying the concurrent micro-
biology in the airways, which may aid in the interpretation
of the CF pulmonary function testing. Sputum cultures are
inexpensive and the most readily available method in an
out-patient setting, and their value should not be underes-
timated, despite the possibility of sputum-negative ABPA.

The diagnosis of CF ABPA remains a clinical one, be-
cause of the recognized weaknesses in the available con-
sensus criteria. Table 3 shows our advocated criteria for
the diagnosis of CF ABPA.

One of the major difficulties with ABPA in the context
of CF is illustrated by a survey of 58 CF centers, by
Cunningham et al,²⁸ which found marked non-conformity
with diagnostic and treatment approaches in 45 of the
centers. That finding highlights the continuing difficulty of
diagnosing and treating CF ABPA, and it also probably
explains the differences in the literature about the inci-
dence of CF ABPA. We believe the diagnosis should re-
main clinical, with consensus criteria and diagnostic test
results used to back up the diagnosis in individual cases.
Furthermore, clinicians should maintain a high suspi-
cion for ABPA in patients > 6 years of age, in whom other
allergic conditions are less commonly observed. Biannual
total serum IgE concentration is another useful screening
tool. If the concentration is > 500 IU/mL, clinicians should
proceed to skin and serology testing. However, if the IgE
concentration is 200–500 IU/mL, the consensus criteria
recommend repeating the test immediately if there is a
high clinical index of suspicion (disease exacerbation), or
at 3–6 months if the patient remains asymptomatic.

The long-term prognosis of ABPA is usually good. Most
patients maintain adequate respiratory status. Detecting
exacerbations secondary to aspergillus is crucial in pre-
venting further airway destruction in an already fragile CF
lung. Treatment requires corticosteroids to treat inflamma-
tory response and improve symptoms, and occasionally
anti-fungal agents should be used to suppress the prolif-
eration of A. fumigatus and limit bronchial inflammation.²⁹
All the patients diagnosed with ABPA in this study were
treated. Corticosteroid treatment (0.5 mg/kg/d) for the first
2 weeks, followed by a decreasing dose over the following
6–8 weeks is recommended, but the exact duration of
therapy is still debated. Several anti-fungal agents (am-
photericin B, ketoconazole, clotrimazole, nystatin, and na-
tamycin) have been proposed as treatments for ABPA, but
no significant benefit was observed in tests, and in many
cases these agents had adverse effects.³⁰⁻³² In contrast,
oraly administered itraconazole (200–400 mg/d × 16 wk)
is an effective adjunctive therapy for ABPA.³³ Itraconazole
decreases the corticosteroid requirement and exacerbations
and halts disease progression without toxic effects. It has
also been suggested that it has anti-inflammatory proper-
ties similar to azithromycin, but the mechanisms of that
are poorly understood.²⁹ Adrenal suppression and resis-
tance due to long-term use are the only potential concerns.
Pulse intravenous methylprednisolone has been used with
some success in cases of resistant CF ABPA.³⁴

Table 3. Suggested Criteria for the Diagnosis of Allergic
Bronchopulmonary Aspergillosis in Patients With
Cystic Fibrosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two of the following 3 criteria:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate cutaneous reactivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presence of precipitating antibodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total serum IgE &gt; 1,000 IU/mL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plus at least 2 of the following 6 criteria:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bronchoconstriction</td>
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<td>Peripheral blood eosinophilia</td>
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<tr>
<td>History of new pulmonary infiltrates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raised serum anti-aspergillus IgE/IgG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive sputum culture</td>
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<td>Response to steroids</td>
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IgE = immunoglobulin E

Conclusions

The diagnosis and treatment of ABPA in CF is a sub-
stantial challenge in clinical practice, despite consensus
guidelines and recent developments. Many controversies
persistence regarding diagnostic criteria, and data concerning the best treatment and patient follow-up remain scarce. Case reports of life-threatening ABPA in CF²⁄₃ remind us of the need to consider a diagnosis of aspergillus/ABPA, even in the most atypical of presentations in the setting of CF.

REFERENCES