Churg-Strauss Vasculitis. Description of 9 cases

Emma García-Melchor,* Sonia Mínguez Blasco, Anna Moltó Revilla, Lourdes Mateo Soria, Susana Holgado Pérez, and Alejandro Olivé Marqués

Sección de Reumatología, Hospital Universitari Germans Trias i Pujol, Badalona, Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Churg-Strauss Syndrome (CSS) is a necrotizing vasculitis affecting small to medium-sized vessels, characterized by lung involvement, asthma and peripheral blood eosinophilia, and pathologically by the presence of granulomas and eosinophilic infiltrates.

Objectives: This report analyzes the characteristics of 9 patients with SCS diagnosed in an university referral center.

Patients and methods: Retrospective study. Between 1984 and 2007 nine patients with SCS were diagnosed in our center. Epidemiological, clinical, laboratory test as well as pathologic studies and treatment required were retrospectively analyzed.

Results: Nine patients (7 males). The mean age at the time of diagnosis was 51 years (range 23-76 years). Eight of these patients had history of asthma. The more frequent organs involved were the skin (66%), musculoesqueletical system (66%), peripheral nervous system (55%) and the lung (55%). All patients presented peripheral eosinophilia. ANCA positivity was demonstrated in 6 patients (66%), most of the patients with the p-ANCA pattern. All patients were treated with corticosteroids, and in 8 immunosuppressant treatment was required, mainly cyclophosphamide.

Conclusions: In this report, 9 patients with SCS are presented. Clinical characteristics are similar with the observed in other reports. We observed a major positivity of ANCA. Most of the patients were treated with corticosteroids and immunosuppressants, but the treatment should be tailored depending on the involvement of the patient.

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RESUMEN

Introducción: El síndrome de Churg-Strauss (SCS) es una vasculitis que afecta a vasos de pequeño y mediano calibre, caracterizándose clínicamente por afectación predominante del aparato respiratorio, asma y eosinofilia periférica y anatomopatológicamente por la presencia de granulomas y la infiltración tisular por eosinófilos.

Objetivos: En el presente trabajo se detallan las características de una serie de 9 pacientes con SCS diagnosticados en un centro universitario de referencia.

Pacientes y métodos: Estudio retrospectivo: entre 1984 y 2007 se diagnosticaron 9 pacientes con SCS en nuestro centro. De todos ellos se obtuvieron de forma retrospectiva datos epidemiológicos, clínicos, analíticos, estudios anatomopatólogicos y tratamiento recibido.

Resultados: De estos 9 pacientes, 7 eran hombres. La edad media en el momento del diagnóstico fue de 51 años (rango 23-76 años). Ocho de los pacientes tenían antecedente de asma bronquial. Las manifestaciones clínicas más frecuentes fueron las cutáneas (66%), musculoesqueléticas (66%), del sistema nervioso periférico (55%) y las pulmonares (55%). Todos presentaban eosinofilia periférica. Los anticuerpos anticito-
Introduction

Churg-Strauss syndrome (CSS) is a vasculitis of small and medium-caliber vessels that affects arterioles, capillaries and venules. It is clinically characterized by predominant involvement of the respiratory system, asthma and peripheral eosinophilia. Pathologically, the presence of granulomas and tissue infiltration by eosinophils is seen. Although respiratory manifestations are the most common, it is a systemic vasculitis and may present skin, cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal or kidney involvement.

This syndrome was first described in 1951 by Jacob Churg and Lotte Strauss as a result of the necropsy study of 13 patients with asthma and systemic vasculitis. However, by 1939 Rackemann and Greene had observed that patients with asthma had a special type of polyarteritis nodosa. Churg and Strauss called this new entity ‘allergic granulomatous angiitis’. The diagnosis was based on the presence of asthma, peripheral eosinophilia and systemic vasculitis, with necrotizing vasculitis, an inflammatory infiltrate composed of eosinophils, and extravascular granulomas observed in the histological study.

Subsequently, Chumbley questioned the fact that the presence of granulomas was a prerequisite to diagnosing this entity. Lanham proposed less stringent criteria than those by Churg and Strauss (Table 1), since it was not necessary to confirm the disease through biopsy, proposing: the presence of asthma, peripheral eosinophilia and vasculitis of two or more organs, making it able to perform a bedside diagnosis.

In 1990 the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) established a set of criteria for each type of vasculitis in order to create homogeneous groups of patients in studies (Table 1). In the case of CSS, in order to establish the diagnosis, 4 of these 6 criteria are needed, reaching 85% sensitivity and a specificity of 99.7%.

At the conference in Chapel Hill, vasculitides were classified according to the histopathologic characteristics based on the size of vessel affected. CSS was defined as a small vessel granulomatous vasculitis with an inflammatory infiltrate, predominantly eosinophils, which affects the upper respiratory tract in association with asthma and peripheral eosinophilia. Within the group of small vessel vasculitis, it was grouped with Wegener’s granulomatosis and microscopic polyangiitis by its association with neutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies (ANCA).

The following describes the epidemiological, clinical, laboratory data and treatment characteristics of a series of 9 patients with CSS diagnosed in our center.

Patients and methods

Between January 1984 and December 2007, nine patients were diagnosed with CSS at the Hospital Universitari Germans Trias i Pujol, which covers a reference area of 800,000 inhabitants.

Patients were identified retrospectively in the CIPER database, which contains all patients seen by the Section of Rheumatology at the center since 1984. Eighty-eight percent of patients met the ACR or Lanham diagnostic criteria.

We collected epidemiological data of all of them, as well as clinical and laboratory test results such as blood count (Coulter), ESR, biochemical and immunological tests: antinuclear antibodies (ANA) (Hep-2), rheumatoid factor (nephelometry) and ANCA (direct immunofluorescence Menarin® kits). We calculated the Five Factor Score6 for each and collected information about the treatment they received.

Results

Between 1984 and 2007, 354 cases of vasculitis were diagnosed in our department, 9 of which (2.5%) were of CSS (Figure). Seven patients were men (77%) and 2 women (22%). The mean age at diagnosis was 51 years (range 23–76 years). Eight of the 9 patients (88%) met the Lanham criteria for classification, while 6 (66%) fulfilled the ACR criteria.

The retrospective study of medical records did not find any triggering infections, or history of vaccination, or the prior treatment with new drugs. It is noteworthy that one case was diagnosed during the postpartum period. Clinical manifestations are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

Eight of the patients had a history of asthmatic bronchitis (88%), and the interval between onset of asthma and the diagnosis of vasculitis was 12.6 years (range 1–40 years). A history of atopy (eczema, drug allergy, allergic rhinitis, urticaria) was present in 2 cases (22%).

Sinus involvement was seen in 4 patients (44%), two of them diagnosed through a sinus CT. The remaining 2 had no imaging evidence, but one showed clinical manifestations compatible with recurrent sinusitis and the other had presented a single episode of sinusitis. Two patients (22%) had history of nasal polyps that had required surgery. After asthma, the most frequent clinical
manifestations were skin, musculoskeletal, peripheral nervous system and pulmonary.

Six patients (66%) had skin lesions classifiable as palpable purpura, which was the most common dermatological manifestation; others had erythematous rash, subcutaneous erythematous nodules, splinter haemorrhages and nailbed erythematous macules on the back of the hands and feet. The pathology of these lesions showed an eosinophil-rich infiltrate, leukocytoclastic vasculitis, with granulomas in only one case.

Joint involvement consisted of joint pain, myalgia, and ankle arthritis in one patient, and another with symmetrical arthritis of the small joints of the hands. The peripheral nervous system manifestations were present in five patients (55%) and in all cases it was a multiple mononeuritis confirmed by electromyogram.

Radiological lung involvement was seen in 5 patients (55%), 3 with eosinophil-rich pleural effusions (right sided in two cases and one left sided), and one case with transient alveolar infiltrates and a case of alveolar hemorrhage confirmed by bronchoscopy. Gastrointestinal symptoms, heart, kidney and central nervous system were less frequent.

Gastrointestinal involvement was present in 3 patients. One of these patients had an intestinal occlusion due to granulomatous ileitis. The second case was diagnosed with colitis by colonoscopy and had a biopsy compatible with vasculitis, following a study due to bloody diarrheal stools. The third patient had clinical manifestations compatible with intestinal angina. One patient had cerebellar cortical infarcts. Two patients had renal involvement in the form of proteinuria; both cases underwent renal biopsy with results consistent with focal segmental necrotizing glomerulonephritis.

Finally, one patient showed repeated episodes of pericarditis during follow-up, with no accompanying eosinophilia, which was not resolved with glucocorticoids, but rather with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, so it was classified as viral pericarditis, more resolved with glucocorticoids, but rather with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, so it was classified as viral pericarditis, which showed leukocytoclastic vasculitis with an infiltrate composed of eosinophils. In one patient a temporal artery biopsy showed signs of necrotizing vasculitis of small and medium arteries with an inflammatory infiltrate with predominance of eosinophils. One of them also had necrotizing tubulointerstitial nephritis with diffuse eosinophilia.

Of the six muscle biopsies performed, one was normal, the other five showed necrotizing vasculitis of small and medium size arteries with an inflammatory infiltrate with predominance of eosinophils.

One patient had an intestinal perforation secondary to obstruction requiring surgery. A sample of ileus was obtained showing intra and extraluminal granulomas with necrosis and eosinophilic infiltrates.

Another patient had bloody diarrheal stools, with a biopsy of the colon mucosa showing leukocytoclastic capillaritis, eosinophilia vasculitis of the lamina propria and submucosa with fibrinoid necrosis. In one patient a temporal artery biopsy showed signs of necrotizing vasculitis with a moderate infiltrate of eosinophils.

In another case, while monitoring after a prostatectomy due to prostatic syndrome, an adenomatous prostate specimen with eosinophilic infiltration was documented.

We calculated the Five Factor Score of all of the patients, with 5 patients having 0, 1 in 2 patients and 2 in 2 patients.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at diagnosis, years</th>
<th>Interval asthma-vasculitis, years</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Clinical vasculitis</th>
<th>Eosinophils, cels/l</th>
<th>ANCA</th>
<th>IgE, UI/ml</th>
<th>Biopsies</th>
<th>Induction therapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Sinusitis</td>
<td>13.3×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>Renal: necrotizing focal and segmental glomerulonephritis</td>
<td>PDN 1 mg/kg/day v.o.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Sinusitis</td>
<td>28×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>Muscle and nerve: vasculitis with eosinophilic infiltrate</td>
<td>PDN 1 mg/kg/day v.o.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Sinusitis</td>
<td>25.8×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Muscle: necrotizing vasculitis with eosinophila</td>
<td>MTP 1 g/day 3 days ev.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Nasal polyps</td>
<td>8.1×10⁹</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>Skin: leukocytoclastic vasculitis</td>
<td>MTP 1 g/day 3 days ev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>AAS allergy</td>
<td>Exanthema</td>
<td>15.4×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4,550</td>
<td>Skin: leukocytoclastic eosinophilic vasculitis</td>
<td>CF 100 mg/day v.o.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Atopy</td>
<td>17.4×10⁹</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Muscle: fibrinoid necrosis of medium and small caliber vessels</td>
<td>MTP 500 mg/day 3 days ev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>Mononeuritis</td>
<td>23.2×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Muscle: necrotizing vasculitis of medium caliber vessels</td>
<td>MTP 500 mg/day 3 days ev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>Erythematous nodules</td>
<td>1.3×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5.8×10⁹</td>
<td>Skin: granulomatous interstitial dermatitis with eosinophilic infiltrate</td>
<td>PDN 1 mg/kg/day v.o.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Non asthmatic</td>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>Lung infiltrate</td>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Colitis</td>
<td>Methotrexate 10 mg/week v.o.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at diagnosis, years</th>
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<th>Biopsies</th>
<th>Induction therapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Sinusitis</td>
<td>15.4×10⁹</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4,550</td>
<td>Sinusitis</td>
<td>CF 100 mg/day v.o.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AAS indicates aspirin; ANCA, anti-neutrophil cytoplasm antibodies; c-ANCA, anti-neutrophil cytoplasm antibodies with a cytoplasmic pattern under immunofluorescence; CF, cyclophosphamide; ev., intravenous; MTP, methylprednisolone; p-ANCA, anti-neutrophil cytoplasm antibodies with a perinuclear pattern under immunofluorescence; PDN, prednisone; v.o., orally.
All patients received glucocorticoids, six of them in the form of an intravenous bolus. Eight patients required immunosuppressive therapy (88%): 7 with cyclophosphamide (4 intravenous and 3 oral) and one with methotrexate due to polyarthritis. One patient with multineuritis and was treated with intravenous immunoglobulin.

Discussion

CSS is a necrotizing vasculitis of small and medium vessels, which particularly affects the respiratory system, but can manifest in any organ, as shown in this series.

The demographic characteristics are similar to those of other series, although we noted the increased prevalence of men, and a somewhat higher average age in this study. Lanham, in 1984, proposed less stringent classification criteria than those of Churg and Strauss, as his did not require histological confirmation. About 66% of our patients met the ACR criteria, while 88% met the Lanham criteria. The difference lies mainly in those patients without involvement of the respiratory system, such as sinusitis or pulmonary infiltrates, which can be diagnosed with CSS according to the Lanham criteria but not with the ACR criteria. Only one patient met none of the criteria. This was a patient who was asthmatic and had no involvement of paranasal sinuses, but a history of allergic rhinitis, eosinophilia, palpable purpura, renal involvement and colon biopsy consistent with the diagnosis of CSS.

Although this vasculitis has been related to some drugs, especially with leukotriene antagonists used in the treatment of asthma, the present study did not identify any precipitating factor.

According to Lanham, asthmatic bronchitis not associated with vasculitis usually begins before age 21, while in CSS patients, episodes of bronchospasm appear in adults. In all of the subjects of this study, asthma respiratory symptoms began in patients over 21 years of age, with a mean age of onset of asthma of 45 years, supporting the hypothesis of Lanham. Particularly striking is the low incidence of rhinitis in this series, probably because it is a retrospective analysis and these symptoms may not be reflected in the patient’s medical history. The other clinical manifestations were more clinically vasculitic (glomerulonephritis, and mononeuritis), whereas negative clinical manifestations were characterized by eosinophil tissue infiltration (heart, lung). Furthermore, in ANCA positive patients, the biopsy tended to have higher diagnostic performance, with a larger probability of finding vasculitis. Although it’s difficult to extrapolate data, it is noteworthy that in the present study, the two patients with renal involvement were ANCA positive.

Regarding the usefulness of the biopsies, a total of 23 were performed and all but one showed changes consistent with CSS. Granulomas were observed only in 2 cases (22%), confirming the hypothesis by Chumbley that granulomas are not essential for diagnosis.

Typically, CSS treatment consisted of corticosteroids. In fact, in the present study, all patients received this treatment. But now there is a tendency to be more aggressive and to use other immunosuppressants such as cyclophosphamide. Eight of our patients required immunosuppressive therapy with cyclophosphamide and methotrexate. The Five Factor Score (FFS, ‘Index of prognostic factors’) is a set of five factors that associate this vasculitis to a worse prognosis, being: proteinuria > 1 g/24 h, renal insufficiency (serum creatinine > 1.6 mg/dl), cardiac, gastrointestinal and central nervous system involvement. According to the French group led by Guillevin, if a patient has none of these factors, treated with only glucocorticoids is acceptable, whereas if any of them should be present, immunosuppressive treatment should be added. In this series, of the 5 patients with no poor prognosis risk factors, all required immunosuppressive therapy due to mononeuritis multiplex, pulmonary hemorrhage or polyarthritis. Therefore, we must bear in mind that there are clinical manifestations that due to the disability they produce (mononeuritis) or their severity (pulmonary hemorrhage), and although they are not included in the index of prognostic factors, should be treated aggressively.

The change in treatment strategy, together with a greater understanding of this condition by physicians and, therefore, an earlier diagnosis, are probably responsible for the fact that the prognosis of these patients has changed. From survival rate of 50% at 3 months in patients without treatment, we are now seeing a survival of more than 70% at 5 years.

### Table 3

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
<td>96</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M/F</strong></td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average age</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asthma, %</strong></td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skin</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Musculoskeletal</strong></td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mononeuritis</strong></td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lung</strong></td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gastrointest.</strong></td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heart</strong></td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Renal</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eosinophilia</strong></td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANCA</strong></td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANCA indicates association with neutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies; CSS, Churg-Strauss Syndrome; F, female; M, male.
The limitations of this study are the retrospective nature of data collection and the limited number of patients, which did not allow for obtaining results in terms of clinical differences between ANCA positive and ANCA negative patients, or prognostic factors.

In conclusion, this paper presents 9 patients with CSS. The clinical features are not different from those observed in other published series. However, in this series there is a greater frequency of ANCA positivity. Most patients were treated with corticosteroids and immunosuppressants, making it necessary to individualize treatment for each patient according the degree of organ involvement.

Disclosures

The authors have no disclosures to make.

References