response to both induction and relapse chemotherapy. IIMM patients are routinely monitored by measuring their serum immunoglobulin and urine light chains – a logical step would be to supplement, or replace, the urine assays with serum FLC measurements, as has already happened in many centres.

Thus, the conclusion of Tate et al. (2005) that larger prospective studies are needed before FLC measurement is 'routinely applied to the monitoring of patients with IIMM', is a generalization, drawn outside the context of the data they have presented. Serial FLC measurement is being undertaken in all patients in the current Medical Research Council Myeloma IX Study, which should provide further information on patients treated in a systematic way. Future studies may investigate clinical benefit further, perhaps with modification or change in treatment determined by FLC measurement.

Graham P. Mead,1 Hugh Carr-Smith,1 Mark T. Drayson,2 Gareth T. Morgan3 Anthony J. Child4

1The Binding Site Ltd, IDRL, Birmingham, West Midlands, 2Division of Immunity and Infection, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, West Midlands, 3Division of Oncology, Royal Marsden Hospital, London, and 4Academic Unity of Haematology and Oncology, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. E-mail: g.p.mead@bham.ac.uk

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The co-expression of PML/RARα and AML1/ETO fusion genes is associated with ATRA resistance

Acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL), associated with the t(15;17)/PML/RARα, and acute myeloid leukaemia (AML), with t(8;21)/AML1/ETO, are distinct subtypes of AML with characteristic cytomorphological, genetic and clinical features. We report the simultaneous expression of PML/RARα and AML1/ETO fusion genes in a 47-year-old female patient with AML, who was referred to our University Hospital presenting with petechiae, ecchymoses and pallor of 1-month duration. She was previously healthy and there was no evidence of exposure to drugs, chemicals or any potential mutagen. There were no relevant findings in her family history. Adenopathy and splenomegaly were absent. The peripheral blood (PB) counts showed haemoglobin level: 6 g/dl; platelet count: 14 × 10⁹/l and leucocyte counts: 102 × 10⁹/l, with 22% blasts. The coagulation profile was normal. Bone marrow (BM) was hypercellular, infiltrated by 45% aberrant myeloid precursors. Two leukaemic cell subpopulations were detected in PB and BM, one with a moderate amount of cytoplasm with few myeloperoxidase-positive granules, accounting for 8% and 21% of PB and BM cells respectively. The other subset morphologically resembled promyelocytes, with round nuclei, abundant cytoplasmatic granules, well-defined perinuclear Golgi area, and accounted for 14% and 24% PB and BM cells respectively (Fig 1A,B). Auer rods were absent. Morphological features of myelodysplasia were apparent, with granulocytes displaying reduced granulation, abnormal nuclear segmentation and pseudo-Pelger-Huet anomaly (Fig 1B). The immunophenotypic analysis identified two cell subsets: one CD33⁻ CD13⁻ HLA-DR⁺ CD34⁻ CD15low with high side-ward scatter (SSC), and CD33⁺ CD13⁻ HLA-DR⁺ CD34⁺ CD15⁻ with low SSC, accounting for 25% and 13% of the BM cells respectively. Conventional cytogenetics and spectral karyotyping (SKY) were performed on BM aspirates. By G-banding, the karyotype was: 46X, iso(X)(q11), t(15;17)(q22;q12) in 5/5 metaphases (Fig 1C). SKY analysis further revealed a cryptic insertion of chromosome 15 material into chromosome 17 (Fig 1D) in 5/5 metaphases. AML1/ETO and PML/RARα transcripts were demonstrated by nested
reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR), performed as described in van Dongen et al (1999). Finally, RARα rearrangements were detected by Southern blot analysis performed on genomic DNA digested with HindIII or EcoRI and hybridized with H18 and K3 RARα genomic probes as described by Biondi et al (1999). Immunofluorescence staining of BM cytospin preparations using the PG-M3 monoclonal antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA) revealed that PML was delocalized from the nuclear bodies, a feature suggestive of APL.

Based on the presence of cytomorphic and molecular characteristics of both APL and AML associated with t(8;21)/AML1/ETO, we treated the patient with all trans retinoic acid (ATRA), 45 mg/m²/d, in combination with the standard daunorubicin + cytarabine (so called ‘3 + 7’) AML induction regimen. The patient had not achieved remission after 30 d of continuous ATRA treatment, so the ATRA dose was increased to 90 mg/m²/d and a second identical course of chemotherapy was administered from day +35. On day +63, the patient was pancytopenic and the BM was hypocellular with <5% of blasts/promyelocytes, however the PML/RARα and AML1/ETO transcripts were still detectable by RT-PCR. The patient died of sepsis on day +67.

In the present case, the co-expression of AML1/ETO and PML/RARα was demonstrated by SKY in a small number of cells, therefore we cannot exclude the presence of multiple clones. In fact, the immunophenotypic analysis suggested that at least two cell populations were present. In previous reports of AML1/ETO and PML/RARα co-expression was detected either by G-banding (Charin et al, 1992; Movafagh et al, 1996) or by fluorescence in situ hybridization analysis (Varella-Garcia et al, 1999) and there was evidence of the presence of two (Varella-Garcia et al, 1999) or three (Movafagh et al, 1996) distinct leukaemic clones harbouring either or both chromosomal translocations. In the cases reported by Sttavroyianni et al (2003) and Bonomi et al (1998), the expression of PML/RARα and AML1/ETO was determined by RT-PCR at diagnosis, whereas by conventional cytogenetics only the t(15;17) was detectable. Only the presence of t(8;21)/AML1/ETO was detected by G-banding and RT-PCR at relapse, suggesting that one of the clones was selected during treatment (Bonomi et al, 1998; Sttavroyianni et al, 2003).

Despite the prolonged use of therapeutic doses of ATRA + chemotherapy, the patient did not achieve remission, in contrast to the observed in the majority of APL and AML patients with t(8;21). As both PML/RARα and AML1/ETO oncoproteins affect transcription by forming repressor complexes containing histone deacetylases, it is formally possible that the expression of both oncoproteins could lead to irreversible chromatin remodelling. The results reported here suggest that PML/RARα and AML1/ETO fusion proteins may mutually affect their pathogenic mechanisms, rendering the cells resistant to treatment.

Rodrigo Siqueira Abreu e Lima
Anita Maria de Lourdes L. Ferrari Chauflaule
Eduardo M. Rego

1Department of Internal Medicine, Medical School of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, 2Department of Pediatrics, Medical School of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, 3Department of Genetics, Institute of Biosciences, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Botucatu, and 4Department of Medicine, Federal University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. 

E-mail: emrego@hcrp.fmrp.usp.br
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