Elevation of plasma noradrenaline levels has been reported as a consistent clinical effect of clozapine, due to its potent effect on α2-adrenergic receptors. The relationship between this elevation and clinical effectiveness remains inconclusive. Davidson et al concluded that the elevation was unrelated to clinical effectiveness. However, Breier et al reported a positive correlation between plasma noradrenaline elevation and clinical improvement in patients on clozapine treatment.

Whilst the elevation remains largely asymptomatic in many patients, there have been a few case reports of a pseudophaeochromocytoma syndrome associated with clozapine treatment. Phaeochromocytomas are catecholamine producing tumours of the sympathetic nervous system, with 95% of them occurring in the adrenal glands.

The clinical manifestations arise from their excessive production of catecholamines. Sustained or paroxysmal hypertension has been described as the sine qua non clinical finding. Most patients present with hypertensive crisis. Other commonly associated features include: seizures, anxiety attacks, weight loss, and hyperglycaemia.

Diagnostic investigations include: plasma metanephrines, as well as 24-hour urinary catecholamines and metanephrines. MRI and Meta-iodobenzylguanidine (MIBG) are useful in detecting adrenal and extra-adrenal lesions respectively.

Our patient was a 51-year-old Caucasian female, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, recurrent depressive illness and generalized anxiety disorder in reference to ICD-10 criteria. The patient provided informed consent for the presentation of the case material. She was admitted into a long-stay inpatient psychiatric unit for treatment. She presented with: restricted affect, auditory hallucinations, poverty of thought content, delusions of persecution and reference, nihilistic delusions, somatic hallucinations and passivity, and impaired insight. Her medications prior to admission were: olanzapine, sertraline, enalapril and nitrazepam.

Prior to clozapine initiation, she suffered from essential hypertension which was adequately controlled with low dose enalapril 2.5mg (usual maintenance; 10-40mg). Her FBE and ECG were normal. Her Echocardiogram showed mild concentric LVH, which was consistent with chronic hypertension. Her psychotic symptoms remained refractory to treatment despite several psychotropic trials, including varying combinations of haloperidol, thioridazine, risperidone, olanzapine, amitryptilline, prothiaden, moclobemide, fluvoxamine, and sertraline.

A few months after clozapine initiation, her blood pressure control became suboptimal and this necessitated alterations of her enalapril, as advised by specialist physicians. Blood pressure remained manageable until approximately eight years into clozapine treatment, when control again deteriorated. There were concomitant symptoms such as: worsening anxiety, weight loss and dizziness. She presented with paroxysmal hypertensive crisis, with blood pressure reaching 250/120mmHg on one occasion. There was associated tachycardia, with her heart rate reaching 140 beats/minutes.

Medications during this period were: clozapine 925mg, lamotrigine 125mg, mirtazapine 45mg, zopiclone 7.5mg, and enalapril 10mg. Serial serum clozapine assays were carried, with two readings >1110µg/L (reference range 100-800µg/L). Her urinary catecholamines were elevated: Noradrenaline 1402 nmol/d (reference level <780nmol/d), adrenaline 146 nmol/L (reference level <80 nmol/L). Serum Normetadrenaline was 1940 pmol/L (reference level <900 pmol/L).

Comprehensive investigations excluded all other causes of hypertension and elevated serum and urinary catecholamines. On these grounds, the diagnosis of pseudophaeochromocytoma, associated with clozapine treatment was made.

The risks versus benefits of discontinuing clozapine were considered in collaboration with the treating specialist physicians. Withdrawal of clozapine was advised. Clearly, our patient had responded poorly to previous antipsychotic trials. Her response to clozapine, although partial, had resulted in reduction of distress, and improved quality of life. On balance, it was decided to maintain her on clozapine. Urinary catecholamines remained elevated a year afterwards. Antihypertensive therapy was optimized which resulted in improved blood pressure control.

It was unclear why she had elevated serum clozapine levels when the phaeochromocytoma symptoms emerged. Nevertheless, we believe the high serum clozapine level aggravated her possibly chronically elevated, but undetected, serum catecholamines.

Our detailed literature search identified a total of six previously reported cases. A summary is shown in Table I.

Correspondence
Dr O. Akinsola
email: akinsola@cbdha.nshealth.ca
There were five male subjects and one female subject. Their ages ranged from 22 – 44 years. All patients had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, with various combinations of refractory positive and negative psychotic symptoms, as well as several failed antipsychotic trials prior to the initiation of clozapine. Dosages ranged from 300 – 900mg daily, and the duration of treatment varied from 2 – 18 months. The duration of clozapine treatment before the onset of elevated blood pressure was unavailable in 4 of the reported cases. All subjects had elevated urinary catecholamines and hypertension without alternative explanation. Obesity, profuse sweating, and tachycardia were reported in 4 cases. Clozapine was discontinued in 4 cases, with a consequent normalization of blood pressure and urinary catecholamines shortly afterwards.

Given the potentially significant morbidity associated with this syndrome, especially in undiagnosed cases, we recommend, early urinary catecholamine screening for patients who develop hypertension, or other typical symptoms after clozapine initiation. Clinical guidelines for early diagnosis and management could be developed by clozapine manufacturers internationally.

O Akinsola, K Ong
Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health, Thomas Embling Hospital, Fairfield, Victoria, Australia

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