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CASE REPORT

Pitfall of hepatitis B surface antigen testing in a kidney transplant recipient presenting hepatitis B reactivation

Pauline Romanet^a, Henri Vacher-Coponat^c, Valérie Moal^c,
Danielle Botta-Fridlund^d, Anne Motte^a, Philippe Colson^{a,*,b}

^a Pôle des maladies infectieuses et tropicales cliniques et biologiques, fédération de bactériologie-hygiène-virologie, CHU Timone, 264, rue Saint-Pierre, 13385 Marseille cedex 05, France

^b Unité de recherche sur les maladies infectieuses et tropicales émergentes (URMITE), CNRS UMR 6236, IRD 198, facultés de médecine et de pharmacie, université de la Méditerranée, 27, boulevard Jean-Moulin, 13385 Marseille cedex 05, France

^c Centre de néphrologie et transplantation rénale, hôpital Conception, université de la Méditerranée, Assistance publique des Hôpitaux de Marseille, 147, boulevard Baille, 13385 Marseille cedex 05, France

^d Service d'hépto-gastro-entérologie, CHU Conception, 147, boulevard Baille, 13385 Marseille cedex 05, France

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Summary Diagnosis of hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection based on hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) detection can be hampered in the setting of HBV reactivation in immunocompromized patients with prior serology indicating past cured infection, and can be associated with severe or fulminant and fatal hepatitis. We present a case of HBV reactivation in a renal transplant patient in whom HBsAg failed to be confirmed as a true positive result. One year after transplantation, systematic testing showed HBsAg positivity with a titer at 244 pg/mL, anti-hepatitis B core antibody and concurrent anti-hepatitis B surface antibody positivity. Confirmation of HBsAg detection by seroneutralization did not confirm HBsAg positivity, indicating that HBsAg detection was a false positive result. Notwithstanding, HBV DNA titer in serum was concurrently 8.6 Log IU/mL. HBV DNA sequencing showed a genotype D and several amino acid substitutions within HBsAg, including some previously involved in impaired diagnosis and altered immunogenicity. Although no perturbation of liver biochemical markers was observed, treatment with tenofovir was introduced. One month later, HBV DNA level had decreased by 2.6 Log IU/mL and no clinical and biochemical symptoms of hepatitis had occurred. The present case underlines that serologic diagnosis of HBV reactivation can be tricky in transplant recipients with a prior serology indicating past HBV infection. This prompts to perform HBV DNA testing in case of positive HBsAg testing, regardless of the result of neutralization by anti-HBs antibodies.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +3 4 91 38 79 69; fax: +33 4 91 38 55 18.
E-mail address: philippe.colson@ap-hm.fr (P. Colson).

Introduction

The diagnosis of hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection is based on hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) detection, which can be hampered in case of infection with HBV HBsAg mutants [1–3]. Such diagnosis failure is of particular concern in the setting of HBV reactivation in immunocompromized patients with prior serology indicating past cured infection, i.e. with positive anti-hepatitis B surface (anti-HBs) and anti-hepatitis B core (HBc) antibody testing [4–7]. We present a case of HBV reactivation in a renal transplant patient in whom HBsAg failed to be confirmed as a true positive result.

Case report

A 65-year-old man received a kidney transplant in September 2009. He had been treated by hemodialysis for 6 years after a post-infectious glomerulonephritis. Systematic HBV serologic testing performed in September 2009 indicated past cured HBV infection. Thus, it showed HBsAg negativity and anti-hepatitis B core antibody positivity, while anti-HBs antibody titer was 27 mIU/mL (Architect Abbott assays, Abbott Diagnosis, Abbott Park, IL); anti-hepatitis e (HBe) antibody testing was negative. Because the anti-HBs antibody titer was low for a hemodialyzed patient, he received a booster vaccination 1 month before the graft. The kidney donor was negative for HBV (anti-HBc antibody, anti-HBs antibody, and HBsAg testing were negative). Post-graft immunosuppressive regimen associated an induction with rabbit anti-thymocyte globulins and a maintenance treatment with tacrolimus, mycophenolate mofetil, and prednisone. A 3-month prophylaxis with valganciclovir and a 6-month prophylaxis with sulfamethoxazole-trimethoprim was prescribed. During the first year, the transplantation was complicated by a post-transplant diabetes, hypertension, and an acute pyelonephritis episode. One year after the graft, the patient was well and his creatininemia had stabilized around 160 $\mu\text{mol/L}$.

A systematic testing 1 year post-transplantation showed HBsAg positivity, HBsAg titer being 244 pg/mL (positivity threshold, 0.05), anti-HBc antibody positivity, with concurrent anti-HBs antibody positivity (titer, 21 mIU/mL). Liver function tests were normal. Indeed, alanine aminotransferase level (ALT) was 19 IU/L (usual values, 8–45), aspartate aminotransferase level was 22 IU/L (12–35), alkaline phosphatase level was 79 IU/L (53–128), gamma-glutamyl transferases level was 21 IU/L (9–55), total bilirubinemia was 15 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ (5–34), and lactate dehydrogenase level was 225 IU/L (125–248). As recommended in case of first positivity of HBsAg testing [8], a confirmation assay was performed to assess the level of neutralization by anti-HBs antibodies, by pre-incubating the patient's serum with neutralizing anti-HBs antibodies before retesting. This procedure aims to assess the specificity of initial HBsAg detection. Indeed, in case of true positivity, pre-incubation with anti-HBs antibodies hampers further interaction of HBsAg with anti-HBs antibodies in the HBsAg detection assay, which leads to a decrease in the signal corresponding to HBsAg detection (threshold for interpretation of HBsAg true positivity, neutralization > 50%). In contrast, in case of false positivity, the signal corresponding to HBsAg detection

does not decrease substantially (neutralization < 50%). In the present case, the confirmatory assay did not confirm HBsAg positivity (neutralization was 13%), in spite of serial dilution of the serum (at final 1:10 and 1:100 dilutions) that aimed at enabling neutralization by anti-HBs antibodies in case of a high HBsAg titer. Indeed, the initial signal of HBsAg detection fell of only 13% (positivity threshold for HBsAg neutralization, > 50%). Thus, according to the manufacturer's instructions, HBsAg positivity was interpreted as a false positive result. Notwithstanding, HBV DNA testing was concurrently performed because of the earlier HBV serologic profile indicating past HBV infection and the known risk of HBV reactivation in renal transplant recipients. HBV DNA could be detected and viremia was 8.6 Log IU/mL (Abbott Real-time PCR). HBsAg detection was controlled with two other assays: AxSYM Abbott assay (Abbott Diagnostics) showed HBsAg positivity but absence of confirmation by the neutralization assay, while VIDAS HBsAg Ultra assay (Biomérieux, Marcy l'Étoile, France) showed HBsAg positivity (Titer, 290.80 pg/mL; positivity threshold, 0.13) and confirmation by neutralization at a dilution of 1:1000 (100% of neutralization; positivity threshold, > 50%). HBV DNA sequencing performed with in-house assays, as described previously [9], showed a genotype D. Additionally, several amino acid substitutions were present within HBsAg in comparison with that of reference genotype D HBV (Fig. 1), including some previously involved in impaired diagnosis or concurrent HBsAg and anti-HBs antibody detection (P120PT, G130R, D144AE) [1,9–12]. Although no perturbation of liver biochemical markers was observed, treatment by tenofovir was introduced. One month later, HBV DNA level had decreased by 2.6 Log IU/mL, liver biochemical markers were still normal, and no clinical symptom of hepatitis had occurred.

Discussion

Impaired HBsAg diagnosis can be a particular clinical concern in the context of HBV reactivation in renal transplant recipients with a serology at time of graft indicating past HBV infection. Indeed, such event can be associated with severe or fulminant and fatal hepatitis [13–15], and delayed diagnosis of HBV reactivation might delay the introduction of anti-HBV therapy.

A few studies have reported previously impaired confirmation of HBsAg positivity by means of seroneutralization. Le Pendeven et al. reported a case of hepatitis B reactivation in a transplant renal recipient with HBV serology indicating post-infection [4]. At the time of HBV reactivation, HBsAg testing was highly positive but HBsAg failed to be seroneutralized (Monolisa HBsAg confirmation, Biorad, Marnes, France), which delayed the viral diagnosis. Concurrently, HBV DNA level was 4.107 copies/mL. HBV serology and HBV DNA testing were performed retrospectively on available serum samples. HBsAg was detected and only neutralized by the VIDAS assay in two sera collected 2 and 6 months before hepatitis onset. Moreover, HBV DNA could be detected in the three serum samples that were tested, as far as 22 months before HBV reactivation. HBV DNA sequencing showed a genotype E with the presence of the G145R mutation within the "a determinant" of the HBV surface

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