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Reprinted from: Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene 1994 Vol.88
pp.55-56

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sexually transmitted diseases, viral hepatitis, hepatitis C, epidemiology, serology

Unannounced

Unlimited

Standard Form 298 (Rev 2-85)
Prepared by: DOD ITC 239-14
214-522
Low risk of sexual transmission of hepatitis C virus in Somalia

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Abstract

The prevalence in Somalia of antibody to hepatitis C virus (anti-HCV) was determined in a survey of 236 female prostitutes, 80 sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinic patients, 79 male soldiers, and 43 tuberculosis patients. Of 98 (22%) serum samples repeatedly anti-HCV reactive by first and second generation enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay kits, only 8 (1-8%) were anti-HCV positive by immunoblot assay (RIBA-2). Anti-HCV seropositivity by immunoblot assay was not associated with any risk group or with positive syphilis serology (found in 18% of subjects) or antibody to human immunodeficiency virus 1 (in 1-4% of subjects). These data indicate that sexual transmission of hepatitis C virus is not common in Somalia among sexually active populations, including female prostitutes and other groups at high risk of STDs and the acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Introduction

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) has been found in developed countries to be a common cause of post-transfusion hepatitis and a common infection among groups with frequent parenteral exposure, such as illicit drug abusers (ALTER et al., 1989a; ESTEBAN et al., 1990; VAN DEN HOEK et al., 1990). The role of sexual transmission in the spread of HCV is not as well understood, particularly in developing countries, although HCV does not seem to be readily transmitted by sexual contact as easily as hepatitis B virus (ALTER et al., 1989b; EVERHART et al., 1990).

In developing countries, HCV infection has not been found as frequently as hepatitis B infection; however, high-risk groups in these countries have not been comprehensively evaluated (AL-FALEH et al., 1991; JACKSON et al., 1991; SAEED et al., 1991). In this investigation, populations living in Somalia and at high risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection were investigated for HCV infection.

Patients and Methods

During 1990, the Somali Ministry of Health surveyed 438 subjects living in 3 major urban centres in Somalia: Mogadishu, Merca, and Chismayu. Subjects included 236 female prostitutes, 80 STD patients (60% male), 79 male military personnel, and 43 patients (58% male) with Mycobacterium tuberculosis infection. The mean age of the entire population was 28 years (range 12-79 years). All subjects were chosen sequentially during clinic or hospital visits on the days that the study was conducted; no selection criterion was used.

A serum sample was obtained from all study subjects and tested for total anti-HCV antibody using both first and second generation commercial enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kits (Abbott Laboratories, Abbott Park, Illinois, USA). Repeatedly reactive sera were further verified with a second-generation immunoblot assay (RIBA-2®; Chiron Corporation, Emeryville, California, USA). Sera reactive by both ELISA and RIBA-2 were considered to be positive for anti-HCV and to represent active infection (FOLLET et al., 1991). Sera were also screened for HIV-1 antibody by ELISA, and repeatedly reactive samples were confirmed by Western blotting. Lastly, sera were tested for syphilis infection by the rapid plasma reagin card test, with confirmation by the fluorescent treponemal antibody-absorption test (FTA-ABS).

Results

Among 438 study subjects, 83 (18-9%) had serum samples repeatedly reactive for anti-HCV by first-generation ELISA. By second generation ELISA, 74 (16-9%) sera were repeatedly reactive for anti-HCV: 59 serum samples which were also reactive by first-generation assay and 15 additional sera which were negative by first-generation ELISA. Among all 98 repeatedly ELISA-reactive sera, only 8 (1-8%) were anti-HCV positive and 6 (1-4%) were indeterminate by RIBA-2. All 8 RIBA-positive sera were identified by the second generation ELISA; however, 4 of the 8 were missed by the first-generation ELISA. Sera from 79 subjects (18-0%) were positive by FTA-ABS and 6 (1-4%) were positive for HIV-1 antibody by Western blotting.

There was no significant association between HCV infection, determined by RIBA-2, and the age, sex, or risk group of study subjects (Table). The mean age of the 8 subjects positive for anti-HCV was 32 years, compared to a mean age of 28 years for the other study subjects. None of the anti-HCV positive subjects had HIV-1 antibody, and only 3 of 8 subjects with anti-HCV were FTA-ABS positive.

Discussion

Based on currently available tests for anti-HCV, these data indicate that sexual transmission of HCV is not common in Somalia among sexually active populations, including female prostitutes and individuals with acquired immune deficiency virus 1, and positive syphilis serology, among 438 subjects living in Somalia and at high risk of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk group</th>
<th>No. (percentages in parentheses)</th>
<th>Number positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female prostitutes</td>
<td>236 (4-1-7)</td>
<td>5 (2-1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STD clinic patients</td>
<td>80 (2-2-5)</td>
<td>0 (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>79 (1-3)</td>
<td>1 (1-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis patients</td>
<td>43 (1-2-3)</td>
<td>0 (-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Immunoblot for anti-hepatitis C antibody.
2Fluorescent treponemal antibody absorption test.
3Antibody to human immunodeficiency virus 1.

Subjects positive for anti-HCV was 32 years, compared to a mean age of 28 years for the other study subjects. None of the anti-HCV positive subjects had HIV-1 antibody, and only 3 of 8 subjects with anti-HCV were FTA-ABS positive.

These data also indicate that false-positive anti-HCV ELISA serological results are common in the Somali population and that the second generation ELISA assay is much better than the first generation assay for identifying immunoblot positive sera. Other studies of African populations have found a high prevalence of false-positive anti-HCV ELISA results, which has been attributed to malaria or flavivirus infection, cross-reactive antibody to unknown antigens, and infection by HCV variants (ACETI.
Our results suggest that HIV-1 infection was not common in Somalia at the time this study was conducted. A prior study in Somalia indicated that HIV-1 infection was not then widespread in that region, possibly because of minimal commerce between Somalia and the rest of Africa (SCOTT et al., 1991).

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the US Naval Medical Research and Development Command, Bethesda, Maryland, USA, Work Unit nos. 3M446305H29AA353 and 3M162787A870AR1288. The opinions and assertions herein are the private ones of the authors and are not to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the US Navy Department, the Department of Defense, or the Somali Government.

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Received 16 March 1993; revised 13 May 1993; accepted for publication 13 May 1993