Diagnosis, Pathogenesis, Treatment, and Prognosis of Hereditary Fibrinogen Aα-Chain Amyloidosis

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ABSTRACT

Mutations in the fibrinogen Aα-chain gene are the most common cause of hereditary renal amyloidosis in the United Kingdom. Previous reports of fibrinogen Aα-chain amyloidosis have been in isolated kindreds, usually in the context of a novel amyloidogenic mutation. Here, we describe 71 patients with fibrinogen amyloidosis, who were prospectively studied at the UK National Amyloidosis Centre. Median age at presentation was 58 yr, and renal involvement led to diagnosis in all cases. Even after a median follow-up of 4 yr, clinically significant extra-renal disease was rare. Renal histology was characteristic: striking glomerular enlargement with almost complete obliteration of the normal architecture by amyloid deposition and little or no vascular or interstitial amyloid. We discovered four amyloidogenic mutations in fibrinogen (P552H, E540V, T538K, and T525fs). A family history of renal disease was frequently absent. Median time from presentation to ESRD was 4.6 yr, and the estimated median patient survival from presentation was 15.2 yr. Among 44 patients who reached ESRD, median survival was 9.3 yr. Twelve renal transplants survived for a median of 6.0 (0–12.2) yr. Seven grafts had failed after median follow up from transplantation of 5.8 yr, including three from recurrent amyloid after 5.8, 6.0, and 7.4 yr; three grafts failed immediately for surgical reasons and one failed from transplant glomerulopathy after 5.8 yr with no histological evidence of amyloid. At censor, the longest surviving graft was 12.2 yr. In summary, fibrinogen amyloidosis is predominantly a renal disease characterized by variable penetrance, distinctive histological appearance, proteinuria, and progressive renal impairment. Survival is markedly better than observed with systemic AL amyloidosis, and outcomes with renal replacement therapy are comparable to those for age-matched individuals with nondiabetic renal disease.


Hereditary non-neuropathic systemic amyloidosis, first described by Ostertag in 1932, is a rare autosomal dominant condition in which progressive amyloid deposition in the viscera, especially the kidneys, frequently leads to organ failure. Mutations in the genes encoding apoAI,2–12 apoAII,13 fibrinogen Aα-chain,14–17 and lysozyme18 have been identified as the cause of the disease in different kindreds. The clinical amyloidosis syndromes that accompany the various mutations in these different genes are diverse with respect to age of onset, mode of presentation, pattern of organ distribution, rate of progression, and prognosis.

Hereditary fibrinogen amyloidosis (AFib) was first characterized in 1993 in a Peruvian kindred.14 Patients with AFib present with renal disease and

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A renal presentation with proteinuria was universal. Seventy-two percent of patients had previously been diagnosed with hypertension or were hypertensive at the time of discovery of proteinuria, and 54% of patients had impairment of renal excretory function by the time proteinuria was discovered. Median age at presentation was 58 yr (range 33 to 83 yr) and sex distribution was equal. Median delay from presentation to diagnosis of amyloidosis was 8 mo (range 0 to 164 mo).

The diagnosis of amyloidosis was made by kidney biopsy in 64 patients and by serum amyloid P component (SAP) scintigraphy in conjunction with genetic analysis in the context of renal dysfunction and a known family history of AFib in seven patients. The renal histologic appearance in every patient was characteristic and showed striking glomerular enlargement with almost complete obliteration of the normal glomerular architecture by extensive amyloid deposition. In contrast, the vessels and renal tubular interstitium of every such patient contained almost no amyloid at all (Congo red stain viewed under cross-polarized light. Panel B shows red-green birefringence when the same section is viewed under cross-polarized light. Panel C shows immunohistochemical staining of the same patient's biopsy with a monoclonal sheep anti-human fibrinogen antibody (Helena Bioscience) confirming the presence of fibrinogen within the amyloid deposits.

**Figure 1.** Renal biopsy in fibrinogen Aα-chain amyloidosis. Panel A shows striking glomerular enlargement and almost complete obliteration of the normal glomerular architecture by extensive amyloid deposition. The vessels and renal tubular interstitium, in contrast, contain almost no amyloid at all (Congo red stain ×100). Panel B shows red-green birefringence when the same section is viewed under cross-polarized light. Panel C shows immunohistochemical staining of the same patient's biopsy with a monoclonal sheep anti-human fibrinogen antibody (Helena Bioscience) confirming the presence of fibrinogen within the amyloid deposits.
Four novel amyloidogenic fibrinogen mutations were discovered: one in a Chinese patient encoding a single base deletion resulting in a frameshift at codon 525 (Figure 3A), one in another Chinese patient encoding a single base substitution that altered the codon at position 538 from threonine to lysine (Figure 3B), one in two German sisters who were heterozygous for a fibrinogen mutation encoding a single base substitution that altered the codon at position 540 from glycine to valine (Figure 3C), and lastly an Afro-Caribbean patient was heterozygous for a mutation encoding a single base substitution that altered the codon at position 552 from proline to histidine (Figure 3D). The German sisters presented with proteinuria aged 47 and 50 yr, with the younger of the two progressing to ESRD within 7 yr and the other maintaining a normal GFR despite persistent proteinuria over the same period of follow up. The Afro-Caribbean man presented in his seventh decade with hypertension and proteinuria. In keeping with variable penetrance of other amyloidogenic fibrinogen mutations, only the German sisters (Figure 4A) and the Chinese patient with the frameshift mutation had a family history of amyloidosis.

Overall, a family history of renal disease or amyloidosis was absent in 46% patients with AFib, with all of the available evidence indicating that this was due to reduced penetrance rather than de novo mutations. Three parents who had the respective mutations were clinically healthy and 20 other first-degree family members also had an amyloidogenic fibrinogen Aα-chain mutation but did not have clinical disease at a median age of 50 yr (range 31 to 84). Six of these 23 patients were older than their oldest clinically affected relative being followed at the NAC (Figure 4B). Absence of clinical disease was corroborated by normal SAP scintigraphy in each of 12 apparently healthy gene carriers in whom the procedure was undertaken. There was no appreciable difference in phenotype between AFib patients with maternal compared with paternal inheritance.

The cohort was followed for a median of 4.0 yr (range 0 to 25.2) after diagnosis, representing 358 person-years. Data for 11 (15%) patients who were lost to follow up were censored at the time of their last assessment. A total of 17 (24%) patients died, and median age at death was 67 yr (range 57 to 85).
Estimated median survival by Kaplan-Meier analysis was 10.9 yr (range 0 to 25.2) from diagnosis and 15.2 yr (range 0 to 25.2) from clinical presentation (Figure 5A). Cause of death was infection in six patients, metastatic malignancy in three patients, dialysis withdrawal in two patients, transplant-related mortality in two patients (combined-hepatorenal transplantation20), gastrointestinal blood loss in one patient, and was unknown in three patients.

At censor, a total of 44 (62%) patients had reached ESRD, having commenced renal replacement therapy at a median age of 60 yr (range 36 to 82). Median time from presentation with proteinuria to ESRD was 4.6 yr (range 0 to 10.2), and from diagnosis of amyloid to ESRD 2 yr (range 0 to 10.2) by Kaplan-Meier analysis. Among 23 patients with a baseline estimated GFR of more than 20 ml/min who were evaluated for rate of renal decline, mean rate of GFR loss was 11.5 ml/min/yr (range 0.5 to 27.7). Thirty-three patients received hemodialysis, 13 patients received peritoneal dialysis, four patients received both dialysis modalities sequentially, and two patients received preemptive kidney transplants. Thirteen of 44 ESRD patients died during follow up; estimated median survival from commencement of renal replacement therapy by Kaplan-Meier analysis was 8.2 yr (range 0.2 to 24.8), and when censored at transplantation was 9.3 yr (range 0 to 8.7).

No patient developed the typical electrocardiographic and echocardiographic features of restrictive diastolic filling, thickened ventricular walls, and reduced QRS voltages to suggest an infiltrative amyloid cardiomyopathy during follow up. Two patients underwent endomyocardial biopsies; one did not show amyloid and the other showed patchy amyloid deposits within the endocardium and interstitium in association with a dilated cardiomyopathy of undetermined etiology. Symptomatic ischemic cardiac events occurred in 11 patients and ischemic cerebral events in five patients, including three patients in whom both were present. Asymptomatic coronary artery disease was detected in seven of a further 16 patients and asymptomatic cerebrovascular disease in two of a further ten patients who underwent pretransplant cardiovascular screening studies. Hepatic amyloid deposits were detected in only two patients, both of whom had presented more than 8 yr previously. Clinically significant autonomic neuropathy was not detected in any patient during follow up or by formal screening of five patients. Apart from the amyloid peripheral neuropathy that was present at baseline in a Chinese patient with a novel fibrinogen point mutation, no patient developed a clinically significant peripheral neuropathy attributable to amyloid during follow up.

Renal transplantation was undertaken in ten patients, two of whom received two grafts. Median patient follow up from renal transplantation was 5.8 yr. At censor, five grafts were still functioning and seven had failed. Median overall graft survival was 5.9 yr (range 0 to 12.2) by Kaplan-Meier analysis. Three grafts failed immediately for technical reasons; estimated median graft survival among the remainder was 6.7 yr (range 0.9

**Figure 3.** Four novel amyloidogenic mutations of the fibrinogen Aα-chain gene. Panel E shows the wild-type sequence for the portion of exon 5 of the fibrinogen Aα-chain gene that encodes the amyloid fibril subunit peptide fragment. (A) Frame-shifting mutation p.Thr525ThrfsX24 resulting from the deletion of T in the ACT codon (c.1632delT). (B) C-to-A single base substitution (c.1670C>A) encoding the p.Thr538Lys variant. (C) A-to-T single base substitution (c.1676A>T) encoding the p.Glu540Val variant. (D) C-to-A single base substitution (c.1712C>A) encoding the p.Pro552His variant. The arrows indicate the positions of the novel mutations.
to 12.2). Three grafts, including two sequentially in the same patient, failed because of recurrent amyloid after 5.8, 6.0, and 7.4 yr. The remaining graft failed after 5.8 yr because of transplant glomerulopathy without histologic evidence of amyloid. One graft was still functioning at censor 12.2 yr after transplantation despite evidence of recurrent amyloid demonstrated by SAP scintigraphy associated with increasing proteinuria within 7.6 yr of transplantation. The first patient to undergo combined hepatorenal transplantation for AFib was reported in 2000 and is included in the present cohort.21 She continues to be well and completely free from amyloid 11.5 yr after the combined transplant procedure. A further six patients in this series have undergone combined hepatorenal transplantation for AFib reported in 2000 and is included in the present cohort.21 Two paternal uncles were each shown to be heterozygous for the relevant mutation encoding the ES26V fibrinogen variant but did not have renal dysfunction on testing aged 76 and 81 yr, respectively.

AFib is an autosomal dominant kidney disease with a characteristic renal histopathological appearance. Because immunohistochemistry fails to determine the amyloid fibril type in approximately 50 and 10% of patients with AL amyloidosis22 and AFib, respectively, and because a family history of renal disease or amyloidosis is frequently absent in AFib due to variable penetrance, the discovery of massive glomerular amyloid, particularly in the absence of significant extraglomerular amyloid, should always prompt a search for a mutation in the fibrinogen Aα-chain gene. Importantly, the presence of a plasma cell dyscrasia in a patient with systemic amyloidosis, as was detected in 10% of the current cohort using the very sensitive techniques now available, neither excludes AFib nor proves AL-type amyloidosis, and does not alter the requirement for DNA analysis.

A proteinuric presentation followed by progression to ESRD within 5 yr was typical of AFib. The natural history of the renal decline in AFib was relatively slow compared with that in untreated systemic AL amyloidosis in which median time from diagnosis to ESRD is 7.5 to 14 mo,23 but was substantially faster than in hereditary apoAI amyloidosis in which it is typically approximately 8 yr.24 Despite the absence of therapy to diminish production of the amyloidogenic fibrinogen variant in most patients reported here, median patient survival from clinical presentation was more than 15 yr, contrasting markedly that of less than 2 yr and approximately 5 yr among untreated25 and treated26,27 patients with systemic AL amyloidosis respectively. Estimated median survival from commencement of dialysis with censoring at transplantation was 9.3 yr, substantially longer than the approximately 5-yr median survival among all nondiabetic U.K. patients aged 55 to 64 yr who commenced dialysis between 1997 and 2001 (Figure 5B).28 Median age at death among patients with AFib was 67 yr and several patients survived into the ninth decade. The prolonged survival in AFib compared with that in systemic AL amyloidosis reflects a combination of the slower natural history of the renal disease and the lack of clinically significant extrarenal amyloid deposits that are commonly the cause of death in systemic AL amyloidosis. The current cohort was followed for a median of 4 yr, including eight patients who were followed for over a decade, and the only clinically significant extrarenal organ involvement was liver amyloid in two patients and peripheral nerve amyloid in one other patient. The significance of patchy microscopic cardiac amyloid deposits in one patient with the R554L fibrinogen variant remains unclear although is reminiscent of systemic AA amyloidosis in which amyloid deposits are frequently present upon endomyocardial biopsy but are of no clinical consequence in over 95% of patients.29 The high prevalence of atherosclerotic cardiovascular

Figure 4. Panel A shows the family tree of two German sisters with AFib (arrows) caused by a novel amyloidogenic point mutation that encodes the ES40V fibrinogen Aα-chain variant. The sisters’ father had died aged 47 yr but had been dialysis-dependent with proven renal amyloid. Panel B shows the family tree of a patient with AFib who presented at the age of 55 yr (arrow). Two paternal uncles were each shown to be heterozygous for the relevant mutation encoding the ES26V fibrinogen variant but did not have renal dysfunction on testing aged 76 and 81 yr, respectively.
similar to the situation among the AFib patients with previously reported amyloidogenic mutations.

Renal transplantation in AFib is associated with recurrence of amyloid in the graft and with resultant loss of transplant kidneys after a median of 6.7 yr, although one kidney continued to function after 12.2 yr. This contrasts with combined liver and kidney transplantation which, by removing the source of the circulating amyloidogenic fibrinogen variant, prevents further amyloid deposition in the renal allograft or elsewhere, but is associated with additional perioperative and subsequent risks. The outcome of isolated renal transplantation reported here suggests that the potential benefit of combined hepatorenal transplantation will not be evident for many years in most patients and thus far, it has been our practice to recommend consideration of combined liver and kidney transplantation only in younger, fitter patients with this disease.

**CONCISE METHODS**

**Patients**

We included in this study all 71 patients with hereditary AFib identified from the NAC database during a period of 15 yr to February 2008.

Patients attended the NAC for their initial diagnostic evaluation and were followed up at regular (usually 12 monthly) intervals for evaluation of organ function and monitoring of whole-body amyloid load by serial 123I-SAP scintigraphy. Patients attending the NAC underwent serial electrocardiography and echocardiography as well as detailed blood and urine biochemistry. Additional investigations were undertaken when clinically indicated.

All patients were managed in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki, and informed patient consent and institutional review board approval from the Royal Free Hospital Ethics committee were obtained for this study.

**Histology and Immunohistochemistry**

Sections from formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded renal biopsies were stained for amyloid with Congo red and viewed under crossed polarized light. Immunohistochemical staining of the amyloid deposits was performed using monospecific antibodies reactive with SAA, kappa and lambda Ig light chains, and fibrinogen Aα-chain, as described previously. Fibrinogen staining was with a monoclonal sheep anti-human fibrinogen Aα-chain antibody (CA1023, Calbiochem). Wherever indicated, additional staining with a panel of antibodies against known amyloid fibril proteins was undertaken.

**DNA Analysis**

Genomic DNA was extracted from whole blood treated with EDTA as described previously. A 707-bp fragment of exon 5 of the fibrinogen Aα-chain gene (c.4445 to c.5152 GenBank accession no. NW_922217) was amplified by PCR and analyzed by automated sequencing. PCR was carried out with Ready-To-Go tubes (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech) with the use of solutions and cycling conditions that have been previously described. The PCR primers: 5′-GCTCTGTATCTGGTAGTACT-3′ (nucleotides 4445 to 4465) and 5′-
ATCGGCTCAGTTCCGGC-3’ (nucleotides 5135 to 5152) were designed to amplify the portion of the fibrinogen α-chain gene that encodes the peptide fragment that has previously been identified as the fibril subunit in AFib.14 The PCR products were purified with a QIAquick PCR purification kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s protocol and sequenced with the primer 5’TGGGGCA-CATTGGAAGAG-3’ (4544 to 4561) and the Big Dye Terminator v3.1 Cycle Sequencing Kit (Applied Biosystems) following the procedures recommended by the manufacturer. The sequence of the fibrinogen α-chain gene was analyzed on the ABI 3100 Avant Genetic Analyzer.

Radiolabeled SAP Scintigraphy
Whole-body anterior and posterior scintigraphic imaging using an Elscint SuperHelix gamma camera was undertaken 6 or 24 h after administration of 123I-labeled SAP, as described previously.36 The labeled SAP studies were interpreted by a single physician (P.N.H) with experience of over 5000 SAP scans.

Statistical Analysis
Patient survival, time from clinical presentation and diagnosis of amyloidosis to ESRD (renal replacement therapy) and survival on dialysis were estimated by Kaplan-Meier analyses. Rate of decline of renal function was analyzed in a subgroup of patients who had a creatinine clearance of more than 20 ml/min at baseline and was expressed in ml/min/yr.

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DISCLOSURES
None.

REFERENCES


