Comparison of Galactomannan Detection, PCR–Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay, and Real-Time PCR for Diagnosis of Invasive Aspergillosis in a Neutropenic Rat Model and Effect of Caspofungin Acetate

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Invasive aspergillosis (IA) is a leading cause of death in neutropenic bone marrow transplant patients, patients receiving cytotoxic chemotherapy for leukemia, and solid organ transplant patients (3, 17, 22). The incidence has been estimated to be 5 to 25% in patients with acute leukemia, with mortality approaching 100% (8, 10, 18, 29).

Early and accurate diagnosis of IA is a worthy goal, as it has the potential to improve outcomes by targeting antifungal therapy more effectively. A number of laboratory strategies to improve the early diagnosis of IA have been published, including PCR amplification of Aspergillus DNA sequences from blood and other body fluids (6, 9, 14, 16, 28, 32, 36, 40) and detection of cell wall components such as galactomannan (GM) (13, 21, 34, 35, 37).

While studies have generally reported very promising results for new, non-culture-based strategies to diagnose IA in the laboratory, problems surrounding clinical validation of the assays has delayed the inclusion of these strategies in routine clinical and laboratory use. A number of parameters remain to be investigated, including the kinetics of fungal cell elements in the blood and the effect that administration of systemic antifungal agents may have on the detection of these elements. As a result, uncertainty surrounding the optimal use of these diagnostic strategies remains.

The aim of the present study was to study the effect of the administration of caspofungin acetate on the performance of GM and PCR testing and to determine if the phenomenon of intermittent positive results in a subject with heavy fungal burden is a true phenomenon or a function of concomitant antifungal treatment.

To this end, we heavily infected transiently neutropenic rats with Aspergillus spores, treated one group with 1 mg/kg/day caspofungin acetate, and left the other group untreated. PCR–enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), real-time PCR, and galactomannan testing were performed at defined time points during the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In summary, animals were immunosuppressed and inoculated with Aspergillus fumigatus spores. The study had two arms: the arm treated with antifungal therapy (arm A) and the untreated arm (arm B). Each arm consisted of 21 animals, including 3 control animals. Animals were housed in seven groups of three, according to the projected date of euthanasia. Animals in antifungal treatment arm A were treated with 1 mg/kg caspofungin acetate daily for 7 days, beginning 24 h after inoculation. One group of three animals was sacrificed every second day, beginning 2 days postinoculation. One group of three animals in each arm was used as a control group. These animals were dosed with cyclophosphamide but were not treated with antibacterial or antifungal agents and were not inoculated with fungal spores.

Animals. Forty-two adult male Sprague-Dawley rats (mean body weight, 365 g) were used in these experiments. Animals were housed in groups of three in sterile microisolator cages. Animals were allowed ad libitum access to sterile...
Galactomannan detection was performed using a commercially available assay kit (Platelia Aspergillus; Sanofi Diagnostics, Marnes-La Coquette, France) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Three hundred microliters of serum was used in each test. Results were expressed as a positivity index calculated by dividing the OD of the sample by the mean of the two threshold sera (supplied by the manufacturer). Samples with a positivity index of $\geq 1.5$ were considered positive, with an equivocal range of $< 1.5$ to $\leq 1$, (according to the manufacturer’s instructions).

**Statistical methods.** Data were initially entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Comparisons within and between groups were made using SPSS version 11 (SPSS Inc. Chicago, Ill.).

**RESULTS**

**Mortality.** One animal in each arm of the study required euthanasia prior to the planned date, on ethical grounds. No samples were obtained from these animals.

**Macroscopic fungal disease and culture.** Macroscopic lesions were easily identifiable, and the majority of lesions were seen in the livers. The findings are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Significantly fewer *A. fumigatus* colonies were isolated from the liver, spleen, and lung homogenates from caspofungin-treated animals than from those of untreated animals (52 versus 123; $P < 0.001$ [Mann-Whitney U test]). *Aspergillus* cultures of the liver showed that more caspofungin-untreated than treated animals had positive results (17 versus 11; $P = 0.019$ [Fisher’s exact test]), higher numbers of colonies (29 versus 98; $P > 0.01$ [Mann-Whitney U test]), and residual tissue burden (log CFU/gram) in the livers (1.665 versus 0.878; $P = 0.002$ [Mann-Whitney U test]).

There were comparatively few positive cultures from kidneys (treated, 16 colonies; untreated, 17 colonies) and lungs (treated, 1 colony; untreated, 8 colonies) of infected animals.

**Diagnostic tests.** Galactomannan assay, PCR-ELISA, and real-time PCR were performed on 20 animals (including control animals) from each arm of the study. No positive results were returned by control animals by any test. PCR-ELISA returned positive results from 11/17 animals treated with an antifungal agent and 10/17 untreated animals. Galactomannan was positive in 8/17 treated animals and 4/17 untreated animals. Real-time PCR was positive in 2/17 treated and 3/17 untreated animals (Tables 1 and 2). The PCR-ELISA test was a more sensitive test than either the GM assay ($P = 0.052$) or real-time PCR ($P < 0.01$) for the diagnosis of IA. (Tables 1 and 2).

The overall values for sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value for each test for diagnosis of IA are shown in Table 3.

**Indices.** Median GM indices from animals treated with an antifungal agent showed a trend ($P = 0.1$) towards higher levels than those of untreated animals, but little effect was observed with PCR-ELISA indices ($P = 0.29$) (Mann-Whitney U test).

**DISCUSSION**

We have established a neutropenic rat model of IA using intravenous sublethal inoculation of *A. fumigatus* spores. This was chosen to ensure a high fungal load but also high survival to the endpoint of the experiment. Tests were done on blood samples taken only at death so that there was sufficient sample to perform all tests in an optimal manner and to avoid com-
promising animal survival by repeated blood sampling or influencing bloodstream dissemination by repeated handling of the animals.

There was obvious macroscopic disease in untreated animals from day 4 and in caspofungin-treated animals from day 6. Despite this, 6 of 25 animals (24%) with obvious macroscopic aspergillosis were negative by all tests. Over the whole population from day 2, the results were more disappointing. The PCR-ELISA test was the most sensitive test for diagnosis of IA in this model (sensitivity, 62%), and by comparison, the other tests performed poorly. There is only one previously published report of the use of real-time PCR testing of blood samples in an animal model (intravenous inoculation) of IA (20). This study found that only 25% of samples from infected animals were positive. Similarly, in a neutropenic mouse model infected by the tracheal route, 62% of samples were positive by PCR-ELISA (4). These results are all in agreement with the observation from small numbers of human cases of IA that GM and PCR-ELISA may be negative or intermittently positive (12, 16).

These results are explained in part by the differences in the lower detection limits of the assays. Our own comparisons of these tests in vitro have shown that the PCR-ELISA is 100-fold more sensitive (10 CFU) than either the real-time PCR (100 to 1,000 CFU) or the GM test. Given that the detection limit of the real-time PCR assay used in the present study was at best 10^2 CFU, this suggests that the fungal DNA load seldom reaches this level even with a large burden of disease. This is in keeping with previous estimates of fungal load in blood samples (19).

The large number of blood samples containing *Aspergillus* DNA and GM at levels below the detection limit in the face of obvious invasive disease suggests that fungal DNA reaches the bloodstream in an irregular manner, and it is likely that host lysis of hyphae is poor. It is possible that the nature of tissue invasion by *A. fumigatus* contributes to this phenomenon. It has been shown that platelets and fibrinogen adhere to hyphae of *A. fumigatus* (7) and participate in fungal killing. Histological sections typically show angioinvasion with regions of associated infarction, indicating that at least partial occlusion of the vessel has occurred. Thus, fungal elements (antigen and DNA) could be contained within this region and hence could be unavailable for detection in the peripheral blood.

Treatment with caspofungin acetate produced a different pattern of results from the untreated group. There were strikingly fewer colonies of *A. fumigatus* from organ homogenate (29 versus 98), but the sensitivity of the PCR-ELISA assay was similar for the untreated group, and there was a high rate of

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No. of infected animals with positive results/total no. 8/17 11/17 2/17

a Disease indicates the macroscopic extent of disease in livers, graded from 0 to 4.
b Tissue burden indicates log CFU/gram of tissue cultured.
c >MC OD was greater than the measurement capacity of the instrument. For the purposes of statistical analysis, these cases were assigned an index of 10.0. Rats 19, 20, and 21 are negative control animals in both groups.
d NEG, negative; POS, positive.

TABLE 1. Macroscopic findings and GM, PCR-ELISA, and real-time PCR results for animals in the treated arm of the study
detection of galactomannan, in terms of both the number of animals returning positive results and the mean or median GM positivity index of treated animals. The paradoxical relationship between caspofungin administration and clinical improvement but stable or increasing GM indices was previously reported by Petraitiene et al., who described the same effect in an experimental rabbit model of IA (26). These observations are also in keeping with reports of clinical improvement following echinocandin therapy but stable or increasing tissue burden and circulating GM compared to untreated controls. Echinocandins inhibit apical-tip growth and may promote fragmentation that releases more GM and possibly DNA into the circulation (15). This pattern differs from that of azoles (with the exception of itraconazole) and deoxycholate amphotericin B at therapeutic dosages, all of which significantly decrease tissue

Aspergillus burden, improve survival and decrease morbidity, and decrease or eliminate GM from the serum (5, 11, 23–25, 27, 30).

These studies clearly demonstrate that the relationship between tissue burden and fungal GM or DNA levels in the circulating blood is complex, especially when an antifungal agent is being used. In our study, there was no correlation between tissue burden and GM or PCR-ELISA positivity. The nature of antifungal treatment needs to be taken into account when considering the value of both GM and PCR-ELISA as diagnostic tests or when monitoring the response to therapy as well as other factors that predispose to variable sensitivity or false-positive results (1, 2, 31, 37–39). Few studies have been designed to specifically study the effect of the administration of antifungal agents on the performance of the test. The results of

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No. of infected animals with positive results/total no.

4/17 10/17 3/17

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* a Trt, treated rats; Untr, untreated rats; PPV, positive predictive value; NPV, negative predictive value.
this and other studies suggest that the use of GM levels in serum to guide treatment in neutropenic hosts should be treated with caution, especially if the patient is receiving antifungal therapy with an echinocandin.

In summary, the results of this study show that GM assay and PCR-ELISA used for the diagnosis of IA may return false-positive results for these tests, the nature of the invasive process of A. fumigatus may cause false-negative results, and the use of antifungal therapy may influence the performance of these tests. The value of these tests needs to be better defined and investigated.

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