Incidence of Adult T-Cell Leukemia/Lymphoma among Human T-Lymphotropic Virus Type I Carriers in Saga, Japan

Shinkan Tokudome,1 Osamu Tokunaga, Yoshinori Shimamoto, Yuichi Miyamoto, Ikuo Sumida, Masahiro Kikuchi, Morishige Takeshita, Takayoshi Ikeda, Koichi Fujiiwara, Masatomo Yoshihara, Takashi Yanagawa, and Masahiro Nishizumi

Department of Community Health Science [S. T., M. N.]; Department of Pathology [O. T.]; and Department of Internal Medicine [Y. S.], Saga Medical School, Saga 840-01; Saga Municipal Koseikan Hospital, Saga 840 [Y. M.]; Karatsu Red Cross Hospital, Karatsu 847 [I. S.]; Department of Pathology, Fukuoka University School of Medicine, Fukuoka 814-01 [M. K., M. T.]; Department of Pathology, Nagasaki University School of Medicine, Nagasaki 852 [T. I.]; Department of Health and Environment, Saga Prefecture, Saga 840 [K. F.]; Saga Medical Association, Saga [M. Y.]; and Department of Mathematics, Faculty of Science, Kyushu University, Fukuoka 812 [Y. Y.] Japan

ABSTRACT

Using a population-based cancer registry, we tabulated 69 definite adult T-cell leukemia/lymphoma cases (36 males and 33 females) and 2.20 expected cases (0.95 for males and 1.25 for females) diagnosed from 1981 to 1983 in Saga, Japan. The number of human T-lymphotropic virus type I carriers was computed by applying sex- and age-specific anti-human T-lymphotropic virus type I antibody positive rates among blood donors at the blood center in 1986 to the whole population of Saga Prefecture in 1982. The age-specific incidence rates among human T-lymphotropic virus type I carriers from 40 to 79 yr of age per 100,000 persons were significantly higher than those of female carriers (P < 0.05), and the rates from 60 to 69 yr of age were the highest in both sexes. The annual crude incidence rates among carriers were 115.9 for males and 66.4 for females. The summary incidence rates with 95% confidence intervals were 115.9 (58.4 to 193.0) for males and 65.9 (30.0 to 115.9) for females. The cumulative risks were 4.5% (0.8 to 11.0) for males and 2.6% (0.3 to 7.0) for females. These morbidity figures were assumed to be underestimated partly due to the newly proposed clinical entity of adult T-cell leukemia/lymphoma.

INTRODUCTION

ATL1 or ATLL is a new clinical entity proposed by Takatsuki et al. in 1977 (1). By using the cell lines established beforehand (2), the associated virus was detected by means of the passive immunofluorescence method (3). Later the DNA sequences were clarified (4), and the ATL virus was verified to be identical to the ATL virus isolated from the lymphocytes of a patient with cutaneous T-cell lymphoma in the United States (5). In the meantime, the virus was named HTLV-I, and it was proved that the virus is directly associated with ATL. However, the precise carcinogenesis of ATL is still unknown.

There are several epidemiological studies dealing with the morbidity of (or mortality from) ATL in Japan (6–9); however, we considered it to be important to calculate more accurate and reliable incidence rates and cumulative risks of ATL by sex with confidence intervals among HTLV-I carriers in an area with moderate endemicity of the virus by using a population-based local cancer registry in Saga Prefecture, located in Kyushu, the southern part of Japan with a population of 880,000.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Patients. We first abstracted 256 reports of malignant lymphomas and other lymphoid malignancies (including case reports submitted by physicians, abstracted information from medical records at major hospitals by the registry staff, and death certificates whose addresses are located in Saga) newly diagnosed between 1981 and 1983 from the data of the Prefectural Cancer Registry (or Annual Cancer Survey, formerly). Then we sent questionnaires to the attending physicians inquiring whether they adopted the definite and/or differential diagnostic procedures, such as detection of monoclonal integration of proviral DNA, histological and/or cytological examinations, to reconfirmation by pathologists and hematologists, and the final diagnoses were made. Consequently, one male anti-HTLV-I antibody negative ATLL (11) and one female smoldering ATL (or pre-ATL) (10) with positive antibody were not included.

Next we reviewed 121 autopsy cases described in the Annual of the Pathological Autopsy Cases in Japan, which were reported from the institutes in Saga and in the neighboring prefectures from 1981 to 1984. Definite ATLL cases whose addresses were located in Saga were tabulated into our study. Possible and/or suspected cases were referred to respective pathologists to obtain final diagnoses.

On the basis of the formation above, we compiled 69 definite incident ATLL cases (36 males and 33 females) diagnosed between 1981 and 1983 (Table 1). For a male case with probable ATLL based upon microscopic diagnosis and with positive T-cell marker but without confirmation of proviral DNA, the case was judged as probable and counted as 0.75. This inference was also based on the proportion of lymphoid T-cell versus B-cell malignancies in Kyushu (12). For one male case with possible ATLL based upon microscopic diagnosis with positive T-cell marker but without other diagnostic procedures, it was regarded as possible and counted as 0.5. For one male case and six female cases described as malignant lymphoma, not otherwise specified, the estimated number of ATLL patients was calculated by applying the number of these cases to the proportion of the number of definite ATLL cases to definite non-ATLL patients among malignant lymphomas in the respective age groups. In all, 36.95 ATLL patients among males and 34.25 cases among females were tabulated in the present study.

HTLV-I Carriers. In order to calculate population at risk or the number of HTLV-I carriers in Saga Prefecture, sex- and age-specific anti-HTLV-I antibody positive rates among blood donors at the Saga Red Cross Blood Center during the fiscal year of 1986 (from April 1986 to March 1987) were tabulated. At the blood center, the antibody to HTLV-I was screened at the final serum dilution (or titer) of 23 by the gelatin particle agglutination method (3). The titer was considered to be positive at this titer. Because the population seropositive rate at the titer of 26 or over by the gelatin particle agglutination method is reported to be practically equivalent to that by the passive immunofluorescence method (14), this cutoff titer was utilized to calculate the number of HTLV-I carriers. As the seropositive rates for the elderly groups (aged 65 or over) were not available from the center, the seroconversion rates (or hazard functions) in these age groups were assumed to be underestimated partly due to the newly proposed clinical entity of adult T-cell leukemia/lymphoma.

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2 To whom requests for reprints should be addressed.

3 The abbreviations used are: ATL, adult T-cell leukemia; ATLL, adult T-cell leukemia/lymphoma; HTLV-I, human T-lymphotropic virus type I; HAM, HTLV-I-associated myelopathy.

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crude incidence rates were computed by the number of ATLL cases and agglutination method.

**RESULTS**

The mean ages of definite ATLL cases were 59.3 (ranged from 40 to 77) yr of age for males and 60.6 (ranged from 38 to 82) for females (Table 1). Most definite cases (95.7%) were diagnosed at 40 yr of age or over. The age-specific incidence rates from 40 to 77 yr of age for males and 60.6 for females (Table 4). The summary incidence rate among male HTLV-I carriers was approximately twice the ATLL incidence rate among female HTLV-I carriers. The cumulative risks were 4.5% (0.8 to 11.0) for males and 2.6% (0.3 to 7.0) for females.

**DISCUSSION**

This is the first report to show the rates and the risks of ATLL among HTLV-I carriers according to sex by using a population-based cancer registry. It must be noted, however, that while every effort was made to compile an accurate number of ATLL cases as numerator, it is conceivable that those figures are underestimated rather than overestimated. That is, it seems unlikely that cases of Hodgkin’s disease, B-cell lymphomas, non-ATLL T-cell lymphomas, and other lymphoid malignancies unrelated to HTLV-I were diagnosed as ATLL. Rather, since ATLL is a newly proposed disease entity and diagnostic information and techniques are not yet fully known by every physician, some ATLL cases may have been overlooked. In addition, the quality of the local cancer registry does not seem to be thorough, because the cancer registration system in Saga depends in part on voluntary reporting by physicians. Definite ATLL patients registered only by death certificates were 25% (9 cases) for males and 3% (1 case) for females, which suggests that there is underreporting on such a level. There are two factors, however, which counterbalance the above. The first is the well-known fact that the prognosis of ATLL is very poor. Indeed, all patients with ATLL, with two exceptions (chronic type of ATLL), died by the end of 1987. Second, the number of undisclosed cases may be regarded as small since the cancer registry routinely collects all death certificates.

As mentioned earlier, the number of HTLV-I carriers was calculated by using the positive rates of antibody to HTLV-I among blood donors. This number of carriers was assumed to be underestimated partly due to the healthy donor effect, because blood used for transfusions is solely procured by voluntary donation in Japan. This factor as denominator may overestimate the risk; however, the calculated rates were almost equivalent to or rather higher than those reported thus far (6-9). The age-specific incidence rates from 60 to 69 yr of age were the highest in both sexes, but the sex difference in the risk was found to be apparent. It is claimed that the individuals infected horizontally by blood transfusion (19) or by sexual contacts (9, 20) are not at risk of ATLL, partly because a long latency
period is needed for the onset of ATLL. In this connection, the seroconversion through transfusion would overestimate the denominator, and thus, underestimate the risk; however, it would not upset the comparison of the morbidity rates between males and females, as long as the frequency of transfusion is not much different between sexes. Furthermore, in order to eliminate the seroconversion by sexual transmission, the seroconversion rates among females over 20 yr of age were assumed to be equivalent to those among males, and the population at risk among females was calculated. As a result, the risk of ATLL among males was still higher than that of females with statistical significance at the 5% level. Further research is required to distinguish the effects of factors (such as age, period or cohort, infection via transfusion, or sex) associated with the cross-sectional HTLV-I prevalence curve and to identify the true population at risk of ATLL.

The series of ATLL studies led us to a new idea and/or model of carcinogenesis in humans. The HTLV-I is the first retrovirus which has been proved to be causally related to human cancer, but the precise role of the virus in the leukemogenesis remains to be disentangled. Recently another disease related to HTLV-I was proposed, that is, HAM (21), which is a neurological disease characterized by spastic spinal paraparesis, similar to tropical spastic paraparesis (22) with positive anti-HTLV-I antibody. Contrary to ATLL, there are HAM cases contracted by horizontal infection of HTLV-I as well as by vertical transmission, but the pathogenesis as to how the lymphotropic virus causes such neurological symptoms in humans is still unclear. Currently, there are neither case reports of HAM patients subsequently incurring ATLL nor patients simultaneously suffering HAM and ATLL. A case-referent study is now under way to compare the cases of ATLL or HAM with HTLV-I carriers in terms of host and environmental factors which might be related to the promotion and/or manifestation of either ATLL or HAM.

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