Clinicopathological dissociation in isolated esophageal eosinophilia

To the Editor,

Eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE) and gastro-esophageal reflux diseases (GERDs) are the two major causes of isolated esophageal eosinophilia (1), which may be proton pump inhibitor (PPI)-responsive or PPI-nonresponsive. PPI-nonresponsive esophageal eosinophilia is considered EoE, whereas GERDs are considered part of the PPI-responsive esophageal eosinophilia (PPIREE) group. However, there is a subgroup of PPIREE that is not considered GERD or EoE (PPIREE: non-GERD, non-EoE) (2). To determine PPIREE, a high therapeutic dose is used (2-4), although the clinical and pathological symptoms of EoE do not respond to PPI treatment. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to reach a differential diagnosis in clinical practice, as the pathological findings may not change after PPI treatment, despite the disappearance of the clinical symptoms. Therefore, this clinicopathological dissociation creates uncertainty regarding patient classification and the indication for treatment.

We diagnosed two children who were recently admitted to our clinic with symptoms of reflux esophagitis and food impaction. Both children had dense eosinophilic infiltration of the esophageal mucosa, before and after the high-dose PPI treatment, which met the criteria for a diagnosis of esophageal eosinophilia (≥15 cells per high-power field) (3,4). In contrast, the clinical symptoms resolved completely in both the children after the high-dose PPI treatment. The resolution of the clinical symptoms after PPI treatment suggested a diagnosis of PPIREE (either GERD or PPIREE: non-GERD, non-EoE), whereas the continued esophageal eosinophilia pathology suggested a diagnosis of EoE.

There are two possible explanations to this discrepancy. First, GERD may have caused the symptoms, while also increasing the fragility of the mucosa and disrupting the integrity of the mucosal lining, subsequently leading to eosinophilic infiltration (5). Therefore, acid suppression by using PPI treatment may have resolved the symptoms due to the vulnerable mucosa before the resolution of the eosinophilic infiltration. Second, EoE and GERD may be co-morbid diseases (2), with GERD exacerbating the patient’s clinical condition, leading to earlier emergence of esophageal dysfunction symptoms. Whichever scenario is correct, the symptomatic improvement after high-dose PPI treatment is of concern. To the best of our knowledge, the long-term prognosis for asymptomatic esophageal eosinophilia remains unknown. Therefore, further therapy with PPIs or corticosteroids cannot be recommended at this point, as there is not enough evidence. To make a differential diagnosis that clearly identifies the PPIREE subgroup, it is important to understand the pathogenic mechanism(s) in EoE and assess the long-term sustainability of the response to PPI. Therefore, close monitoring of these patients is strongly recommended.

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