

CASE REPORT

Severe pulmonary involvement in a case of drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms (DRESS)

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Abstract

Drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms (DRESS) is a rare, but potentially lethal disorder characterised by fever, exanthema and systemic organ involvement. We present a young woman with a complex medical history, including endocarditis and DRESS, suffering from fever for which antibiotics were prescribed. After initial recovery the fever returned, along with a rash. Her condition progressively deteriorated into shock, requiring ICU admission. Soon after, an acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) evolved, which called for mechanical ventilation with deep sedation and prone positioning. After extensive investigations excluding most autoimmune, infectious and haematological aetiologies, DRESS was considered. Antibiotics were withdrawn and prednisone treatment was started after which the patient eventually recovered.

This case demonstrates the importance for intensivists to recognise DRESS, a potentially life-threatening syndrome, in patients with shock and multi-organ failure, due to its non-infectious process. Awareness is pivotal to discontinuing the causative drugs.

Background

DRESS is the acronym for 'drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms' and is also known as a drug-induced hypersensitivity syndrome (DIHS).^[1] DRESS/ DIHS (further denoted as DRESS) belongs to a family of severe cutaneous drug reactions, together with Stevens-Johnson syndrome, toxic epidermal necrolysis (SJS/TEN) and acute generalised exanthematous pustulosis (AGEP). Symptoms, including fever, enlarged lymph nodes, skin and/or internal organ involvement, mimic various systemic diseases. Exclusion of these other diseases and fulfilling the criteria of the RegiSCAR scoring system (*table 1*) are essential in the diagnosis of DRESS.^[1,2] DRESS is rare: prevalence ranges from 1 case per 1,000 to

10,000 drug exposures. In particular, the burden of DRESS on intensive care admissions is largely unknown. However, it is important that intensivists are aware of this syndrome, as this case will demonstrate.

Case Report

A 35-year-old female presented to the emergency ward of a university hospital with fever, cold chills and tenderness in the right knee joint for three days. Almost a year before, she was admitted for four months because of pneumococcal pneumonia complicated by aortic valve endocarditis for which an aortic valve replacement had been performed. This episode was furthermore complicated by septic emboli to the brain and thoracic vertebrae and an aortic root abscess for which a Bentall procedure was needed. She received long-term antibiotic therapy. During that admission she had a drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms for which she was successfully treated with prednisone. She was prescribed piperacillin/tazobactam, benzylpenicillin, ceftriaxone, vancomycin, diclofenac and tramadol, but careful evaluation at the allergology department could not reveal the culprit agent. Finally, she recovered completely.

At the current admission, her vital signs were normal except for a low-grade fever (38.0°C) and local knee joint swelling with tenderness. Her medication was limited to acenocoumarol and acetaminophen. Empirical therapy with teicoplanin and moxifloxacin was started, aimed to cover a possible bacterial endocarditis, graft infection or arthritis (see *figure 1A* for an overview of antibiotic use). Knee arthrocentesis resulted in a dry tap and ultrasound of the knee was normal. Soon after admission she developed gastrointestinal symptoms, attributed to moxifloxacin which was therefore switched to ciprofloxacin. Early after administration of intravenous ciprofloxacin, however, a subtle but pruritic skin rash with a papular erythematous

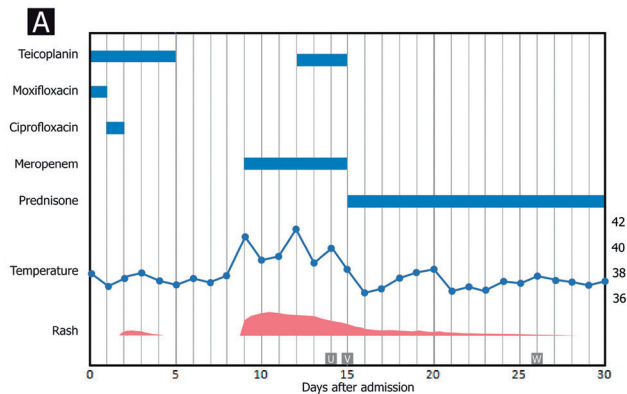


Figure 1A. Outline of medication use in relation to symptoms. Schematic representation of medication use in relation to fever (°C), extension of rash and U: ICU admission, V: prone positioning and W: extubation during current admission.

aspect developed. Quinolones were stopped and teicoplanin was continued. Blood cultures were repetitively negative as were further investigations including cardiac ultrasound, and MRI of the knee, heart and aortic graft. An infection was thus considered unlikely and the antibiotics were stopped after six days. The skin eruptions had improved and the fever had resolved.

However, nine days after admission, there was a sudden recurrence of fever, an increase in C-reactive protein, mild eosinophilia of 590 cells per μl and atypical lymphocytes on the blood smear. Meropenem was prescribed targeting a possible vascular graft infection or endocarditis, which would have been insufficiently treated in the earlier prescribed antibiotic regimen. However, the fever persisted and a few days later a new skin rash appeared with generalised erythematous eruptions on her back, torso and extremities. To cover the more resistant Gram-positive species as well, teicoplanin was added to the antibiotic regimen. At day 14 her condition, however, worsened with haemodynamic instability and respiratory distress for which she was transferred to the ICU and immediately intubated. Consistent with ARDS, severe hypoxaemia was present with a PaO₂/FiO₂ ratio declining under 100 mmHg, in association with the development of bilateral infiltrates (figure 1B) and normal cardiac function on echocardiography. With further respiratory deterioration, neuromuscular blockade and prone positioning was required after lung protective mechanical ventilation was set up. Concomitantly there was evidence of liver and kidney involvement with respectively elevated serum transaminases and creatinine, although the latter developed after ICU admission and could just as well be secondary to the patient's state of shock.

Our differential diagnosis was broad and included ARDS due to recurrent endocarditis with septic pulmonary involvement,

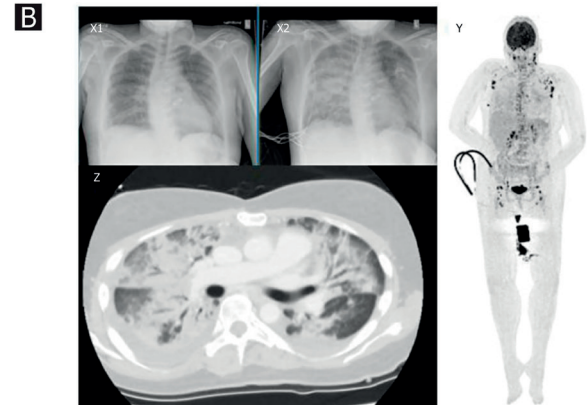


Figure 1B. Radiological and nuclear imaging studies. X: Chest X-ray at admission (1) and at the time of intubation showing bilateral diffuse consolidations. (2). Y: PET-CT of multiple enlarged lymph nodes suggesting widespread adenopathy. Z: CT thorax at intubation showing bilateral dense consolidations merging in peripheral groundglass opacifications suggestive of (early) ARDS.

a pulmonary infection or a haematological or autoimmune disease. PET-CT scan showed bilateral pulmonary opacities and widespread lymphadenopathy, but no signs of graft infection (figure 1B). Pathological examination of bone marrow and lymph node ruled out haemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis and lymphoma. Cultures and microbial testing of blood and bronchoalveolar lavage, including a viral panel, *Pneumocystis jiroveci* and *Aspergillus* were negative. In addition, no herpes viruses were detected and autoimmune serology was also negative, making an autoimmune disease unlikely.

Because of the continuing deterioration under antibiotic treatment DRESS was considered and rated as a 'definite case' in compliance with the RegiSCAR criteria (table 1) as a diagnosis by exclusion.^[1,2] All antibiotics were discontinued and prednisone treatment was started at 1 mg/kg, resulting in a gradual recovery. Extubation followed after 12 days of mechanical ventilation and eventually our patient was discharged to a rehabilitation clinic with a tapering prednisone regimen. Six months after the initial presentation she returned home. Follow-up in the outpatient clinic again included evaluation of the possible culprit drug which was thought to be teicoplanin. However, she received a relative contraindication for beta-lactam antibiotics in the future as well.

Discussion

We present a young woman who was admitted to the ICU with multi-organ failure and severe ARDS as manifestations of DRESS. This diagnosis was supported by negative test results for infectious, haematological or autoimmune disease in combination with the 'definite' categorisation according to the RegiSCAR criteria (table 1). In addition, her gradual recovery after withdrawal of all antibiotics and initiation of prednisone

therapy favoured the diagnosis of DRESS. This is one of the few reports linking DRESS with ARDS (search on Medline and PubMed with search criteria “DRESS,” “drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms,” “DIHS,” “drug-induced hypersensitivity syndrome,” “drug induced ARDS,” “drug pulmonary involvement,” “drug hypersensitivity lung” and “drug hypersensitivity pulmonary”).

Awareness is critical as DRESS is potentially life threatening but, as this case demonstrates, it may often go unrecognised for several reasons: symptoms are non-specific, it is a diagnosis by exclusion requiring expert-based criteria and the time of dosage to symptoms may vary greatly.^[1] Symptoms may occur 2-6 weeks after prescription of the culprit drug, or in hours to days in case of a rechallenge.^[2] Based on the temporal relationship between the onset of symptoms and the initiation of the drug (*figure 1A*), the glycopeptide and quinolone antibiotics could have been the culprit drug. Quinolone antibiotics, however, have not been reported to cause DRESS,^[1] although they have been implicated in SJS/TEN and AGEP.^[2]

It is thus reasonable to specify only teicoplanin as the culprit agent. DRESS due to a combination of vancomycin and teicoplanin has recently been described by Miyazu et al.^[3] The possibility of the patient's initial presentation being a relapse of the previous episode of DRESS a year before was considered, but could not be proven since the criteria (*table 1*) were not met at that time. In the last eight months there had been no other drug exposure, including possible over-the-counter drugs, than acenocoumarol and acetaminophen making the initial phase as a prodromal stage of DRESS unlikely as well. However amoxicillin-induced flares have been reported, implying a relative contraindication for beta-lactam antibiotics in patients with DRESS.^[4]

In general, severe cutaneous drug reactions are elicited by excessive or inappropriate activation of an immune response, due to the binding of foreign antigens (i.e. the drug) to T- cell receptors.^[5] This leads to a dramatic expansion of functional T-lymphocytes and the appearance of autoantibodies to various epidermal proteins. This drug-specific T-cell proliferation may have an important role in the known association with reactivation of latent human herpesvirus (HHV) 6, and to lesser extent with HHV7, Epstein-Barr virus and Cytomegalovirus reactivation.^[1,3,5,6]

Pulmonary involvement in drug reactions is well known and characterised by pulmonary oedema and interstitial lung disease, and rarely with a severe presentation consistent with ARDS at the extremity of the spectrum of pulmonary involvement.^[7,8]

Data regarding the course and outcome of patients with severe DRESS admitted to the ICU are limited to one retrospective study in 23 French ICUs.^[9] The researchers identified 21 patients with a probable or definite diagnosis of DRESS in ten years' time (based on the RegiSCAR score, *table 1*). All had fever and erythematous exanthema (part of database search criteria);

Table 1. The RegiSCAR group diagnosis score for drug reaction with eosinophilia and systemic symptoms (DRESS)^(1,2)

	No	Yes	Unknown	Case
Fever (≥38.5°C)	-1	0	-1	0
Enlarged lymph nodes (≥2 sites, >1 cm)	0	1	0	1 ^a
Atypical lymphocytes	0	1	0	1
Eosinophilia 700-1499x10 ⁹ /l or 10-19.9% ≥1500 x10 ⁹ /l or ≥50%	0	1 2	0	0
Skin rash Extent >50% At least 2 of: oedema, infiltration, purpura, scaling Biopsy suggesting DRESS	0 0 -1 -1	1 1 0 0	0 0 0 0	0 1 0 0 ^b
Internal organ involvement One 2 or more	0	1 2	0	2 ^c
Resolution in >15 days At least 3 biological investigations done and negative to exclude alternative diagnosis	-1 0	0 1	-1 0	0 1

A schematic scoring system to grade the possibility of DRESS: <2 no case; 2-3 possible case; 4-5 probable case; > 5 definite case.^(1,2) The last column represents the scoring for our patient, 6 points in total

^a Generalised lymphadenopathy on computed tomography (CT), see also figure 1

^b Biopsy of the skin was not performed

^c Including pulmonary, hepatic and possibly renal involvement, although this could also be secondary to shock

more than half were associated with shock (15/21), acute renal failure (18/21), mechanical ventilation (13/21; no information about ARDS diagnosis in this population) and acute hepatitis (11/21). The disease severity of this highly restricted population selection is further demonstrated by a mortality rate of almost 50%.^[9]

DRESS is rare, but the low incidence may be explained by underreporting or unawareness of the syndrome with diagnostic hallmarks such as fever, eosinophilia, generalised rash with typical mucosal involvement, and multi-organ involvement. Nevertheless, the high mortality compatible with severe shock and multi-organ failure emphasises the importance for intensive care physicians to consider DRESS in their differential diagnosis. This is imperative, as early recognition with prompt withdrawal of the culprit drug to stop the harmful exposure is considered the key treatment. In addition, corticosteroids are advised, but future studies are needed to explore their role in the treatment of DRESS.^[1]

Conclusion

This case demonstrates that intensive care physicians should include DRESS in their differential diagnosis of ARDS in patients with a distributive shock accompanied by systemic symptoms without evidence of definite aetiology. This is important as it has treatment implications, namely the withdrawal of the possible causative agent. Thus earlier recognition implies shorter exposure. It is possible that this could have led to a shortened period of mechanical ventilation and haemodynamic

