**Name of journal:** *World Journal of Gastroenterology*

**ESPS Manuscript NO: 5669**

**Columns:** **CASE REPORT**

**Overlap syndrome consisting of PSC-AIH with concomitant presence of a membranous glomerulonephritis and ulcerative colitis**

Warling O *et al*. Concomitant overlap syndrome, membranous glomerulonephritis and ulcerative colitis

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**Received:** September 20, 2013 **Revised:** November 21, 2013

**Accepted:** January 6, 2014

**Published online:**

**Abstract**

The association of primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) and autoimmune hepatitis (AIH) is known as an overlap syndrome (OS). OS can also be described in the setting of concomitant presence of an AIH and a PSC. These diseases can in some cases be associated with an ulcerative colitis. In this case report we describe, to our knowledge, the first case in the literature of a young caucasian male suffering from ulcerative colitis and a overlap syndrome consisting of an association between an PSC-AIH, with the concomitant presence of an membranous glomerulonephritis.

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**Key words:** Primary sclerosing cholangitis; Autoimmune hepatitis; Overlap syndrome; Ulcerative colitis; Membranous glomerulonephritis

**Core tip:** This case reports highlights a particular kind of hepatic overlap syndrome. To our knowledge it would be the first case to be described in the literature concerning 4 different diagnosis; all being autoimmune related. Those autoimmune diseases were never described together, yet their association in this case is probably not a pure coincidence. Auto-immune diseases will play an ever so more import role in the future; yet the knowledge and the understanding concerning these pathologies today is certainly only a fraction of what is necessary to offer the best treatment to our patients.

Warling O, Bovy C, Coïmbra C, Noterdaeme T, Delwaide J, Louis E.Overlap syndrome consisting of PSC-AIH with concomitant presence of a membranous glomerulonephritis and ulcerative colitis.

**Available from:**

**DOI:**

**INTRODUCTION**

The term "primary sclerosing cholangitis-autoimmune hepatitis (PSC-AIH) overlap syndrome" is used to describe different varieties of AIH and/or PSC in the setting where an unspecific number of characteristics of the other disease is present[[1](#_ENREF_1)].

Herein we report a particular kind of hepatic overlap syndrome. To our knowledge it would be the first case to be described in the literature concerning a patient with a ulcerative colitis, a PSC, a auto-immune hepatitis and a extra-membranous glomerulonephritis. Those autoimmune diseases were never described together, yet their association in this case is probably not a pure coincidence.

**CASE REPORT**

We report the case of a 29-year-old caucasian male suffering from ulcerative colitis (UC) since 2000 associated with PSC since 2003. The intial diagnosis of UC was baised on concordant endoscopic and histological findings and PSC diagnosis was established by means of a liver biopsy. The patient was treated using 1g/d of ursodesoxycholic acid.

In September 2005, the patient was hospitalized for jaundice and fatigue without any notion of pain. Besides a lean physic and conjunctival jaundice the clinical examination was inconspicuous.

The initial blood analysis showed an impaired liver function characterized essentially by the presence of cholestasis and cytolysis (Table 1). Further investigation showed increased IgG [25.2 (normal: 6.9-14) g/L) and IgM [2.36 (normal: 0.3-2.1) g/L] titers. Subanalysis for IgG4 and anti nuclear antibodies remained negative. Anti-mitochondrial antibodies type 2, anti- antimyeloperoxydase as well as anti-LKM were negative as well. Anti-neutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies (determined by indirect immunofluorescence assay) and anti-antiprotéinase 3 antibodies however turned out to be positive. Serotype analysis confirmed the presence of HLA-DR 3 in our patient. Further analyses concerning tumor markers (alfa feotoprotein, carcinoembryonic antigen, CA19-9) as well as hepatitis serology (A, B and C) were negative. Urinary copper levels were normal and no Keiser Fleischer rings were noted at clinical examination. Abdominal ultrasound only demonstrated the presence of dilated intrahepatic bile ducts. This picture was confirmed by the endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) showing some minor irregularities of the intrahepatic portion. Cholangio-magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) proofed to be non-contributive and only confirmed the results obtained by the ERCP. The overall appearance was compatible, but not specific for sclerosing cholangitis. A liver biopsy performed shortly afterwards showed the presence of a chronic hepatitis with predominantly centrolobular necrosis (Figure 1) evoking a toxic origin or possibly an AIH. Owing to the fact of increased IgGs with concomitant cytolysis and the exclusion of any other causes (*i.e.,* toxics) the diagnosis of an AIH associated with PSC was retained, delimitating the picture of an overlap syndrome. The patient was promptly started on 32 mg/d of methyl-prednisolone. Seven days after the initiation of the treatment, there was a marked improvement in the patients overall condition. Total bilirubin dropped to 53 mg/L. Alanine aminotransferase and IgGs were significantly decreased to 228 U/L and 15.4 g/L respectively. The IgGs titers will however fluctuate for the next four years before reaching a normal level again. Two months later corticosteroids were reduced by half (16 mg/d). Nonetheless we were forced to start the patient on 50 mg/d of azathioprine, shortly after this step as liver function degraded. This medication was poorly tolerated by the patient, so that he was switched to 6-mercaptopurine (6-MP). The dosage was steadily increased to 75 mg/d. *TPMT* gene variant genotyping didn't show any abnormal activity, therefore excluding a genetic predisposition to bone marrow toxicity. Further withdrawal of corticosteroids proved to be difficult as clinical jaundice reoccurred as soon as the dosage was reduced to or less than 8 mg/d. As liver function [Total bilirubin: 61 mg/L (range < 4 mg/L), TGP 72 UI/L (range: 3-36 UI/L)] as well as clinical evolution of the patient stagnated, we temporarily interrupted the administration of ursodeoxycholic acid to exclude any possible drug interaction. The titers for 6-MP were in normal range. Another Cholangio-MRI proofed to be non contributive, and we therefore suspected a new episode of AIH which led us to increase corticosteroids to 12 mg/d. This decision promoted into an excellent clinical and biological evolution with almost a complete normalization of liver function. Following this good evolution corticosteroids were decreased progressively to 8 mg/d, which will be the minimum dose required for the next several years.

In October 2009, four years after the initial diagnosis of overlap syndrome, the patient presented himself to the emergency department with severe edema of the lower extremities.

Besides a raised blood pressure of 155/105 mmHg, clinical examination was unremarkable. At that moment the patient treatment consisted of 75 mg/d of 6-mercaptopurine, 8 mg/d of methyl-prednisolone, 1 g/d of ursodeoxycholic acid as well as 2 g/d of mesalazine. Blood work performed at the emergency department showed a hypoalbuminemia [17 (range: 35-50) g/L] with normal creatinine level [1.15 (range: 0.6-1.3) mg/dL]. A 24 h urine sample confirmed a severe nephrotic syndrome with a proteinuria of 23400 mg/L or 10400 mg/g of creatinine with a total of 46.3% of albumin. The protein fractions were normal. An abdominal ultrasound was unremarkable. On the next day kidney biopsies (Figures 2 and 3) were performed showing the presence of an extra-membranous glomerulonephritis. Immunohistology showed the presence ofsubepithelial deposits of IgG and C3d and C4d. C1q, IgA and IgMs were not detected. Despite the absence of renal failure, the presence of massive proteinuria pushed us to increase the corticosteroids to 64 mg/d. Cylcophosphamide as well as calcineurin inhibitors were not available as alternatives as the patient received 6-MP at that time**.** This treatment was supplemented with bumetanide 0.5-1 mg/d, lisinopril 20 mg/d, CaCO3 1250 mg/d as well as omeprazole 20 mg/d. One month after the initiation of the treatment the nephrotic syndrome went into complete remission. Diuretics were stopped and corticosteroids were progressively reduced. Unfortunately nephrotic syndrome reemerged as soon as corticosteroids were weaned and after two consecutive episodes we decided to convert the treatment regimen to cyclophosphamide 2 mg/kg per day. 6-MP was stopped during the next 6 mo. The patient responded well to this alteration so that corticosteroids could again be reduced to 16 mg/d. Liver function remained stable.

In August 2011 the clincal and biological evolution stabilized so that the patient was finally weaned from systemic corticosteriods. His final treament consisted of 5 mg/d of beclomethasone, 75 mg/d of 6-MP, 2 g/d of mesalazine and 1 g/d of ursodeoxycholic acid. The administration of cyclophosphamide was stopped indefinitely.

DISCUSSION

The term "PSC-AIH overlap syndrome" is used to describe different varieties of AIH autoimmune and/or PSC in the setting where an unspecific number of characteristics of the other disease is present[[1](#_ENREF_1)]{Rust, 2008 #1}.

Other forms of overlap syndromes are described combining the simultaneous presence of different diseases like AIH and primary biliary cirrhosis. A precise clinical and pathological definition is still missing. Concerning PSC-AIH overlap syndrome, Czaja[[2](#_ENREF_2)] suggested that it's possibly an atypical manifestation of a classic disease rather than a complete new entity. The International Auto-Immune Hepatitis Group (IAIHG) takes however no clear position on that matter, leaving the door open to a wide variety of possibilities: Consecutive presentation, concomitant presentation, existence of a continuum between the two diseases or presence of a disease that also has one or more other features of another one[[3](#_ENREF_3)]. The PSC-AIH overlap syndrome is most often described in children, adolescents or young adults[[1](#_ENREF_1),[3-5](#_ENREF_3)]. Before confirming the diagnosis of an overlap syndrome it is however of the upmost importance to exclude liver toxicity of the preexisiting treatement.

Most large series published in the literature[[5-7](#_ENREF_5)] concerning overlap syndrome are presenting patients with an initial diagnosis of PSC to whom the diagnostic criteria for auto-immune hepatitis were applied to diagnose or postulate the presence of an overlap syndrome. This situation is comprehensible in the light that well-defined inclusion criteria are still absent and need yet to be defined. The IAIHG recalls, however, that clear and strict criteria are not intended to diagnose an overlap syndrome[[3](#_ENREF_3)].

A study published in 2005[[5](#_ENREF_5)] estimated that 17% of patients with PSC have an overlap syndrome (PSC + AIH according to the criteria of IAIHG 1999[[8](#_ENREF_8)]). On behalf of the IAIHG[[8](#_ENREF_8)], Boberg estimated a prevalence of 1.8% of AIH (according to the diagnostic criteria’s of the IAIHG) and 8.8% of probable AIH (according to the criteria of the IAIHG) in a sample of 114 patients suffering from PSC. If one would consider that the diagnosis of overlap syndrome doesn't necessitate a complete coverage of both diagnostic criteria’s of each disease, these figures would be much higher.

The patient mentioned in this case report meets both diagnostic criteria’s for PSC[[9](#_ENREF_9),[10](#_ENREF_10)] as well as for AIH according to the IAIHG criteria[[8](#_ENREF_8)] giving us the confidence to diagnose our patient with overlap syndrome. It is important to note that centrolobular necrosis have been described in cases of AIH particularly in young patients as well as in hepatic transplants[[11](#_ENREF_11),[12](#_ENREF_12)]. No antibody were detected in our patient, but this is the case in almost 10% of AIH[[3](#_ENREF_3)].

A prospective study[[5](#_ENREF_5)] of 41 patients comparing patients with PSC (*n* = 37) alone *vs* associated to an auto immune hepatitis (*n* = 7) showed that patients in the latter group were generally younger, had higher IgGs and higher levels of transaminases. The authors believe that there is a benefit of treating such patients with immunosuppressive and ursodeoxycholic acid. Patients with overlap seemed to have a better survival than those with PSC alone[[5](#_ENREF_5)]. However, this study didn't take into account the possibility that the difference in survival may be due to the fact that patients in the overlap group generally presented with less severe forms of PSC. These findings are nonetheless in sharp disagreement with the fact that patients with overlap syndrome have a lower response rate than those with PSC. Statistical analysis methods are not detailed in this study, therefore rendering correct interpretation of results difficult.

Given the lack of specific diagnostic criteria, it is difficult to establish a line of scientifically proven conduct. The guidelines published by the European association for the study of the liver (EASL) recommends treating patients with AIH-PSC overlap by ursodeoxycholic acid and immunosuppressive agents even though this is not per se "evidence-based"[[9](#_ENREF_9)]. Note that the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases also recommends the use of corticosteroids and immunosuppressive agents in these patients[[3](#_ENREF_3)]. This is in agreement with the usual treatment of patients with PSC associated with ulcerative colitis since it appears that the treatment of PSC with ursodeoxycholic acid reduces not only the risk of dysplasia[[4](#_ENREF_4)] but also the prevalence of colorectal carcinomas[[4](#_ENREF_4),[13](#_ENREF_13)] and should be given to every patients with ulcerative colitis and PSC. However, the EASL puts forward that no study could demonstrate any positive effects on the prognosis of patients with PSC and that the treatment is therefore not "evidence-based"[[9](#_ENREF_9)]. Culver and Chapman published a review in 2011[[4](#_ENREF_4)] on the management of the treatment of sclerosing cholangitis and its variants, and concluded that many studies included patients with advanced stages of disease and that the impact of ursodeoxycholic acid may be different if used in a much earlier moment. This statement has however not been fully evaluated[[4](#_ENREF_4)]. The notion of overlap syndrome is important because it has been shown[[2](#_ENREF_2)] that in cases of PSC-AIH overlap there is a weakened response to corticosteroids. Equally it has been shown[[2](#_ENREF_2),[3](#_ENREF_3)] that patients, like the one presented in this case report, with AIH, PSC and ulcerative colitis have a reduced probability of remission and higher treatment failure rates than patients with normal cholangiography.

The IAIHG noted several working groups that mention a benefit of steroids but it also mentions another group who found a reduced response in this particular patients[[8](#_ENREF_8)]. Several reviews[[4](#_ENREF_4),[14](#_ENREF_14)] also suggest that liver transplantation is indicated for advanced stages of this disease.

Extra-intestinal manifestations of inflammatory bowel disease, like glomerulonephonritis (GN) are considered rare[[15](#_ENREF_15)] in cases of overlap syndrome. In such instance GN can have a wide spectrum from minimal change to rapidly progressive (crescent) GN and may also be accompanied by active tubular-interstitial nephritis[[15](#_ENREF_15)]**.**

However, we only found 6 cases of membranous glomerulonephritis associated with ulcerative colitis[[16-21](#_ENREF_16)] and only one published case of PSC associated with membranous glomerulonephritis by Verresen *et al*[[22](#_ENREF_22)] in 1988. Furthermore there are 3 described cases in which an extra-membranous glomerulonephritis is associated to an auto-immune hepatitis[[23-25](#_ENREF_23)].

Lastly, in our review of the literature we found one case similar to the one mentioned in here suffering from UC alongside with PSC and an membranous glomerulonephritis[[26](#_ENREF_26)]. To our knowledge this case report seems to be the only one presenting a patient with UC, an overlap syndrome involving PSC and AIH, as well as membranous glomerulonephritis.

Glomerulonephritis caused by aminosalicylates, cyclosporine[[15](#_ENREF_15),[27-29](#_ENREF_27)] and tumor necrosis factor-αinhibitor[[27](#_ENREF_27),[28](#_ENREF_28)] are well known and described even with a delayed presentation after several years of continuous treatment[[30](#_ENREF_30)]. 6-mercaptopurine shows no significant direct nephrotoxicity[[28](#_ENREF_28)]. In the group of six patients described with membranous glomerulonephritis associated with ulcerative colitis, 4 patients[17,18,20,21] did not receive potentially nephrotoxic treatment before the onset of nephrotic syndrome. So it seems that the treatment may not be solely nore blindly be incriminated in the association of these diseases.

Currently, the research concerning the pathophysiology of glomerulonephritis is in full progress. The recent discovery of the phospholipase A2 receptor as target antigen in 70% of membranous glomerulonephritis[[31](#_ENREF_31)] validates these efforts. Nonetheless until now no study has been able to link certain forms of membranous glomerulonephritis and ulcerative colitis, even tough the autoimmune context seems inevitable.

**COMMENTS**

***Case characteristics***

Jaunice, fatigue and oedema in a patient with ulceratice colitis and primary sclerosing cholangitis

***Clinical diagnosis***

Overlap syndrome [autoimmune hepatitis (AIH) and primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC)] and membranous glomerulonephritis in a patient with ulcerative colitis.

***Differential diagnosis***

PSC exacerbation, primary biliray cirrhosis, Wilson disease, neoplasia, are all valid differential diagnosis for hepatic alteration, nore should a nephritic syndrome due to treatment toxicity be excluded.

***Laboratory diagnosis***

Elevation of liver enzymes and IgG for the diagnosis of AIH. Proteinuria and hypoproteinemia for the membranous nephritis.

***Imaging diagnosis***

For the liver: Magnetic resonance imaging and omputer tomography were not contributive, the diagnosis is based on histological findings. Those methods are nonetheless necessary to exclude other causes (*i.e.,* neoplastic); For the kidney: The diagnosis is made by means of a urine analysis and kidney biopsy.

***Pathological diagnosis***

The ulcerative colitis was diagnosed by endoscopy and histology, primary sclerosing cholangitis by magnetic resonance imaging and histology, auto-immune hepatitis by histology and the criteria of the International Auto-Immune Hepatitis Group. The extra-membranous glomerulonephritis were diagnosed by histology (with Jones’s staining).

***Treatment***

Cortisteroids are used in the treatment in case of an auto-immune exacerbation. Maintenance treatment could be azathioprine, ursodesoxycholic acid for auto-immune hepatitis and primary sclerosing cholangitis and cyclophosphamide for the treatment of membranous nephritis.

***Term explanation***

The term "PSC-AIH overlap syndrome" is used to describe different varieties of autoimmune hepatitis autoimmune and/or primary sclerosing cholangitis in the setting where an unspecific number of characteristics of the other disease are present. The term overlap just designs an association of disease. It’s not very clear if it’s just a concomitant presence of the disease or the potential or if the overlap design a variant of the diseases.

***Experiences and lessons***

It’s very important not to forget that clear diagnostic criteria are sometimes more of a theoretical concept and rarely apply to the circumstances found in a specific patient. Therefore a correct knowledge and interpretation of the different sub characteristics of each disease is the key to allow a tailored therapeutic approach.

***Peer review***

This paper reports associated "autoimmune" diseases in a single patient. The new is the addition of membranous glomerulonephritis to ulcerative colitis and a PSC-AIH overlap. A short note on this new association could be of interest and useful for the future.

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**P-Reviewers:** Efe C, Lindgren S, Tebo AE

**S-Editor:** Zhai HH **L-Editor: E-Edito**r**:**

**Figure 1 Hematoxylin eosin.** Centrilobular necrosis (disorganized appearance) (red arrow) centrilobular vein (black arrow) (original maginifcation × 40).

**Figure 2 Optic microscopy: Jones’ staining.** Presence of spikes in a diffuse manner (arrows) (silver impregnation of the basement membrane, original maginifcation ×400).

**Figure 3 Immunoperoxidase (anti-IgG Ab).** Binding of the antibody in the sub-epithelial region of the basal membrane. The immunofixations for C3d and C4d are positive in the same locations, original maginifcation ×400.

**Table 1 Initial Biology at first presentation**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Value | Range |
| Hemoglobin (g/dL) | 12.1  | 14.0-17.4  |
| Gamma glutamyltransferase (UI/L) | 157  | 8-61  |
| C-reactive protein (mg/dL) | 11.5  | < 10  |
| TGO (AST, UI/L) | 920  | 0-35  |
| TGP (ALT, UI/L) | 701  | 3-36  |
| Total bilirubin (mg/dL) | 123.7  | < 15 |
| Direct bilirubin (mg/dL) | 93.8  | < 4  |
| Amylase (UI/L) | 94  | < 160  |
| Lipase (UI/L) | 77  | < 140  |
| Alcaline phosphatase (UI/L) | 208  | 35-100  |
| Total low density lipoprotein (UI/L) | 429  | 95-195  |
| Albumin (g/dL) | 33.4  | 35-50  |

ALT: Alanine aminotransferase; AST: Aspartate aminotransferase; TGO: Glutamate oxaloacétique transaminase; TGP: Glutamate pyruvate transaminase.