Problems in diagnosing viral hepatitis

F Bonino, G Colloredo Mels, G Bellati, G Ideo, F Oliveri, P Colombatto, M R Brunetto

Abstract
The most reliable method of making a specific aetiological diagnosis of chronic viral hepatitis would be to identify virus-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes responsible for the killing of virus-infected hepatocytes in each patient's liver. Unfortunately, this can not be proposed for routine diagnosis and surrogate tests are required. The detection of virus markers, and even of the virus itself, does not imply that liver damage is caused by virus infection. Indirect markers of the host's antiviral immunoresponse have to be used to confirm more specifically the diagnosis of viral hepatitis. IgM antibodies against viral antigens implicated in the elimination of the virus seem to be suitable alternative candidates. Significant changes in the serum values of viraemia and aminotransferases occur within a few days, while a significant variation in liver histology takes much longer. Only the kinetics of the highly variable parameters can be used for an appropriate study of the relationship between viraemia, antiviral immunoresponse, and liver cell necrosis. Quantitative and dynamic analyses of hepatitis virus markers seem the most suitable and reliable methods of monitoring the patients eligible for antiviral treatment and identifying the most appropriate time to start this.

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Molecular hybridisation techniques exploiting the natural properties of nucleic acids and enzymes which regulate DNA synthesis and replication have become a major research tool. They have been used to identify new genes and viruses and to unravel the mysteries of genetic heterogeneity. These techniques have contributed with innovative strength to speed the course of knowledge in the pathobiology of virus infection and liver disease, and are now being introduced into the diagnostic laboratory.

Before the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) revolution, viruses were detected by isolation and growth in tissue cultures or cell lines, or by molecular hybridisation using nucleic acid probes. The sensitivity of these techniques was limited to hundreds of thousands of virions.1 2 Now PCR can detect a few viral genomes, amplifying a target nucleotide sequence.3 Therefore, we have to consider viruses as bacteria which may be undetectable in biological specimens, but can be amplified in culture (Table I). This leads to the detection of viruses in individuals who are negative by detection of conventional viral markers, and thus to a change in diagnostic criteria. With analogy to bacteriology, it is well known that 'sterile' does not mean the absence of bacteria, merely presence in a number of defined cut-off value. Now that viruses can be detected with absolute sensitivity after PCR amplification, diagnostic and therapeutic decisions in virology should rely on quantitative cut offs (Table I).

This paper analyses some of the current diagnostic problems and discusses possible means of overcoming them.

Quantitative detection of viral markers
Many valuable reviews describe in detail the nucleic acid amplification techniques and discuss their advantages and the problems associated with them.3 4 A major advantage is their absolute sensitivity, while a major problem is the detection of false-positive results caused by contamination of the sample with amplification products. False-negative results are also possible, because of genetic heterogeneity at the site of the oligonucleotide primers' hybridisation. This is a minor problem, however, if highly conserved genomic regions are selected as targets.

The improvement in sensitivity leading to the detection of minute amounts of virus in unexpected circumstances and individuals who are negative for conventional virus markers, has raised medical scepticism and has overemphasised the risk of false-positive results. However, many of the controversial results have been confirmed to be specific by the introduction of contamination control systems, such as PCR carry-over prevention methods.5 6

A major need for the application of PCR to diagnostics is to make it suitable for quantitative analysis. The efficiency with which oligonucleotide primers hybridise and amplify all appropriate target sequences at each cycle of amplification depends on the number of oligonucleotides which rehybridise to themselves, and on the quantity of enzymes and dNTPs which are needed for polymerisation. Most of the quantitation problems derive from the variability of these factors. Terminal dilutions of each biological

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**TABLE I** Common diagnostic criteria in bacteriology and virology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacteria</th>
<th>Viruses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Amplification by culture</td>
<td>Amplification by PCR</td>
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<td>Diagnostic quantitative cut off</td>
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Serological markers of hepatitis B virus infection and disease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serological markers of Infection</th>
<th>HBsAg</th>
<th>anti-HCV</th>
<th>anti-HD</th>
<th>IgM anti-HBc</th>
<th>IgM anti-HCV</th>
<th>IgM anti-HD</th>
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<td>Disease</td>
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Kinetics of hepatitis viral markers

Viraemia and serum ALT and IgM anti-HBc values fluctuate with significant peaks in patients with chronic hepatitis, and exacerbations of asymptomatic hepatitis are frequently separated by periods of uneventful disease course. All episodes of ALT flare up are associated with an increase in IgM anti-HBc values and are preceded by an increase or reappearance of viraemia.

We analysed the relation between serum values of viraemia, transaminases, and IgM anti-HBc in 52 untreated chronic hepatitis B patients followed up for one year by monthly semiquantitative assay. In 96% of ALT flare ups, the chronological sequence was: HBV-DNA reactivation, followed by ALT flare up, and then an increase in the value of IgM anti-HBc (Figure), suggesting that this pattern identifies the "true" hepatitis B exacerbation. Quantitative correlations were not found between HBV-DNA, ALT peaks, and IgM anti-HBc increases, but a significant inverse relation was present between the basal viraemia value and its increase (r= -0.682; p<0.001). This indicates that a rapid and noticeable increase in serum HBV-DNA values triggers the cytolytic reaction.

Monthly semiquantitative determinations of HBV-DNA, ALT, and IgM anti-HBc seem to be the most suitable and reliable approach for monitoring chronic HBV infection, and can be proposed to follow up patients eligible for or undergoing antiviral treatment. The same type of quantitative and dynamic criteria should also be applied to hepatitis D virus (HDV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV).
infections, as a guide for the appropriate time to start treatment. It is well known that patients with high ALT values and low viraemia at baseline respond better to treatment, but only a precise study of the kinetics of viraemia, ALT, and IgM antiviral response can help to identify these patients or select better the most suitable phase of chronic hepatitis virus infection for the start of antiviral treatment.


