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Utility of C4d Immunostaining in the First Year after Pediatric and Young Adult Heart Transplantation

Ying Xu¹, Csaba Galambos, MD PhD², Miguel Reyes-Múgica, MD², Susan A. Miller, MD³, Adriana Zeevi, PhD², Steven A. Webber, MBChB^{3,4}, and Brian Feingold, MD, MS^{3,4}

¹University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA.

²Department of Pathology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA

³Pediatric Cardiology, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, Pittsburgh, PA

⁴Clinical and Translational Science, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA

Abstract

Background—C4d assessment of endomyocardial biopsies (EMB) after heart transplantation (HTx) has been widely adopted to aid in the diagnosis of antibody-mediated rejection (AMR), yet it remains unclear whether to assess all patients routinely and at what frequency/duration. We sought to evaluate the utility of routine C4d immunostaining in the first-year after pediatric and young adult HTx.

Methods—We reviewed pre-transplant alloantibody and clinical data, including serial EMB reports, on all 51 patients who received HTx at our center since we instituted routine C4d staining of all first-year EMBs. C4d was considered positive if diffuse, capillary staining (2+) was present. Rare/focal capillary staining or absence of staining was considered negative.

Results—Twenty-six of 406 first-year EMBs (6%) were C4d+ in 6 (12%) patients. Sixty-five percent of all C4d+ EMBs occurred by 30 days post-transplant. Five of 6 patients had pre-transplant donor-specific antibody (DSA) 4000 MFI. The sixth patient had neither pre-transplant anti-HLA antibodies nor a positive donor-specific cytotoxicity crossmatch (DSXM), but there was clinical concern for AMR. Among the entire cohort, 5 of 10 patients with pre-transplant DSA 4000 MFI and/or a positive DSXM were C4d+ compared to only 1 of 41 without (50% vs. 2%; p=0.001).

Conclusions—In the first-year after HTx, C4d+ occurred early and only in children and young adults with pre-transplant DSA or with clinical suspicion of AMR. While our data suggests that assessment limited to the first 90 days post-transplant in patients with pre-transplant DSA 4000 MFI may be appropriate in the absence of clinical concern for AMR, further research is needed to determine the optimum strategy for post-transplant surveillance.

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Corresponding author: Brian Feingold, MD, MS Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC 4401 Penn Avenue (FP 5129) Pittsburgh, PA 15224 Phone: 412-692-5540 Fax: 412-692-6991 brian.feingold@chp.edu.

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DISCLOSURES

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INTRODUCTION

Though much has been learned in the last decade about risk factors for and adverse outcomes associated with antibody mediated rejection (AMR) following heart transplantation, there is continued uncertainty about the appropriate work-up of endomyocardial biopsies (EMB) for AMR [1]. The 2005 International Society for Heart and Lung Transplantation (ISHLT) Consensus Report recommended immunostaining for AMR not be performed routinely but reserved for only those EMBs showing hallmark pathologic features of AMR [2]. The difficulty with this approach is that classic histologic features of AMR are not readily apparent on all EMBs and interpretation is somewhat subjective [3]. The recent ISHLT working formulation for pathologic diagnosis of AMR recommended surveillance immunostaining be performed at 2 and 4 weeks after transplant and then at the time of serum alloantibody assessments (i.e. 1, 3, 6 and 12 months) [4]. It also recommended that C4d assessment of EMBs be included, at a minimum, in the diagnostic panel, regardless of whether immunofluorescence (IF) or immunohistochemistry (IC) is utilized.

Since May 2007 we have prospectively utilized routine IC staining for C4d of all first-year endomyocardial biopsies (EMB). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the utility of routine IC staining for C4d in the first-year after pediatric and young adult heart transplantation.

METHODS

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, we reviewed the medical records of all patients who received heart transplantation at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC since we began routine assessment for C4d on all first year EMBs. Patients who had at least one EMB through April 2011 were included in this study. Demographics, pre-transplant alloantibody testing, retrospective crossmatch results, and clinical data were reviewed. Pre-transplant alloantibody assessment consisted of complement dependent cytotoxicity (CDC) panel reactive antibody (PRA) in all patients and anti-HLA antibody profile by Luminex[®] platform (LABScreen, One Lambda, Canoga Park, California) in all but 2 patients, both of whom had CDC-PRA 0% and negative ELISA anti-HLA antibody assessments. Clinical data included EMB reports and serial hemodynamics with temporally linked echocardiogram reports. Based on these data, we defined graft dysfunction as present if any of the following were present: shortening fraction <28% or decrease in shortening fraction of >12% from prior echocardiogram, pulmonary artery wedge pressure >24 mmHg, mixed venous oxygen saturation <56%, or cardiac index <2.2 L/minute/m².

Data from EMB reports were abstracted by one investigator (YX) who was blinded to the clinical information. Because we could not exclude that a pathology diagnosis of AMR was made solely on the basis of C4d+ immunostaining, we did not record any mention of AMR from the EMB report. Instead the EMB reports were reviewed for acute cellular rejection (ACR) grade, the presence or absence of C4d immunostaining, and the presence or absence of histological features that have been ascribed to cardiac AMR: endothelial activation, intracapillary neutrophils, intracapillary macrophages, intracapillary thrombi, hemorrhage, and edema [1-2, 4-7]. We then quantified an "AMR score" for each EMB by assigning 1 point to each histological feature of cardiac AMR described and summing these values. We chose to weigh each feature equally because of the current uncertainty regarding the histologic findings of cardiac AMR, including the histologic features of "early" AMR and the significance of intravascular macrophages [4]. Also because EMBs were interpreted during the clinical care of these patients between 2007 and 2011, the 2011 Working Formulation guidelines [4] were not available to be applied in real-time.

Assessment for C4d was performed by paraffin IC as previously reported [8]. Diffuse brown-colored staining of capillary endothelial cells (2+) was interpreted as positive C4d staining [9]. Staining of other vessels or serum was not considered positive.

All patients received thymoglobulin induction and corticosteroids during the first 5-7 days after transplantation. Tacrolimus was initiated on post-operative days 2-4 and patients were maintained on tacrolimus plus adjunctive therapy (either sirolimus or mycophenolate mofetil). In addition to the above, patients with a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch received daily plasmapheresis for 3-5 days after transplantation with continuation of plasmapheresis based on clinical status, alloantibody profile, and EMB findings. These patients were also maintained on weaning doses of corticosteroids during the first post-transplant year. Surveillance EMBs were typically performed 6–8 times in the first year at 7–14 days, one, two, four, 6–7, 9–10, and 12 months, with infants having slightly fewer EMBs.

Statistical analysis

Data are presented as mean $\pm$ standard deviation, median (range), or count (percentage). Group comparisons were made using the Wilcoxon rank-sum test and the Fisher's exact test, as appropriate. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to analyze associations of AMR score with graft dysfunction and C4d+. Data were analyzed using Stata 10.1 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX) and all comparisons used a two-sided alpha of 0.05.

RESULTS

Study cohort

Fifty-one patients met inclusion criteria. Age at transplantation was 6.6 years (15 days – 20.4 years) and reasons for transplant were: cardiomyopathy/myocarditis (59%), congenital heart disease (31%), and re-transplantation (10%). The cohort was 58% male, 68% White, and 16% Black. Median pre-transplant CDC-PRA was 0% (range 0 – 89%) and 10 patients (20%) had a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch (n=2), pre-transplant donor-specific antibody (DSA) 4000 mean fluorescent intensity (MFI) (n=3), or both (n=5). Four other patients (8%) had at least one pre-transplant DSA 1000-3999 MFI with a negative donor-specific CDC crossmatch. Two patients (4%) who did not have pre-transplant Luminex® assessment had pre-transplant CDC PRA of 0% with negative ELISA anti-HLA antibody assessments, and negative donor-specific CDC crossmatches.

All but 2 recipients (96%) are alive as of the time of this report with a median post-transplant follow-up of 2.9 years (range 1.0 – 4.9 years). Two infant recipients died at 27 and 67 days post-transplant having had 1 and 2 EMBs, respectively. One died of complications of adenovirus and the other of severe ACR or recurrent myocarditis. Neither was pre-sensitized, had a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch, or was C4d+ on EMB.

Endomyocardial biopsies

A total of 406 first-year EMB were assessed for C4d. The median number of first-year EMBs per patient was 8 (1 – 15). One first-year EMB amongst the cohort was inadvertently not stained for C4d. It was obtained on post-transplant day 161 in a non-allosensitized male in whom all other first-year EMBs (n=6) were C4d negative.

A total of 26 EMB (6%) were C4d+. Seventeen C4d+ EMBs (65%) occurred in the first post-transplant month (figure 1). The distribution of C4d+ EMBs stratified by ACR grade is shown in figure 2. Most C4d+ EMB (73%) occurred in the absence of ACR (grade 0).

As shown in table 1, all C4d+ EMBs occurred in 6 patients (12%). Five of these patients (83%) had pre-transplant DSA ≥ 4000 MFI with 4 of the 5 also having a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch. All of these patients had ≥ 2 C4d+ EMBs. One patient with neither pre-transplant anti-HLA antibodies by Luminex[®] nor positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch had a single C4d+ EMB. This patient also had elevated filling pressures, borderline low cardiac index, worsening ventricular ectopy, and an AMR score of 4 on his C4d+ EMB. He was treated pulse corticosteroids and plasmapheresis for 5 days and on follow-up assessment 7 days later had resolution of C4d+, normal filling pressures, and improvement in histology (AMR score = 1).

The timing of all first-year EMB in the 6 patients with C4d+ is shown in figure 3. Median time to first C4d+ EMB was 10.5 days (5 – 16 days). All patients with C4d+ immunostaining were positive on their first or second EMB and once their EMB became C4d negative, none had recurrence of C4d+ during the first post-transplant year. There was no significant difference in first-year EMB follow-up duration between patients who were C4d+ compared to C4d negative patients (326 days, range 279 – 362 vs. 305 days, range 9 – 365; $p=0.23$).

Four patients with pre-transplant DSA 1000-3999 MFI had a total of 32 EMBs, all of which were C4d negative. Among the entire cohort, 5 of 10 patients with pre-transplant DSA ≥ 4000 MFI and/or a positive CDC crossmatch had C4d+ on EMB compared with only 1 of 41 of patients without pre-transplant DSA ≥ 4000 MFI and a negative CDC crossmatch (50% vs. 2%; $p=0.001$). The 5 patients with pre-transplant DSA ≥ 4000 MFI and/or a positive CDC crossmatch who had no C4d+ tended to have fewer DSA [median 1 (0-5) vs. 3 (1-7); $p=0.07$] and fewer DSA ≥ 4000 MFI [1 (0-1) vs. 2 (1-6); $p=0.03$] than the 5 patients with DSA ≥ 4000 MFI and/or a positive CDC crossmatch with C4d+.

Figure 4 shows the distributions of 1) C4d+ EMBs and 2) graft dysfunction stratified by AMR score. Though half of all C4d+ EMBs were observed with AMR score ≤ 1 , C4d+ was more common as AMR score increased ($p=0.0001$). Similarly, 70% of all episodes of graft dysfunction occurred with EMBs showing AMR scores ≤ 1 , yet graft dysfunction was increasingly prevalent as AMR score increased ($p=0.0009$). Together these data together show that both C4d+ and graft dysfunction were more commonly present among first-year EMBs showing multiple histologic features of AMR. Finally, C4d+ was observed more often in EMB showing graft dysfunction than not (19% vs. 5%; $p=0.001$).

DISCUSSION

In this single center analysis of all first-year EMBs prospectively immunostained for C4d, we found that paraffin IC C4d+ occurred almost exclusively in patients with a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch or significant pre-transplant DSA. Furthermore, C4d+ occurred early after transplantation and after resolution did not recur during the first post-transplant year. Perhaps the most clinically useful finding was that among 41 children and young adults without pre-transplant DSA ≥ 4000 MFI or a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch, only one had 1 C4d+ EMB during the first post-transplant year and this was in the context of classic histologic features and abnormal hemodynamics.

In our review of the literature, we found no other pediatric-based studies that have examined routine, first-year cardiac allograft C4d immunostaining. Amongst studies of adult recipients, there were widely divergent incidences of C4d+ reported during the first post-transplant year, ranging from 17% - 84% of recipients with ≥ 1 C4d+ EMB [10-12]. The time of earliest C4d+ EMB in these studies (61 days and 179 days) was also later than in our cohort (10.5 days). It is unclear whether differences in the proportions of recipients with pre-

transplant DSA and/or positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch between these studies and ours may explain these variations. However our findings are consistent with the fact that AMR commonly occurs within the first 8–12 weeks after transplantation [13–14].

We also found that C4d+ was associated with graft dysfunction and was more common on EMBs with multiple histologic features of AMR. While these findings confirm the approach to the diagnosis of AMR taken by the 2005 revised ISHLT grading scheme [2], we believe our finding that C4d+ was not specific to AMR (50% of C4d+ EMBs in our sample had AMR scores of ≥ 1) is of greater importance because of the current uncertainty about “asymptomatic AMR” [1] and the definition of “early AMR” [4, 15]. A similar lack of specificity was reported by Rodriguez et al in adult cardiac transplant recipients in whom only 5 of 20 patients with C4d and/or C3d by IF had clinical features of AMR [16]. At present it is unclear whether C4d+ alone, in the absence of other features of AMR (hallmark histologic features, graft dysfunction, circulating donor-specific alloantibodies), is clinically meaningful. Though Kfoury et al have reported that “asymptomatic” AMR portends worse outcomes in adult cardiac transplant recipients; their diagnosis of “asymptomatic” AMR relied upon a combination of histologic features and immunostaining, and not on isolated C4d [17]. In two studies that tested the association of C4d with outcomes, findings were contradictory. While Fedrigo et al reported higher mortality among C4d+ adult heart allograft recipients, Lai et al found C4d+ alone was not associated with outcomes [12, 18]. Also, data from the ABO-incompatible renal transplant literature shows that diffuse C4d+ staining of peritubular capillaries on surveillance biopsies is common, occurring in 70–80% of such grafts as compared to 30–40% of renal allografts transplanted across a positive donor-specific crossmatch, and is not associated with adverse outcomes [19]. Our study did not show that C4d+ was associated with post-transplant survival, however our follow-up time was relatively short and it is possible that with longer follow-up C4d+ could show prognostic significance.

Our findings suggest that a strategy of routine C4d immunostaining of all first-year EMB is not warranted. Rather, an alternative strategy which enables targeted C4d surveillance, particularly early after transplantation, in those recipients at greatest likelihood for C4d+ should be pursued. Possible surveillance strategies might include: 1) routine C4d immunostaining in all children until 90 days post-transplant, with continued assessments in those who are C4d+ at the stopping point; or 2) restriction of routine C4d immunostaining to those with significant pre-transplant DSA (i.e. ≥ 4000 MFI), a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch, and/or clinical or histologic concern for AMR. Both of these strategies would have detected all C4d+ EMBs in our cohort while resulting in fewer surveillance assessments for C4d than the recommendations of the 2011 working formulation [4]. It is important to note that neither of these strategies considers the recipient who is >1 year post transplantation.

It should be noted that our study was a single center analysis; however we reviewed data on over 400 EMBs in 50 recipients and this represents the largest series to date in the pediatric and young adult heart transplant literature. Also our study relied solely on data from the clinical record. This is an important limitation because it means that we did not utilize a systematic, blinded re-review of all EMBs by a single pathologist. Rather, pathology findings were documented by 1 of 5 pediatric pathologists on a rotational basis in the course of clinical care from 2007–2011. Though all pathologists are experienced in the interpretation of pediatric allograft EMBs, with each reporting at least 75 EMBs annually, no checklist is used. Thus a lack of uniformity in the interpretation of EMBs may have existed, which could have influenced our findings. However, because uncertain or concerning findings were reviewed amongst the group of pathologists as they arose, we believe that the potential influence of such variability on our findings is limited.

With the exception of recipient survival, our analysis considered clinical and EMB data in the first post-transplant year only. While this observation period was unavoidable due to our clinical practice of routine C4d immunostaining only during the first post-transplant year, we believe that our analysis is clinically relevant and informative because cardiac AMR is most common early after transplantation. Nonetheless, late post-transplant AMR is also well recognized. The characterization of DSA and EMB findings, including C4d, late after transplantation will thus be important to further our understanding late AMR. Unfortunately we did not have data on post-transplant DSA, including persistent, pre-formed DSA as well as *de novo* alloantibodies and thus we are not able to address this topic. However, ongoing studies in our center now include serial assessments for DSA and C4d after transplantation.

In summary, we found paraffin IC C4d+ occurred almost exclusively in patients with a positive donor-specific CDC crossmatch or pre-transplant DSA >4000 MFI. When present, C4d+ occurred early after transplantation and after resolution did not recur during the first post-transplant year. Though associated with graft dysfunction and hallmark pathologic features of AMR, most C4d+ EMBs occurred in the absence of these circumstances. Taken together, these data suggest that a strategy of routine immunostaining of all first-year EMBs for all children and young adults after heart transplantation is not warranted. Further investigation with a greater number of patients and EMBs is needed to determine whether a strategy suggested by our analysis that consists of surveillance C4d immunostaining only in the first 90 days among patients with pre-transplant DSA, supplemented by selective assessment when there is clinical and/or histological concern for AMR, is appropriate.

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Figure 1.
Cumulative incidence of C4d+ EMBs during the first post-transplant year.

Figure 2.
Distribution of C4d+ EMBs by ACR grade

Figure 3.

Chronology of first-year EMBs among patients with 1 C4d+ EMB. ACR, acute cellular rejection; dysfxn, dysfunction.

Figure 4.
Distribution of C4d+ EMBs and graft dysfunction by AMR score.

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Table 1

Characteristics of patients with 1 C4d+ EMB.

Patient	Sex	Race	Age at Tx (yr)	Diagnosis	Pre-Tx CDC-PRA (%)	Pre-Tx DSA	4000 MFI	CDC-XM	# C4d+ EMB
1	F	non-white	14	CHD	4	yes	yes	positive	2/10
2	M	white	2	CHD	89	yes	yes	positive	5/9
3	M	white	13	CHD	0	no	no	negative	1/11
4	F	white	14	ReTx	0	yes	yes	positive	9/9
5	M	white	6	CHD	29	yes	yes	positive	5/9
6	M	white	16	CHD	75	yes	yes	negative	4/12

CDC, complement dependent cytotoxicity; CHD, congenital heart disease; DSA, donor-specific antibody; MFI, mean fluorescent intensity; Tx, transplant; ReTx, re-transplant; XM, crossmatch; yr, years.