Characteristic Features of a Case of Recurrent Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome

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A 56-year old schizophrenic patient developed three episodes of Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome (NMS) after age of 50. Patient was under treatment with risperidone and clozapine during the first two episodes respectively. But no antipsychotic was ever used during the 45-month period between 2nd and 3rd lethal episodes of NMS, and the patient was only treated with ECT, and promethazine as needed base. Patient used to show sub syndromal catatonia throughout this period. This might reflect a "trait vulnerability" to NMS which for full expression of the disorder need some sort of "state variable" such as a drug.

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Introduction

Neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS) is an uncommon complication of antipsychotic drugs with a mortality rate of about 10%-20%. It usually presents as the combination of core symptoms of hyperthermia and severe muscular rigidity, as well as some other symptoms such as diaphoresis, tachycardia, elevated or labile blood pressure, dysphagia, incontinence, tremor, delirium, lethargy, stupor, coma, mutism, leukocytosis, liver transaminase and Creatine kinase (CK) elevation. According to the recent reports with some second generation antipsychotics, rigidity and hyperthermia may not always be present. Temperature elevation can be mild to severe. The initial progression of the syndrome may be insidious or it may have a rapid onset (1-3).

Case Report

A 56 year old schizophrenic man who
Characteristics of Recurrent NMS

First episode of NMS emerged 36 years after developing schizophrenia at age 14 and the second and third episodes at ages 52 and 56 respectively. Patient was under treatment with risperidone and clozapine while he developed the first and second episodes. But during the 45-month period between second and third episodes no antipsychotic was ever used. Mood stabilizers (including lithium) were discontinued months before the third episode and patient was only treated with ECT, benzodiazepines, and promethazine as PRN. Reports about the relationship between promethazine, lithium, prior treatment with ECT and NMS do exist (2,3).

An important feature of the presented case was catatonia—an uncommon clinical syndrome mostly seen in psychotic and mood disorders. It can also occur as idiopathic catatonia or in the context of some medical conditions, as well as by many drugs like antipsychotics. This syndrome can be seen in extreme forms of neuroleptic-induced parkinsonism and NMS (2,4).

The typical presentations of NMS and malignant catatonia cannot be differentiated either clinically or by laboratory tests, suggesting that NMS is a specific type of catatonia (4,5). Malignant catatonia tends to have a prodrome of excitement and agitation prior to the onset of rigidity, while NMS tends to begin with rigidity (2).

Benzodiazepines and ECT have been successful in the treatment of both catatonia and NMS (4). On the other hand, ECT has been associated with catatonia (6). A non-depolarizing muscle relaxant has been associated with NMS after repeated general anesthesia (7), and halogenated inhalational anesthetics, such as halothane, and depolarizing muscle relaxants, such as succinylcholine, may be responsible for Malignant hyperthermia (MH) which can be very similar to NMS (2,4).

There was no evidence for other causes of NMS, such as serotonin syndrome, heat stroke, central nervous system infections, status epilepticus, stroke, brain trauma, neoplasms, acute intermittent porphyria, tetanus, and environmental and psychological factors such as...
as hot and humid conditions, agitation, dehydration, and exhaustion (2) in this case.

Catatonic features throughout the 45-month period between second and third episode of NMS might reflect a "trait vulnerability" to NMS which for full expression of the disorder need some sort of "state variable" such as a drug (8). A genetic vulnerability has been described in recurrent NMS (2,8). Over representation of the A1 allele of the dopamine D2 receptors gene may contribute to this phenomenon. Familial clusters of NMS support this hypothesis (1). Sub syndromes of catatonia that do not meet the DSM or ICD criteria, and genetic and familial form of catatonia also has been described (4,9). Posturing that developed only after second episode exemplifies similarities between pathophysiologic mechanisms of NMS and catatonia (8).

The transition of baseline symptoms to a full-blown NMS occurred smoothly and during first days of exacerbation of symptoms CBC and CK level was unremarkable. Other reporters also mentioned this phenomenon (10).

References