"Characterisation of severe obliterative bronchiolitis in rheumatoid arthritis"

Devouassoux, G. ; Cottin, V. ; Liote, H. ; Marchand, Eric ; Frachon, I. ; Schuller, A. ; Bejui-Thivolet, F. ; Cordier, J-F.

ABSTRACT

The characteristics of patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) who develop obliterative bronchiolitis characterised by severe airflow obstruction have been hitherto poorly investigated. A retrospective study of 25 patients with RA and functional evidence of obliterative bronchiolitis (forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1)/forced vital capacity (FVC) <50% and/or residual volume (RV)/total lung capacity (TLC) > 140% predicted) was conducted. Patients (mean +/- SD age 64 +/- 11 yrs) included 17 never-smokers and eight ex-smokers (10.5 +/- 5.4 pack-yrs). The diagnosis of RA preceded respiratory symptoms in 88% of cases. Dyspnoea on exertion was present in all patients and bronchorrhea in 44%. High-resolution computed tomography findings included: bronchial wall thickening (96%), bronchiectasis (40%), mosaic pattern (40%), centrilobular emphysema (56%), and reticular and/or ground-glass opacities (32%). Pulmonary function tests showed: FEV1 41 +/- 12% pred, FEV1/FVC 49 +/- 14%, FVC 70 +/- 20% pred, RV 148 +/- 68% pred and RV/TLC 142 +/- 34% pred. Lung biopsy, available in nine patients, demonstrated constrictive, follicular and mixed bronchiolitis. Patients were followed for 48.2 +/- 49 months. Treatment was poorly effective. Chronic respiratory failure occurred in 40% of patients, and four patients died. Obliterative bronchiolitis associated with rheumatoid arthritis is a severe and under-recognised condition leading to respiratory failure and death in a high proportion of patients.

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Obliterative bronchiolitis associated with rheumatoid arthritis is a severe and under-recognised condition leading to respiratory failure and death in a high proportion of patients.

KEYWORDS: Airflow obstruction, bronchiectasis, emphysema, obliterative bronchiolitis, rheumatoid arthritis, small airways disease

Pulmonary manifestations may account for 10–20% of all rheumatoid arthritis (RA)-related deaths, ranking second after cardiovascular disease [1]. These include opportunistic pulmonary infections, drug-induced lung disease, and pulmonary manifestations directly associated with RA, which may affect all anatomic compartments of the lung, with the exception of pulmonary hypertension, which is distinctly rare in RA [2]. Pleural disease (with or without effusion), interstitial lung disease (most commonly with a histopathological pattern of usual interstitial pneumonia) and rheumatoid (necrobiotic) lung nodules are the most frequent manifestations, with a prevalence varying according to the investigation employed.

Airway complications include cricoarytenoid arthritis, bronchiectasis (often not clinically significant) and small airways disease, which may cause airflow obstruction; these were first reported in 1977 in six patients, five of whom had RA [3]. In the present manuscript, the following terminology is used: “bronchiolitis obliterans” (historically used for the histopathological lesions) to name the pathological feature of reduced lumen of the bronchioles, and “obliterative bronchiolitis” (OB) to name its functional counterpart with airflow obstruction. The estimated prevalence of bronchial disease in RA varies widely (from 8% to 65%) between studies [4–8] depending on the criteria used. It may correspond pathologically to either fibrosing (constrictive bronchiolitis obliterans) or cellular bronchiolitis (folllicular bronchiolitis or, less commonly, diffuse panbronchiolitis) [2, 4, 5].

Although some of the characteristics of bronchiolar disease have been reported in systematic studies of consecutive patients with RA undergoing pulmonary function tests and/or high-resolution computed tomography (HRCT) of the chest, regardless of pulmonary symptoms [6–8], the small subgroup of RA patients with severe airflow obstruction remains poorly investigated.
The current study provides a detailed analysis of a homogenous group of 25 patients with functional evidence of OB (as defined by severe airflow obstruction without clinically relevant tobacco smoking, and with or without pathological diagnosis). Herein it is shown that the clinical radiological presentation of RA-associated severe OB may be nonspecific and resemble chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) with emphysema, with inconsistent direct signs of bronchiolitis at HRCT. Furthermore, it is shown that some features of interstitial lung disease may be present in addition to the airways disease in as many as one third of the cases.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Case recruitment

The present retrospective study was conducted by the Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherche sur les Maladies ‘‘Orphelines’’ Pulmonaires (GERM’O’P), a collaborative group of >200 physicians dedicated to the study of rare (so-called orphan) pulmonary diseases. Members keep in regular contact through newsletters and an annual meeting, and constitute a motivated group with experience in orphan and systemic diseases. A letter was sent to participating physicians, asking them to report cases of airways disease with severe airflow obstruction associated with RA according to the following inclusion criteria encountered between January 1987 and February 2007. Reports to the GERM’O’P registry were nominative for patients who gave their written consent, or were otherwise anonymous. The clinical data were collected through a detailed questionnaire sent to each participating physician who had reported cases. Queries were sent for missing data.

Inclusion criteria

Patients were included in the study if they fulfilled the following two criteria: 1) RA diagnosed according to the American Rheumatism Association (score >4) [9]; and 2) presence of small airways disease demonstrated by severe airflow obstruction (OB) as defined by forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1)/forced vital capacity (FVC) <50% and/or severe air trapping with residual volume (RV)/total lung capacity (TLC) >140% predicted value. In addition, patients might have evidence of bronchiolitis on lung biopsy specimen.

In order to select cases in which small airways disease was confidently attributable to RA, only patients with a history of cumulative tobacco smoking of <20 pack-yrs were included. Only cases for which pulmonary function data and chest imaging were available for review were included. Bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) and echocardiography were performed as part of the patients’ evaluation according to the judgement of the physician.

Clinical analysis

Medical records were reviewed for clinical manifestations, including respiratory and extra-respiratory symptoms with a special focus on respiratory symptoms, subcutaneous rheumatoid nodules, Raynaud phenomenon, Sjögren syndrome, pulmonary function tests and laboratory tests. Chest radiographs and HRCT scans of the chest were reviewed by participating physicians, and assessed for presence of hyperinflation, reticulation (irregular linear opacities), areas of ground-glass opacification, consolidation, nodules, bronchiectasis, bronchiolectasis, expiratory air trapping (lobular areas with decreased attenuation and mosaic pattern) and bronchial wall thickening. Reports of histopathological analysis of open lung biopsy were collected. The authors also reviewed drug therapies received by the patients and their potential impact on respiratory symptoms and lung function, including anti-rheumatoid regimens, and outcome.

Pulmonary function tests

Pulmonary function tests were performed with standard protocols and following European Respiratory Society guidelines. Values were expressed as per cent of predicted, except for FEV1/FVC, which was expressed as absolute per cent. FEV1 and FEV1/FVC were assessed before bronchodilators, then 10–15 min after the administration of short-acting inhaled β₂-agonist. Airflow obstruction was defined by a post-bronchodilator FEV1/FVC ratio <70% pred with FEV1 <80% pred, and severe airflow obstruction by post-bronchodilator FEV1/FVC ratio <50% and/or RV/TLC >140% pred.

Data analysis

Data were reported as mean ± SD, and were expressed as absolute values or as per cent of predicted values, as appropriate. Categorical variables were compared by the Chi-squared test and continuous variables by the paired t-test. A p-value of <0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS

Patients characteristics

A total of 25 patients (18 females, seven males) were included in the study, with a mean ± SD age of 64 ± 11 yrs (range 37–81 yrs). In total, 17 (68%) patients were never-smokers; eight were ex-smokers (10.5 ± 5.4 pack-yrs, with age of 62 ± 8 yrs), but none had been diagnosed with COPD before the diagnosis of RA-associated airways disease. Respiratory occupational exposure was present in a single patient who had worked in a gasolene service station with some exposure to petrol extracts. None of the patients had a history of atopy, asthma, severe respiratory infection during childhood, or other significant chronic disease other than RA, which may have affected pulmonary lung function (except for one patient with Crohn’s colitis).

According to inclusion criteria, all patients had both RA and evidence of severe fixed airflow obstruction (18 patients with FEV1/FVC <50%, two patients with RV/TLC >140% pred and five patients with both criteria), including nine patients with further pathological evidence of bronchiolitis on lung biopsy.

Clinical presentation

The mean interval between the diagnosis of RA and the onset of respiratory symptoms was 7.8 ± 8.2 yrs (range 1–35 yrs); the mean interval between the diagnosis of RA and the diagnosis of bronchiolitis was 9.5 ± 10 yrs (range 1–45 yrs); and the mean interval between respiratory symptoms and diagnosis of bronchiolitis was 19 ± 32 months (range 1–73 months). Respiratory manifestations developed after the diagnosis of RA in 22 cases, were concomitant in one case, and preceded the rheumatoid disease in only two cases (by 8 and 20 months). The major respiratory symptom was chronic dyspnoea on exertion, present in all patients, with six, 10 and nine cases classified as New York Heart Association II, III and IV,
respectively. A total of 16 (64%) patients complained of cough, and bronchorrhea was present in 11 (44%). Chest pain was reported in three patients. Crackles, wheezes and squawks were found in 13, 13 and six patients, respectively. Chest hyperinflation was present clinically in 11 patients. Finger clubbing was not reported.

The mean body mass index was 22.5 ± 4 kg m⁻². The most frequent extra-respiratory symptoms were asthenia (17 cases), fever (six cases), and weight loss (12 cases). At the time of the onset of OB, RA was symptomatic in eight of 25 patients, who complained of morning joint stiffness, soft tissue swelling and symmetrical peripheral joint pain. Subcutaneous rheumatoid nodules, Raynaud phenomenon, and Sjögren syndrome were present in three patients, with Hashimoto thyroiditis, Crohn’s colitis and vitiligo. Additional systemic involvement by RA was diagnosed in five patients, affecting the heart (two cases), muscle (one case), and skin (two cases). No patient had RA-associated vasculitis.

**Pulmonary function tests**

The pulmonary function parameters are listed in table 1. According to inclusion criteria, all patients had both RA and evidence of severe fixed airflow obstruction (18 patients with FEV₁/FVC <50%, two patients with RV/TLC >140% pred, and five patients with both criteria). Transfer factor for carbon monoxide (DLCO) was 78 ± 16%, and transfer coefficient of the lung (Kco) was 104 ± 24% pred.

Mean arterial oxygen tension (PaO₂) on room air was 8.8 ± 1.7 kPa, with PaO₂ <7.5 kPa in 34% of patients, without significant change depending upon position or exercise (table 1). The mean 6-min walk distance was 335 ± 145 m, with a mean decrease of pulse oxygen saturation of 9% (from 94 ± 2.6% initially to 85 ± 6.2% at the end of the test).

**Chest imaging**

The most common findings on chest radiographs were pulmonary hyperinflation (64%), diffuse lung infiltrates (44%) and bronchiectasis (40%). Diffuse alveolar opacities and nodular shadows were reported less frequently (32% and 16% of cases, respectively).

Bronchial wall thickening, centrilobular emphysema (fig. 1), lobular areas of decreased attenuation with mosaic pattern indicative of air trapping, and bronchiectasis (fig. 2) were the most frequent HRCT findings, present in 96%, 56%, 42% and 40%, respectively (table 2). Areas of ground-glass attenuation were found in 44% of cases, and reticular opacities with mild honeycombing in the lower lobes were present in 16% of cases. An association of diffuse emphysema and interstitial opacities of the lower lobes (including ground-glass attenuation) was present in 32% of cases; infiltrative opacities were bilateral and diffuse, without central or peripheral predominance. Pleural effusion was observed in four patients, and rheumatoid lung nodules in nine patients.

**Biology and BAL**

BAL performed in 12 patients showed increased leukocyte count in 10 patients, with a predominant increase of neutrophils at differential cell count (neutrophils 29 ± 35%, lymphocytes 13 ± 12%, without eosinophils). Infectious pathogens were identified by BAL during the course of disease in nine patients (Pseudomonas aeruginosa in three; Aspergillus fumigatus in two; Streptococcus pneumoniae in two; Haemophilus influenzae in one; and Staphylococcus aureus in one), with presence of bronchiectasis at HRCT in eight out of nine cases.

Erythrocyte sediment rate was increased in all patients (46 ± 28 mm at 1 h), and serum C-reactive protein was elevated (29 ± 30 mg L⁻¹). Rheumatoid factor and anti-nuclear antibodies (without specificity for soluble nuclear antigens or native DNA) were present in 24 (96%) and 12 (48%) patients, respectively.

**Lung pathology**

Lung pathology of video-assisted thoracoscopic or open lung biopsy or explanted lung was available in eight and one case, respectively, and analysed by an experienced lung pathologist (FTB). A histopathological pattern of bronchiolitis was found.
in all cases, occasionally associated with accessory lesions consistent with usual interstitial pneumonia or diffuse alveolar damage (one case each). Bronchiolar changes consisted in chronic constrictive bronchiolitis (six cases), follicular bronchiolitis (one case), and mixed constrictive/follicular bronchiolitis (two cases; fig. 3). Constrictive bronchiolitis was characterised by the presence of concentric fibrosis of the bronchial wall, with severe narrowing of the bronchiolar lumen and/or bronchiolectasis. Inflammatory infiltrates (predominantly lymphocytic) were present within the wall of bronchioles in four cases. Centrilobular emphysema adjacent to bronchiolar changes was further present in five cases.

Echocardiography
Echocardiography performed in 16 patients showed normal left ventricular function in all patients. The estimated systolic pulmonary artery pressure was >35 mmHg in six patients, with a mean of 52.6 ± 13.3 mmHg, and was normal in the remaining patients. No patient had clinical evidence of right heart failure at diagnosis.

Treatment and outcome
All patients were receiving treatment for RA at the onset of the airways disease; of these, 24 (96%) were receiving oral corticosteroids, and 22 were taking nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Of the study patients, 52% had received methotrexate for a mean duration of 46 months, 40% had received intramuscular gold salts (mean duration 20 months), 48% had received D-penicillamine (mean duration 25 months), 20% had received hydroxychloroquine (mean duration 62 months), 20% had received leflunomide (mean duration 19 months), 12% had received salazopyrine (mean duration 33 months), 12% had received anti-tumour necrosis factor (anti-TNF)-α regimens (mean duration 21 months) and 4% had received tiopronine. In order to evaluate the possible influence of treatment of RA on the development or severity of OB, the main HRCT findings, pulmonary function tests and pathology findings were compared according to treatment and tobacco history (table 3). FEV1 was lower in patients who had ever received D-penicillamine as compared with those who had not been treated with this drug (800 ± 320 mL versus 1,240 ± 320 mL; p < 0.01). There was also a trend toward lower FEV1 in patients who had been treated with methotrexate or gold salts. Ex-smokers had lower RV/TLC than never-smokers (119 ± 27% versus 151 ± 23%, p < 0.05), with a trend toward higher FEV1 in smokers. RA treatment and smoking history had no effect on HRCT and pathology findings.

Treatment of the respiratory disease included oral corticosteroids in 24 (96%) patients, associated with immunosuppressive treatment in 24 cases (methotrexate in nine patients; leflunomide in four; hydroxychloroquine in four; anti-TNF-α in three; azathioprine in one; and cyclophosphamide in three).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>High-resolution computed tomography findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bronchial wall thickening</td>
<td>24 (96)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bronchiectasis</td>
<td>10 (40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lobular areas of decreased attenuation (mosaic pattern)</td>
<td>13 (42)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centrilobular emphysema</td>
<td>14 (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular linear opacities, reticulation</td>
<td>8 (32)</td>
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<td>Ground-glass opacification</td>
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<td>Areas of alveolar consolidation</td>
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<td>Rheumatoid nodule(s)</td>
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</table>

Data are presented as n (%). *: bilateral in one case; #: multiple in six cases, excavated in one.
Penicillamine was stopped after the emergence of airflow obstruction in two patients. Improvement of pulmonary symptoms was obtained in only four patients, three of whom received corticosteroids and two received anti-TNF-α regimens. Pulmonary function tests improved in one patient treated with etanercept [10], with stabilisation in another patient. However, imaging and pulmonary function parameters were not significantly modified by treatment in the remaining patients.

Patients were followed for 48.2 ± 49 months. Symptoms worsened in 52% of patients, and were unchanged in 32% of patients. Bronchial and/or pulmonary infections occurred in 60% of patients and pneumothorax in 12%. Acute respiratory failure occurred in 48% of patients. Right cardiac failure developed in 16% of patients during follow-up, all of them with pulmonary hypertension at echocardiography. Chronic respiratory failure requiring oxygen supplementation occurred in 40% of patients. One patient underwent single lung transplantation. Four patients died of respiratory failure.

DISCUSSION

The present study showed that OB associated with RA is a severe condition, with imaging and functional features resembling those of COPD, with the exception of less impaired DLCO. Typical imaging features of bronchiolitis were inconsistent at HRCT, and interstitial lung disease was occasionally associated. Respiratory failure was common.

Among the connective tissue diseases, OB has been reported mostly in RA [11], although it may also be encountered in Sjögren disease [12] and, only exceptionally, in systemic sclerosis [13]. The association of OB and RA was initially described by Geddes et al. [3] in six patients (five of whom had RA) with rapid progressive dyspnoea and airflow obstruction, with bronchiolitis obliterans demonstrated at necropsy in four cases. Most cases occur <5 yrs after the diagnosis of RA, but OB may be a presenting manifestation of RA in 10–20% of patients [2], as in two of the current patient series.

Since the original description, several studies reported that mild to moderate airways involvement is frequent in patients with RA regardless of pulmonary symptoms [8, 14, 15]. Hence, airways obstruction (reduced FEV1/FVC) was present in 13.6% of consecutive nonsmoking patients undergoing systematic evaluation in one study [16], and some HRCT abnormalities suggestive of airways disease were present in 34% of patients in another study [8]. The disease course is usually uneventful in poorly symptomatic patients with only mild airflow obstruction and/or isolated bronchiectasis detected by systematic evaluation [17], a condition distinct from that of symptomatic patients with severe OB (as in the present study).

The patients reported in the present study, which is the largest series of patients with RA-related severe OB, presented with an abrupt or progressive onset of dyspnoea and dry cough, often with squeaks and crackles at auscultation, as previously reported [3]. However, the mean ± sd delay between respiratory symptoms and diagnosis was 19 ± 32 months, further delaying onset of treatment. The diagnosis may be especially delayed in patients with progressive onset of symptoms, and in those with OB presenting concomitantly or before the diagnosis of RA. Pulmonary function testing revealed airflow obstruction, which seemed to progress more rapidly than in COPD, as previously described [3, 15, 18], with mild to moderate hypoxaemia. In addition to airflow obstruction (with decreased FEV1/FVC), hyperinflation demonstrated by increased RV and RV/TLC was common. In order to improve early detection of disease, the current authors suggest sequential pulmonary function tests (including measurement of RV and RV/TLC) be performed in any RA patient with progressive dyspnoea on exertion. In addition, lung biopsy should be considered more frequently in this condition, except when contraindicated by the severity of disease or comorbidities, as it might provide access to definitive diagnosis and...
BRONCHIOLITIS AND RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

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TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bronchial wall thickening</th>
<th>H. L.</th>
<th>Methotrexate</th>
<th>Gold salts</th>
<th>D-Penicillamine</th>
<th>Smokers on ARD</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Alveolar consolidation %</td>
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<td>151+23*</td>
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<td>2</td>
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Data are expressed as mean±SD, unless otherwise stated. HRCT, lung function and pathological characteristics are expressed in ex-smokers (compared with never-smokers), or in patients ever treated with methotrexate, gold salts or D-penicillamine, and in ex-smokers who had received anti-rheumatoid drugs (ARDs; as compared with the other patients). FEV1: forced expiratory volume in one second; RV: residual volume; TLC: total lung capacity. *: p<0.05; **: p<0.01.

early therapy. However, the current authors consider that the diagnosis of OB may be obtained without a lung biopsy in a patient with RA and progressive severe airflow obstruction in the absence of significant tobacco smoking and no other cause of airflow obstruction. Treatment with bronchodilators and oral corticosteroids was ineffective in most (84%) of the patients, as previously described [3]. Some improvement was obtained in two patients who received off-label anti-TNF-α regimen for OB (one of these has been previously reported [10]). Lung function further deteriorated in half of the patients, despite therapy, with chronic respiratory failure in 40%, and death in 16%. The use of high-dose corticosteroids, cyclophosphamide, and of erythromycin, has been suggested [6, 19, 20], but has been poorly evaluated. It is not known whether early diagnosis and treatment with inhaled or high-dose oral corticosteroids, or cyclophosphamide, will decrease progression of OB. Although not formally compared, overall survival seemed lower than that of COPD patients with similar airflow obstruction, and was almost similar to that in post-transplant bronchiolitis obliterans syndrome [21, 22]. No treatment recommendation can be provided from published data and the present study. However, it is current experience-based practice, in patients with documented and progressive severe RA-associated OB (and especially those with cellular bronchiolitis at biopsy), to propose combination therapy with bronchodilators, inhaled and oral corticosteroids; macrolides, pulse intravenous cyclophosphamide, or etanercept (with methotrexate) may be considered as second-line therapy.

Consistent with previous studies [3, 11, 15], 13 out of 25 patients had received previous therapy with D-penicillamine or tiopronine, and 10 out of 25 had received gold salts, raising the concern of drug-induced bronchial disease. In addition, FEV1 was significantly lower in patients who had ever been treated with D-penicillamine compared with those who had not, with a similar trend of more severe impairment of lung function in patients ever treated with methotrexate or gold salts. A majority of patients with RA and OB are females [20], contrasting with the increased prevalence of interstitial lung disease associated with RA in males [11]. Whether associated Sjögren disease affects the development of OB is controversial [8, 16, 23]. In addition, one study reported a higher frequency of OB in patients with human leukocyte antigen-B40 and -DR4 [24]. The risk of OB was not related to the severity of rheumatic disease, as RA was controlled by treatment in two thirds of the present patients.

Only eight out of 25 patients in the current series were ex-smokers, with a mean smoking history of only 10 pack-yrs. It is, therefore, the conviction of the present authors that progressive and severe airflow obstruction could be explained in them neither by tobacco smoking, nor by any known cause other than RA [11]. In fact, pulmonary function was less severely impaired in ex-smokers than in never-smokers. Most patients had isolated, unexplained, and progressive obstructive lung disease, somewhat similar to COPD (although usually with more rapid functional worsening and less impaired DL.CO). Hence, the Global Initiative for Obstructive Lung Disease functional definition of moderate, severe, and very severe COPD [25] was fulfilled in 20%, 56% and 24% of the 25 patients, respectively. Interestingly, cigarette smoking is associated with an increased risk of developing RA [26] and
with RA activity, an association probably due to post-
translational protein modifications induced by tobacco-derived
products [27]. The relationship between tobacco smoking and
the development of lung disease in RA is unclear [2]. Although
severe OB may develop without tobacco smoking in patients
with RA, it is conceivable that smoking might have contributed
to pre-existing small airways disease in ex-smokers, and all RA
patients should be discouraged from smoking. Lymphocytic
activation within bronchus-associated lymphoid tissue (where
the immunopathology of RA mostly takes place within the
lung) also probably contributes to bronchiolar disease in RA
[28], with involvement of both B-lymphocytes and CD4+ T-
lymphocytes [28, 29]. Whether the onset or outcome of OB can
be affected by the presence and treatment of gastro-oesophag-
eal reflux in patients with RA is unknown and would require
specific investigation.

HRCT features consisted mostly of indirect signs of bronchio-
ritis, with a mosaic pattern reflecting air trapping in 44% of
cases, compared with 20–32% in studies conducted in RA
patients regardless of symptoms [7, 8]. The frequency of
mosaic pattern was probably underestimated, however, since
expiratory images were not systematically obtained. Part of the
imaging was performed using single-detector row scanners.
Direct signs of bronchiolitis (centrilobular micronodules and
tree-in-bud opacities) and thin-walled cysts were also reported
in previous imaging studies of consecutive patients with RA,
with centrilobular opacities reported in 6% [8], 28% [7], and
71% [30] of patients.

One unexpected finding of the present study was the high
frequency of diffuse emphysema lesions on HRCT (56% of
patients, five of whom were smokers) and on histopathology
(five out of nine cases with biopsy, including three smokers), a
prevalence higher than in previous studies (i.e. 4–39% [7, 8, 31,
32]), which may be partly due to the inclusion criteria, which
included air trapping. Centrilobular emphysema was not
influenced by a history of moderate tobacco smoking in 32%
of patients; it may conceivably develop as a late result of
chronic bronchiolitis, as in smokers [33], and/or be related to
air trapping. Interstitial lung disease was also present in more
than half of the patients with OB, consistent with previous
reports [5, 28]; interstitial lung disease was mild in most
patients but evolved to severe pulmonary fibrosis and death in
one patient. In about one third of patients, both emphysema
and infiltrative opacities were present, and was somewhat
reminiscent of the syndrome of combined pulmonary fibrosis
and emphysema identified in smokers [34, 35]. Taken together,
the findings suggest that severe OB occurring in RA present
significant similarity with COPD, especially with emphysema
on chest imaging, and subtle changes suggestive of bronchiolar
disease may be overlooked.

Bronchiectasis is present in 8–30% of patients with RA [7, 16, 31,
36] and has been associated with a higher risk of airflow
obstruction, pulmonary infections and death [37]. Bronchiec-
tasis, bronchial wall thickening, cough and bronchorrhea in the
patients from the present study with OB suggest comprehensive
airways disease, involving both bronchioles and bronchi of all
size. Therefore, airway disease with OB occurring in RA
compares to that complicating bone marrow transplantation
[21, 38] and lung transplantation [21].

Pathological analysis of the lung biopsy available in nine out of
25 cases (a proportion possibly greater than that in current
clinical practice) demonstrated bronchiolitis in all cases,
predominantly with constrictive fibrotic bronchiolitis obliter-
ans and peribronchiolar fibrosis (so-called bronchiolocentric
fibrosis [39]), and occasionally follicular or mixed constrictive/
follicular bronchiolitis, in a similar manner to previous studies
[5, 6]. Both pathological patterns often coexist in patients with
RA [6]. Although constrictive and follicular bronchiolitis share
common clinical, functional and imaging characteristics, follicular bronchiolitis might theoretically respond better to
therapy.

The limitations of the present study are its retrospective and
multicentric nature; the management of patients was not
uniform, limiting interpretation of effect of therapy. Expiratory
chest HRCT was not performed in all patients. Referral bias
probably occurred, with the most severe cases being referred to
participating tertiary centres. Although inclusion bias may
have occurred, as in any retrospective study, the current
authors consider that it was limited by including patients in
whom lung biopsy was not performed (with potentially more
severe disease), therefore the series reflects current clinical
practice. The design of the study did not allow an evaluation of
the epidemiology of disease (and especially its actual pre-
valence) and evaluation of the spectrum of severity of disease
(and especially patients with mild or moderate disease were
not included), but rather focused specifically on describing the
subpopulation of patients with severe OB, in order to improve
the knowledge regarding the manifestations, chest imaging,
outcome and, possibly, therapy of this orphan condition, and
to further justify and promote an earlier detection. While only
severe cases were included, it cannot be ruled out that
inclusion may be skewed toward cases with less progressive
disease and better outcome (with ensuing longer follow-up
facilitating recollection by the physician). As patients included
were diagnosed over a period of 20 yrs, image acquisition was
not standardised. The limited number of patients did not allow
multivariate statistical analysis.

In conclusion, the current authors describe a homogenous
cohort of 25 patients with severe obliterative bronchiolitis
attributable to rheumatoid arthritis, characterised by severe
dyspnoea, lung hyperinflation, bronchial wall thickening,
chronic bronchiectasis, and centrilobular emphysema on chest
imaging. Disease presentation was somewhat similar to that of
chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in tobacco smokers.
Severity of disease was variable. Response to oral corticoster-
oids was poor, frequently leading to chronic respiratory failure
and possible death.

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