

Diagnosis of Candida Pneumonia in Young Children

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Abstract: Fungal infections are common in pediatric intensive care units (PICUs), but the monitoring methods are limited. This study analyzed the differences in clinical features, diagnosis, and treatment between PICU patients with and without fungal infection.

Methods: This retrospective study analyzed PICU patients at the Child Health Hospital of Bukhara diagnosed with severe pneumonia between January 2019 and January 2023. The patients were divided into the fungal (F) and non-fungal (NF) infection groups. Levels of 1,3-beta-D-glucan (BDG) and galactomannan (GM) in serum and bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BALF) were analyzed. Chest computed tomography (CT) images were reviewed.

Results: A total of 157 patients were included. In the F group, fever, moist rales, coarse rales, shortness of breath, and sepsis were more common (all $P < 0.05$); PICU time, hospitalization duration, and BDG- and GM-positive rates in serum and BALF were all significantly higher than in the NF group (all $P < 0.05$). The BDG- and GM-positive rates in serum and BALF were higher in the F than in the NF group (all $P < 0.05$). The abnormal lymphocyte ratios in serum were higher in the F group (all $P < 0.05$). Wedge-shaped, patchy, streaky shadows and subpleural reticulation were higher in CT images of the F group (all $P < 0.05$). Tracheobronchial stenosis was more common in pulmonary fibroscopy results of the F group ($P = 0.04$).

Conclusion: PICU pneumonia patients with fungal infection have specific clinical and laboratory features compared with those without fungal infection, including higher rates of BALF, serum BDG, GM positivity and tracheobronchial stenosis.

Introduction

Fungal infections are common in pediatric intensive care units (PICUs) and neonatal intensive care units (NICUs). Invasive fungal disease is among the main causes of morbidity and mortality of hospitalized pediatric patients, especially premature infants [1–4]. Yeast and mold are the most common clinical fungal pathogens. According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fungal infection is the sixth largest cause of nosocomial infections, and *Candida* spp. is the fourth-most common pathogen responsible for hospital-acquired infections [5]. In the NICU, fungal infection is the third most common cause of mortality, with a rate as high as 20–40% [6]. In 2000, nosocomial fungal infections increased significantly compared with 2001–2004 (24.4 vs. 13.9%) [7]. Candidemia ranked fourth in the United States and seventh in Europe among blood infections responsible for the high mortality rate among children [8].

With improvements in diagnostic technologies and treatment methods, the incidence of fungal infections has shown a downward trend in recent years, but its mortality remains high [1, 4]. Unfortunately, the methods available to monitor fungal infections are limited and definitive diagnosis in many cases is still difficult. Despite their low sensitivity and long delays before

providing results, the fungal culture of blood, body fluids, and respiratory secretions is still considered the gold standard.

Novel methods have shown promise, including serum marker tests such as the G test and galactomannan (GM) test, polymerase chain reaction (PCR), matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization-time of flight, high-throughput pathogen sequencing, and other molecular approaches [9–12]. Because the diagnostic accuracy of culture and imaging is low for patients with fungal infections [12, 43], they are often misdiagnosed as tumors, tuberculosis, or inflammatory lesions [14–36], resulting in delayed treatment. Bronchoscopic manifestations and testing of the bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BALF) in children with pulmonary fungal infections could have a high diagnostic accuracy [17, 18].

Accurate identification and timely diagnosis of fungal infections are crucial to the early control of the disease, as well as reducing medical costs and the economic burden on society and families. Therefore, this paper summarizes the clinical diagnosis and treatment of patients in the PICU of the Child Health Hospital from January 1, 2019 to January 1, 2023 and analyzes the general clinical manifestations, chest computed tomography (CT), laboratory examination, fiberoptic bronchoscopy examination, and BALF. The results could provide a reference for medical practitioners.

Patients and Methods

This retrospective study examined the data of 157 patients with proven or probable pulmonary fungal infection admitted to the PICU of the Child Health Hospital, between January 1, 2019, to January 1, 2023. All data were prospectively collected in a database. The study was approved by Child Health Hospital of Bukhara. Informed consent was waived due to the retrospective nature of the study.

According to the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer/Mycoses Study Group, fungal diagnostic criteria include clinically diagnosed and suspected patients [12, 19]. Therefore, the inclusion criteria were (1) patients younger than 18 years and (2) patients who met the diagnostic criteria of severe pneumonia in community-acquired pneumonia [20]. Patients with incomplete data, a hospital stay of < 3 days and serum and BALF were not simultaneously tested for 1,3-beta-D-glucan (BDG), and GM were excluded.

Data Collection and Grouping

Demographic data and clinical characteristics such as clinical manifestation and acute physiology and chronic health evaluation (APACHE) score were obtained from medical records. Routine blood biochemical tests, chest CT, and serum 1,3-beta-D-glucan (BDG) and GM tests were performed on days 1 and 2 of PICU admission. For suspected patients and those with unfavorable outcomes after routine anti-infection treatment, fiberoptic bronchoscopy and alveolar lavage were performed from days 3 to 7; BALF was tested using BDG and GM tests. Chest CT was performed for all patients after 10–14 days of antifungal infection treatment. All test results and clinical data were recorded and retrospectively analyzed. Patients were divided into fungal (F) and non-fungal (NF) groups, depending on the presence or absence of fungal infection. The diagnostic criteria for fungal infection were the child had a history of cough, wheezing, and fever, pulmonary rales and sounds, no obvious improvement with antibiotic treatment, pulmonary CT showed signs of fungal infection, fungi were cultivated in blood or BALF, the G and GM tests were positive in blood or BALF, and the condition was significantly improved with antifungal treatment [21–23].

The GM test was performed to detect GM levels in serum and BALF samples using the one-step enzyme immunoassay sandwich method (Aspergillus antigen detection kit). The BDG test was mainly performed to detect BDG in serum and BALF samples using the dynamic turbidimetric method (fungal dextran detection kit). All tests were conducted following the manufacturer's instructions.

Serum GM > 0.5, BALF GM > 0.7, serum BDG > 100 pg/mL, and BALF BDG > 200 pg/mL were defined as positive values for fungal infection [9, 20].

Chest CT Scan and Interpretation

All patients were placed in the supine position and scanned using a 64-row multi-slice spiral CT. Chest scans were obtained at 1.25-mm intervals using 1.5-mm collimation and were reconstructed with a high-spatial-frequency algorithm. The images were photographed at window settings appropriate for assessing the lung parenchyma (window level, -600 Hounsfield units; window width, 1,600 Hounsfield units). The CT images were retrospectively reviewed by two experienced deputy chief radiologists. The pulmonary nodules or masses, wedge shadow, and consolidation shadow were recorded.

Fiberoptic Bronchoscopy Examination and Interpretation

Fiberoptic bronchoscopy was performed by a deputy director or a senior doctor using an Olympus fiberoptic bronchoscope. All patients who required bronchoscopy provided informed consent obtained from their parents prior to the treatment (excluding those with interfering factors, such as those receiving antibiotics and antifungal treatment). Routine bronchoscopic alveolar lavage was then performed, and their heart rate, oxygen saturation, and blood pressure were monitored. Under general anesthesia with propofol, 2% lidocaine was locally infused into the larynx via the fiberoptic bronchoscope. The top of the fiberoptic bronchoscope was in close contact with the bronchial opening of the lung lobe with abnormal imaging; sterile sodium chloride (0.5–1 mL/kg each time, 15–30 mL in total, at 37°C) was then rapidly injected through the biopsy port. The recovery rate was 40–60%. Furthermore, 50–60 mmHg (1 mmHg = 0.133 kPa) negative pressure suction was applied, and the total amount of lavage fluid was recovered and recorded. The recovered lavage fluid was placed in a uniform sterile container without a heat source and sent for timely inspection.

Pneumonia recovery was defined as the resolution or less cough, wheezing, or fever; lung imaging showed that the infection changes disappeared; the BDG and GM levels became normal. Improved pneumonia was defined as decreased cough and wheezing; lung CT still showed lung shadow (<50%); the GM and BDG levels were partially or completely normal. Uncured was defined as no change or improvement was less than 50%, i.e., lung shadow > 50%.

Statistical Methods

IBM SPSS statistics 24 (IBM, Armonk, NY, United States) was used for analysis. The categorical variables are presented as frequencies and percentages [n (%)] and were compared between groups using the chi-square test or continuous correction method if the effective value was < 5. The continuous variables in accordance with a normal distribution were displayed as mean ± standard deviation (SD) and were analyzed using an independent sample t-test; those not in accordance with a normal distribution are displayed as medians (ranges) and were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U-test. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

General Data and Clinical Features

Of the total 357 patients in the PICU, 169 were in the F group, and 188 were in the NF group. The incidence of fever (56.2 vs. 42.6%, $P = 0.01$), moist rales (46.2 vs. 33.0%, $P < 0.01$), coarse rales (71.6 vs. 55.9%, $P < 0.01$), shortness of breath (79.3 vs. 63.9%, $P < 0.01$), and sepsis (60.9 vs. 44.7%, $P < 0.01$) were higher in the F group than in the NF group, while wheezing rate (50.9 vs. 67.6%, $P < 0.01$) was lower. Furthermore, the days in the hospital and PICU were significantly increased (days in PICU: 12.80 ± 9.20 vs. 9.91 ± 6.84 days, $P < 0.01$; duration of hospital stay: 19.55 ± 9.29 vs. 15.93 ± 9.23 days, $P < 0.01$; Table 1).

Clinical manifestation	F group (n = 169)	NF group (n = 188)	T	P
Male/female	107/62	124/64	0.27	0.60
Age (months)	14.75 ± 21.60	16.46 ± 18.00	1.22	0.22
Weight (kg)	9.24 ± 5.17	10.06 ± 6.48	1.32	0.19
Fever	95 (56.2)	80 (42.6)	6.65	0.01
Fever duration (days)	3.27 ± 7.27	2.45 ± 4.37	1.26	0.21
Cough	153 (90.5)	160 (85.1)	2.43	0.12
Cough duration (days)	9.30 ± 9.83	7.73 ± 8.82	1.58	0.11
Wheezing	54 (32.0)	66 (35.1)	0.40	0.53
Wheezing duration (days)	2.41 ± 5.05	2.70 ± 6.05	0.50	0.62
Distress	56 (33.1)	76 (40.4)	2.03	0.16
Distress duration (days)	0.82 ± 2.43	0.75 ± 1.59	0.36	0.72
Moist rales	78 (46.2)	62 (33.0)	20.17	< 0.01
Coarse rales	121 (71.6)	105 (55.9)	9.50	< 0.01
Wheezing rate	86 (50.9)	127 (67.6)	10.27	< 0.01
Shortness of breath	134 (79.3)	120 (63.9)	10.36	< 0.01
APACHE	98.07 ± 6.46	99.48 ± 6.17	2.11	0.04
Sepsis	103 (60.9)	84 (44.7)	9.44	< 0.01
Septic shock	14 (8.3)	10 (5.3)	1.25	0.26
Mechanical ventilation	44 (26.0)	33 (17.6)	3.79	0.05
Blood purification	6 (3.6)	4 (2.1)	0.24	0.62
Basic diseases				
Premature delivery	22 (13.0)	30 (16.0)	0.62	0.43
Malnutrition	10 (5.9)	5 (2.7)	2.35	0.13
Bronchopulmonary dysplasia	6 (3.6)	3 (1.6)	1.38	0.24
Congenital heart disease	10 (5.9)	9 (4.8)	0.23	0.64
Length of stay (days)	19.6 ± 9.3	15.8 ± 8.2	4.1	< 0.01
Days in PICU (days)	12.8 ± 9.2	9.9 ± 6.8	4.8	< 0.01
Recovery rate	121 (71.6)	125 (66.5)	1.3	0.26
Mortality	2 (1.2)	2 (1.1)	0	> 0.99

Data are expressed as mean ± standard deviation or n (%).

F group, fungal infection group; NF group, non-fungal infection group; APACHE, Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation scoring system; PICU, pediatric intensive care unit.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the patients.

Results of the BDG and GM Tests

The BDG and GM values of serum and BALF in the F group were significantly higher than those in the NF group. More patients in the F group had positive serum BDG and GM than in the NF group (BDG: 20.7 vs. 5.9%; GM: 11.8 vs. 4.3%; both $P < 0.01$). Similarly, more patients in the F group had positive BALF BDG and GM than in the NF group (BDG: 50.9 vs. 18.6%; GM: 39.1 vs. 17.0%; both $P < 0.01$). Fewer patients in the F group had negative serum BDG and GM than the NF group (67.5 vs. 87.8%, $P < 0.01$). In addition, fewer patients in the F group had negative serum and BALF BDG and GM than the NF group (20.1 vs. 62.8%, $P < 0.01$).

Pathogens

Results of the mycoplasma, adenovirus, blood culture, sputum culture, and lavage fluid culture showed no significant specificity in the F group compared with the NF group.

Routine Blood Tests

The routine blood test results were compared between the F and NF groups. The proportion of C3, serum albumin, prealbumin, prothrombin, and blood monocytes was significantly lower in the F group, whereas the proportion of hydroxybutyric acid, lactate dehydrogenase, and abnormal lymphocytes in blood smear was significantly higher in the F group than that in the NF group (all $P < 0.05$).

Chest CT Imaging and Fibroscopy of Both Groups

Chest CT imaging revealed that the F group showed a significant increase in wedge-shaped, patchy, streaky shadow and subpleural reticulation (all $P < 0.05$); however, halo sign, cavity, and consolidation did not significantly increase in the F group.

Pulmonary fibroscopy findings were compared between both groups. Changes in the bronchoscopy results observed in the F group could contain bronchial congestion, edema, paleness, necrosis, and bleeding. The lavage fluid could contain pus and blood and have a sticky, jelly, or foamy consistency. Tracheobronchial stenosis was more common in the F group than in the NF group (55.0 vs. 44.1%, $P = 0.04$). There was no significant difference in the properties of lavage fluid and tracheomalacia between the two groups.

Conclusion

The factors associated with fungal infections should be considered when evaluating pediatric patients. PICU pneumonia patients with fungal infection have specific clinical and laboratory features compared with those without fungal infection, including higher rates of BALF, serum BDG, GM positivity and tracheobronchial stenosis. Using antifungal therapies combined with tests like serum and BALF BDG and GM could enable a timely diagnosis of pulmonary fungal infections, possibly improving prognosis. Future prospective studies should examine the diagnosis and prognosis of PICU pneumonia patients with fungal infection.

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