THREE PROBABLE CASES OF LOA LOA ENCEPHALOPATHY FOLLOWING IVERMECTIN TREATMENT FOR ONCHOCERCIASIS

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Abstract. Over the past nine years, more than 12 million people exposed to Onchocerca volvulus infection have received at least one dose of ivermectin, almost all without serious adverse reactions. Since 1991, however, several cases with neurologic manifestations, including coma, have been reported after ivermectin treatment of persons infected with O. volvulus who also had concomitant Loa loa infection with very high microfilariaemia (> 50,000 microfilariae/ml of blood). In 1995, four criteria were established to define probable cases of Loa encephalopathy temporally related to treatment with ivermectin (PLERI). The present paper describes three PLERI cases recorded in Cameroon and compares them with two others reported previously. Disorders of consciousness began 3–4 days after treatment. The objective neurologic signs were variable. The conditions improved favorably in three patients who benefited from early hospitalization and good nursing; their disorders of consciousness lasted only 2–3 days; the results of clinical examination became normal after one month and electroencephalographic abnormalities disappeared after 5–7 months. Conversely, late diagnosis and delay in proper management in two others probably led to worsening of the condition and to fatal outcome related to the usual complications of coma. In addition to these cases, patients with high Loa microfilariaemia also developed milder neurologic manifestations causing functional impairment lasting for at least one week after treatment. Before launching mass ivermectin distribution programs to control onchocerciasis in central Africa, communities in which the intensity of concomitant L. loa microfilariaemia is high need to be identified, and specific educational measures and monitoring strategies should be developed and applied before they are treated.

Mass ivermectin (Mectizan®; Merck and Co., Inc., Whitehouse Station, NJ) distribution programs (IDPs) against onchocerciasis are currently being developed in most African countries where the disease is endemic. Since 1989, several studies have shown that ivermectin is generally well-tolerated by patients infected with Loa loa,1–5 and consequently IDPs were extended to forested areas in central Africa where loiasis is coendemic with onchocerciasis. In 1991, the first case of encephalopathy following ivermectin treatment was recorded in Cameroon in a patient with L. loa microfilariae (mf) in both the blood and the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).6 Since similar events have been known to occur after treatment of loiasis with diethylcarbamazine (DEC), the hypothesis was proposed that ivermectin might also induce serious neurologic reactions in patients with high L. loa microfilariaemia.7 Following the report of two other suspect cases in southern Cameroon,8 a clinical study of reactions to ivermectin treatment was carried out in the Central Hospital in Yaounde, Cameroon on 112 patients with L. loa microfilariaemia exceeding 3,000 mf/ml. This study showed that ivermectin may provoke the passage of L. loa mf into the CSF. In addition, during this study, another case of L. loa encephalopathy was recorded.9 This paper reports three new probable cases of L. loa encephalopathy occurring after ivermectin treatment between June 1995 and February 1996, and provides information on 20 other cases of severe functional impairment, without disorders of consciousness, which also occurred after treatment.

METHODS

Study area. All the cases were recorded in the Lekie Division of central Cameroon. This densely populated forest area lies along the left (south) bank of the middle section of the Sanaga River, where 40–95% of the residents had Onchocerca volvulus mf in the skin and 10–33% had L. loa microfilariaemia (Boussinesq M and others, unpublished data). The Lekie Division is also endemic for Mansonia perstans, but not for lymphatic filariasis.

Case definition. As previously indicated, some reports were available by mid-1995 on adverse neurologic events in an area of Cameroon that was endemic for both loiasis and onchocerciasis, and where IDPs were underway. This resulted in the Mectizan® Donation Program organizing a meeting in Paris to review all existing data on Loa encephalopathy, including the cases recorded after treatment with ivermectin (Central nervous system [CNS] Complications of Loiasis and Adverse CNS Events Following Treatment—Report of an Invited Consultation: October 2–3, 1995). During this meeting, expert clinicians, pathologists, epidemiologists, and parasitologists defined a probable case of Loa encephalopathy temporally related to treatment with ivermectin (PLERI) as having satisfied four criteria: 1) occurrence of a coma in a person who was previously healthy, and who has no other underlying cause for the coma; 2) onset of the CNS symptoms and signs within five days of ivermectin treatment and progression to coma without remission; 3) very high Loa microfilariaemia, i.e., ≥ 10,000 mf/ml, if the blood sample had been obtained before treatment, or ≥ 1,000 mf/ml if the blood sample had been collected within the two months following treatment; the latter threshold value was adopted following the results of small-scale trials that showed that post-treatment Loa microfilariaemia is approximately 10% of the pretreatment level; and 4) the presence of Loa mf in the CSF.

Case recording and pretreatment examinations. All the cases described in the present report were recorded after first ivermectin treatment at dose of 150 μg/kg of body weight. Three patients developed serious neurologic manifestations. Case 1 had been routinely treated during an IDP carried out by a nongovernmental organization; thus, no pretreatment
observations were made on this case. Cases 2 and 3 were recorded during an incidence study (ethically approved by the World Health Organization and the Cameroon Ministry of Health and involving 17,877 persons) aimed at determining 1) the incidence of serious neurologic reactions during the week following ivermectin treatment in an area where onchocerciasis and loiasis are coendemic, and 2) whether any relationship exists between the occurrence of serious neurologic reactions and the presence of intense Loa microfilariaemia in treated patients. Before distribution of ivermectin, the patients involved in this incidence study were informed that reactions might occur during the days immediately following treatment, that they would be visited daily for the first seven days after treatment, and that any reaction will be treated free of charge. Monitoring of side effects was performed by physicians with the assistance of selected residents who were asked to visit all households to record possible serious reactions. In addition to the neurologic reactions, 20 patients of the 17,877 treated during the incidence study developed a less serious condition characterized by severe functional impairment, but without disorders of consciousness or objective neurologic signs. This impairment was such that for several days they could not carry out any of their everyday domestic activities without assistance. This condition will be referred to as a serious non-neurologic reaction.

Blood smears were taken just before dosing from all persons 15 years of age or older in this incidence study; no skin snips were taken before treatment. The smears were made from 50 µl of capillary blood collected by fingerprick between 10:00 AM and 4:00 PM and were stained with Giemsa. These smears were examined subsequent to treatment and the microfilarial loads were expressed as mf/ml of blood. No other blood samples and no skin snips were taken before treatment. Among the 5,550 adults who underwent a blood smear examination and had never received previous filaricidal treatment, the prevalence of Loa microfilariaemia was 29.9%.

Laboratory examinations made after the appearance of adverse manifestations. These examinations were limited to the three patients who developed serious neurologic reactions (cases 1, 2, and 3). The day of treatment was D0 and the subsequent days were designated D1, D2, and D3, etc.

Venous blood was taken and capillary blood smears were made (between 10:00 AM and 4:00 PM) on D13 for case 1, and on D4 and D7 for cases 2 and 3. The laboratory examinations included complete blood counts, calculation of mf concentrations, determination of plasma electrolytes, glucose, creatinine, proteins, transaminases (aspartate aminotransferase and alanine aminotransferase), creatine phosphokinase (CPK), C reactive protein (CRP), alkaline phosphatase, complement C3, and protein electrophoresis. In addition, hemoglobin electrophoresis was performed in cases 2 and 3 to determine whether the patients had sickle cell disease; this investigation was done because it was assumed that Loa encephalopathy was at least partly related to an obstruction of the cerebral vessels secondary to the death of mf, and sickle cell disease might constitute a cofactor facilitating the pathologic process. Three milliliters of CSF were collected on D13 from case 1, and on D4 from cases 2 and 3. One milliliter was used for counts of red blood cells and leukocytes, and for determination of glucose, protein, and chlorides levels. One milliliter was centrifuged at 1,235 x g for 15 min and the mf in the pellet were counted. Urine samples were collected on D13 from case 1, on D4 and D7 from case 2, and on D7 from case 3. Ten milliliters were centrifuged at 4,750 x g for 5 min and the mf in the sediment were counted. The remainder of each sample was used for counts of red blood cells and leukocytes and for determination of glucose and protein levels. Electroencephalograms (EEGs) were performed on case 2 (on D15, D146, and D233) and on case 3 (on D19, D105, and D159) by Professor G. Atchou of the General Hospital in Yaounde.

CASE DESCRIPTIONS

The main clinical findings in the three PLERI cases described here are listed in Table 1. To evaluate whether common features exist between all cases that meet the criteria of PLERI, the clinical findings of the three cases described in detail in this paper are compared in Table 1 with the findings from the two previous cases recorded in the literature. The biological findings from the same five PLERI cases are listed in Table 2.

Case 1. This patient was 26-year-old male farmer living in Okok (4°08’N, 11°15’E). Ten hours after treatment on D0 he complained of backache, neck pain, and tinnitus. On D1 he had stomach pains and diarrhea. On D2 and D3 he was very weak, unable to remain standing or to eat, and his neck was stiff. On D4 he had difficulty in swallowing and speaking, and he was taken to a health center. On D5, he did not speak, became incontinent of urine, and his temperature was 37.4°C. Treatment was started, including perfusion with glucose, dexamethasone, atropine, furosemide, and diazepam. On D6 he became comatose until D9 when his fever increased to 38.5°C and penicillin and tube feeding were added to his treatment. His condition remained unchanged until he was hospitalized on D13. Between D13 and D16, he did not respond to commands or to painful stimuli; his eyes were open and corneal reflexes were present, tendon reflexes were absent and there was no Babinski sign, his neck was stiff, he showed signs of dehydration, and had large bedsores on the buttocks. Treatment included glucose infusion, intravenous betamethasone, tube feeding, and treatment of his bedsores. On D17, the condition improved slightly, with the patient being able to perform voluntary movements of the eyes, fingers, and legs. On D18, his condition worsened and his temperature increased because of a large abscess on one cheek. The betamethasone was discontinued and replaced with ampicillin and gentamicin, but he died on D21.

On D13 (Table 2) his counts of L. loa, and M. perstans mf in capillary blood were 3,600 mf/ml and 960 mf/ml, respectively, there was no eosinophilia, and the CRP and CPK levels were very high. The CSF was clear, with 10 live Loa mf/ml, and the protein level slightly elevated. Loa mf were also found in the urine. The other results were normal.

Case 2. The patient was 32-year-old male farmer living in Mbazoa (4°20’N, 11°27’E) and had no relevant medical history except for chronic alcoholism. On D1 he was weak and anorexic but was able to walk. On D2 he stayed in bed and did not speak. On D3 he became feverish, which was
attributed to malaria and he was given chloroquine. On D4 his condition worsened and he was hospitalized. At this time, his temperature was 37°C, he was unable to stand, and was alternatively somnolent and restless. The general condition of the joints was in flexion. He answered only yes or no to questions, but in an incoherent manner; otherwise, he did not speak at all. On command, he did not perform any voluntary movement. The pain sensation was normal, the cornal reflexes were feeble, the pupillary reflexes were normal, tendon reflexes were very brisk and symmetric, and plantar responses were flexor. He showed shaking of hands, and crumbling, dusting, and scratching movements. He had a marked grasp reflex. There were no meningeal signs or hypertension. Treatment with paracetamol and chlorpheniramine maleate was given. On the evening of D4, the patient was able to perform adjusted simple movements on command, and a spastic hypertension with the clasp-knife phenomenon was found. On D5 his condition was similar but he became incontinent and did not speak; surprisingly, he was able to hold a glass and to drink without help, and when a flashlight was given to him, he switched it on and off, but without regard to the examiner’s command. His Glasgow coma score was 10; a cogwheel phenomenon had appeared at the wrists, elbows, and knees; pain sensation varied from second to second, with sometimes no response to pinching. On the morning of D6 he was still somnolent, incontinent, and unable to speak or walk. In the evening his condition improved considerably and he could walk with assistance, speak spontaneously, respond to commands and recognize his relatives; however, his face remained inexpressive. Episodically, he showed flexion attitude of the upper limbs, and involuntary movements appeared when he had to perform a mental effort. His condition from then on improved progressively. On D7 he could walk slowly with short steps but without help, and a fundus examination showed bilateral retinal hemorrhages. On D8 and D9 involuntary movements became less frequent but the cogwheel phenomenon persisted at the wrists and elbows, and proprioceptive sensation was altered over the limbs. On D10 the patient was able to stand up without help, and to walk more than 500 m, but psychomotor slowing was still marked, and he often complained of being disturbed by imaginary flies. On D11 he showed no signs of disorientation or memory trouble, but still complained of blurred vision. On D13 he left the hospital and traveled 5 km on foot to return to his village. The subsequent clinical examinations were performed at home. The hypertension and the involuntary movements had disappeared on D13. On D20 his face was more expressive, but he still showed marked psychomotor slowing and slowness of voluntary movements. On D27 he was still asthenic and a slight cogwheel phenomenon was found when he performed an important mental effort. Five months after treatment no neurologic abnormalities were found and the patient appeared quite normal, although his relatives stated that his general behavior had changed and that he was much calmer than before treatment.

His pretreatment counts of *L. loa* and *M. perstans* mf/ml were 50,520 and 420 respectively (Table 2). The CSF collected on D4 was clear but contained live *L. loa* mf; they were also found in the blood and urine. The CRP level was

<p>| TABLE 1 | Clinical signs in the five probable cases of <em>Loa loa</em> encephalopathy temporally related to ivermectin treatment recorded from 1991 to 1996 in Cameroon* |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Anonymous*</th>
<th>Ducorps and others*</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>M. 37</td>
<td>M. 40</td>
<td>M. 26</td>
<td>M. 32</td>
<td>M. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery</td>
<td>M. 32</td>
<td>M. 17</td>
<td>M. 32</td>
<td>M. 32</td>
<td>M. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever ≥ 38.5°C</td>
<td>D5–15</td>
<td>D5–15</td>
<td>D5–15</td>
<td>D5–15</td>
<td>D5–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutism</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary movements</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agitation</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor deficit</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity deficit</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paresthesia</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
<td>D5–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendon reflexes</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Abolished (D3–8)</td>
<td>Abolished</td>
<td>Brisk (D4–11)</td>
<td>Abolished (D4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babinski’s sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasping reflex</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meningeal signs</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Tube-feeding, antibiotics, corticosteroids</td>
<td>Perfusion, loratadine, furosemide</td>
<td>Perfusion, antibiotics, corticosteroids</td>
<td>Antihistamines, paracetamol</td>
<td>Perfusion, tetracarboxylic, antibiotics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* D = days; ++ = marked; +++ = important.
† D5 is the day of appearance of incontinence; the day of disappearance was not recorded.
### Table 2

Biologic results in the five probable cases of *Loa loa* encephalopathy temporally related to ivermectin treatment recorded from 1991 to 1996 in Cameroon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Anonymous</th>
<th>Ducorps and others</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loa loa count</strong></td>
<td>Very numerous</td>
<td>162,920</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>50,520</td>
<td>152,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mansonella perstans count</strong></td>
<td>?</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Day of examination</strong></td>
<td>D10</td>
<td>D14</td>
<td>D17</td>
<td>D1</td>
<td>D3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blood</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Loa loa count</em></td>
<td>&gt;1,000</td>
<td>90,520</td>
<td>1,880</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>3,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>M. perstans count</em></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBC (10⁶/mm³)</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukocytes (1/µl)</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>11,800</td>
<td>7,300</td>
<td>7,600</td>
<td>6,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eosinophils (%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platelets (10⁸/mm³)</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPK (U/liter)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP (mg/liter)</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CSF Color</strong></td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Loa loa count</em></td>
<td>&gt;100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBC (1/µl)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukocytes (1/µl)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glucose (g/liter)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proteins (g/liter)</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urine</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Loa loa count</em></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBC (1/µl)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukocytes (1/µl)</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* RBC = red blood cells; CPK = creatine phosphokinase; CRP = C-reactive protein.
† Microfilariae per milliliter of blood.
‡ Microfilariae per milliliter of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).
§ Microfilariae per 5 ml of CSF present but not counted.
Case 3. The patient was an 18-year-old schoolboy living in Nkolobang II (4°11’N, 11°19’E) with no notable past medical history, except for left sciatic nerve paralysis due to an intramuscular quinine injection when he was child. The left lower limb was amyotrophic and was not examined subsequently. He complained of joint pains on D1. On D2 he was unable to work and stayed in his bedroom. On the evening of D3 he was found unconscious on his bed, soiled with urine and feces. He was hospitalized on D4, where he lay without voluntary movement either spontaneous or on command. At this time he was incontinent of urine; he opened his eyes and emitted inarticulate sounds in a loud voice, but otherwise did not speak; pain sensation was abolished, the Glasgow coma score was 6, there was no involuntary movement, hypertonia with a marked cogwheel phenomenon was found in the upper limbs, the tendon reflexes of the upper limbs were normal, the patellar reflex was abolished, the Achilles reflex was feeble, and the plantar response was flexor. On D5 and D6 the patient could make voluntary movements of the eyes and head, but he was still incontinent and did not respond to verbal stimulation or to pain; a swinging horizontal movement of the eyeballs was recorded when he had his eyes half-closed, his reaction to pinching was nearly absent, the Glasgow coma score was 9, the tendon reflexes were present, there was no Babinski sign, hypertonia with a cogwheel phenomenon was recorded in the wrists, elbows and knees and no meningeal sign was found. Treatment included perfusion with glucose, tetracosactide, ampicillin, and thiamphenicol. His condition improved considerably on D7; although he remained weak, he could stay seated on the bed when helped, and spoke several sentences; he could perform slow but adjusted voluntary movements, muscular strength and sensation were normal, but the cogwheel phenomenon persisted in both wrists. From D8 to D11 the patient continued to improve; although he was still incontinent, could not stand unaided, and could not say either where he was or what day it was, he recognized the examiners and could correctly answer simple questions about himself; he complained of visual troubles, joint pains and paresthesia of the feet and fingers; the hypertonia had disappeared, but mild motor deficit appeared at the left upper limb on D10. Perusions were interrupted on D8 but tetracosactide was continued. On D12 the patient could stand up unaided, walk with help and perform simple calculations, and a fundus examination showed bilateral retinal hemorrhages. On D14 he left the hospital, on D15 he could walk unaided, and on D21 there was no deficit of muscular strength, but a mild cogwheel phenomenon persisted at the left wrist. On D47 he went back to school. Five months after treatment, the neurologic examination result was normal but he still complained of headaches and episodic amnesia.

His pretreatment counts of Loa loa and M. perstans mf were 152,940 mf/ml and 100 mf/ml, respectively. The CSF collected on D4 was clear but contained live Loa loa mf. Loa loa mf were also found in the blood and urine. Eosinophilia decreased markedly between D4 and D7. The CRP level was very high on D4 and slightly elevated on D7. The CSF glucose and protein levels were normal. Hemoglobin electrophoresis indicated that the patient was AA homozygous.

The EEG tracing on D19 was slow with spontaneous occurrence of diffuse, paroxysmal, and monomorphic theta activity that lasted 2–3 sec. The slowing of activity was increased by hyperventilation. By D105 an improvement was recorded but focal abnormalities persisted in the left occipital region, especially during hyperventilation. By D159 all previously recorded abnormalities had disappeared.

Patients with serious non-neurologic reactions. The condition of these patients was characterized by functional impairment that required assistance for several days when carrying out their minimal basic everyday activities in the home, such as eating, getting out of bed, getting dressed, or washing themselves. The patients usually stayed in bed or in armchairs, and had difficulty in standing up or walking, even with help. They complained of severe fatigue and diffuse pains. They were not confused, and were able to answer questions, but the replies were slow and slightly delayed. No objective neurologic sign was found and the blood pressure of these patients was normal, but all of them showed mildly elevated temperature on D1 or D2. Pretreatment blood smears were available for 18 of the 20 patients who experienced such conditions. Their geometric mean Loa microfilarial load was 83,448 mf/ml.

DISCUSSION

The present paper describes three new cases which meet the definition of PLERI. A total of five cases corresponding to this definition have so far been documented, all of them from Cameroon. That only two cases have been recorded during the carefully monitored incidence study in which 17,877 persons from an area with onchocerciasis, also heavily endemic for Loa loa, were treated with ivermectin, indicates that such adverse events are rare. However detailed clinical and biologic description of these cases is useful to identify similar cases that could occur during mass IDPs for onchocerciasis in areas of Africa in which loiasis is endemic, and to provide information on their treatment and prognosis.

The clinical and biologic manifestations in five patients with serious neurologic reactions corresponding to the definition of PLERI are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Several common features should be emphasized. All were young males in apparently good health before treatment. The first symptoms appeared on D1 or D2 after treatment with ivermectin and included fatigue, headache, and joint pains. Disorders of consciousness usually appeared on D3 or D4. In the three nonfatal cases, the symptoms changed rapidly from day to day but the condition was worst on D4 or D5 and then improved progressively to become more or less normal one month after the ivermectin dosage. With regard to clinical signs, the patients were usually incontinent for several
days, the motor deficit was usually mild, but the tendon reflexes were abolished in three cases and brisk in one; no Babinski sign was found, a marked and long-lasting cogwheel phenomenon was present in cases 2 and 3, in whom this sign was sought, and retinal hemorrhages were found in all of the three patients whose fundi were examined (i.e., the case described by Ducorps and others, and cases 2 and 3 described in the present paper). With regard to biologic results, Loa loa mf were found in all early examinations of blood, CSF, and urine, but full blood counts did not show any constant pattern in the five cases. In the patients with pretreatment Loa loa microfilarial count exceeding 15,000 mf/ml, eosinophilia decreased significantly between D0 and D1, and increased subsequently. This was not consistent with the results of cases 1 and 3, whose eosinophilies were nil on D12 and D7, respectively. The CRP levels measured were very high when the neurologic signs were maximum. In most cases, red blood cells were found in the CSF; whereas the CSF leukocyte counts were slightly elevated and the glucose and protein levels were normal or only slightly elevated. Red blood cells and leukocytes were also found in the urine but macroscopic hematuria was recorded in only one patient.

Since the description of the first case, the existence of ivermectin-induced Loa loa encephalopathy, or PLERI, has been questionable. Two questions have been raised: 1) whether the condition is related to Loa loa? and 2) whether ivermectin can induce the condition?

With regard to the first question, several points may be made. First, Loa loa mf, and not those of any other filarial species, have been found in the CSF of these patients. Their presence there is remarkable finding since no mf of any species has been found in the numerous CSF examinations performed routinely over many years in the Centre Pasteur at Yaounde, which provides this service for the area highly endemic for loiasis from which all five PLERI cases came. Second, a common feature of the five cases is that they all showed exceptionally high Loa loa microfilariaemia, as demonstrated in three cases before treatment and in the two others after treatment. Third, if one assumes that the pathologic process in PLERI is induced by ivermectin, one should remember that this drug, like DEC, has little microfilaricidal effect against M. perstans. If neurologic manifestations are related to the destruction or death of mf, this may explain why the process develops in patients infected with Loa loa, and not in those solely infected with M. perstans. In addition, the assumption that M. perstans can cause neurologic or psychiatric conditions is highly questionable. The only two well-documented cases attributed to M. perstans have subsequently been shown to be due to Meningonema peruzzi, a filaria of monkeys (Cercopithecidae), a parasite of whose fourth-stage larva has also been found in the CSF of humans. Another fourth argument is based on pathologic findings that have shown that in all autopsies of encephalopathic cases involving Loa loa, the cerebral tissue was diffusely invaded by mf causing microinfarcts and microthromboses. In contrast, neurologic manifestations attributed to lymphatic filariasis have been recorded on only eight occasions, and the cerebral lesions involved were generally limited to local granulomata. Finally, an exhaustive search of the literature on neurologic complications of filarial diseases has been performed to ascertain what species were involved in the various reported cases. This review showed that if one discards all cases of psychoneurotic or purely painful conditions, most of the remaining cases of objective central neurologic disorders, presumably caused by filariases, have been attributed to Loa loa. This difference is all the more striking because the area endemic for Loa loa, i.e., the rain forest of central Africa, is much more limited than the area endemic for any other filarial species. Infection with O. volvulus, has been associated with epileptic seizures but not with motor deficits or encephalopathic conditions. The only cases of neurologic complications, six patients with severe vertigo of which one developed an associated quasi-Parkinsonian condition, were reported in patients heavily infected with the Cameroon Sudan-savanna strain of O. volvulus, who were treated with DEC following a course of suramin. However, no similar cases have been reported following ivermectin treatment among the many millions of savanna-dwelling onchocerciasis patients who have been treated since mass IDPs began.

With regard to the assumption that the five PLERI cases documented so far were induced by ivermectin, three arguments may be put forward. First, the initial symptoms began within two days of ivermectin treatment in patients who were previously healthy. Second, ivermectin has been shown to provoke the passage of Loa loa mf into the CSF. Third, the fact that microfilaricidal treatment may induce Loa loa encephalopathy has been clearly demonstrated when DEC was widely used in central Africa. Among all the cases of Loa loa-related neurologic disorders, most of them, especially the most serious, were related to DEC, whereas those apparently unrelated to previous treatment were exceptions and often questionable with regard to their spontaneous occurrence.

The fact that all the PLERI cases reported so far came from Cameroon, and especially from the Sanaga Valley, might be due to characteristics of the Loa loa strains or to human host factors specific for this region. An alternative explanation, which we consider as more probable, is that the mean Loa loa microfilariaemia might be higher in the Sanaga Valley than in the other areas endemic for loiasis where ivermectin has been distributed for onchocerciasis. This could be particularly the case in Congo where the distribution programs were carried out principally near Brazzaville, in an area of degraded forest where, although data are scarce, the intensity of Loa loa infection is presumably low.

Although the induction of Loa loa encephalopathy by microfilaricidal drugs is now well established, the question remains why some people with high Loa loa microfilariaemia develop such reactions and other do not. Among the 5,550 adults who received their first microfilaricidal treatment and underwent pretreatment blood examination on the occasion of the incidence study, 160 (2.9%) harbored Loa loa microfilariaemia exceeding 30,000 mf/ml, the value that has been proposed as the at risk threshold. It is possible that cofactors may facilitate the development of Loa loa encephalopathies after microfilaricidal treatment. It has been suggested that concomitant infections or chronic vascular disease, which make the blood-brain barrier more permeable, may constitute such cofactors. A priori, there is no evidence that the occurrence of encephalopathy is linked with the
sickle cell gene; although case 2 was AS heterozygous, case 3 was AA homozygous. This observation indicates that the existence of sickle cell trait or sickle cell disease is not a necessary cofactor for the development of PLERI.

Among the five PLERI cases so far recorded, one died following gastrointestinal bleeding and another died of infectious complications (case 1 in this report). Both of these patients were treated during mass IDPs for onchocerciasis control and the diagnosis of PLERI was established too late for them to be adequately treated in a hospital. Conversely, the three who recovered were treated with ivermectin in the course of clinical studies with careful monitoring, and they were managed in hospital as soon as neurologic manifestations became serious. Early recognition and hospital care appear to be the key to recovery.

Also of importance is the long-term neurologic outlook for patients who survive PLERI, especially since the majority of patients who have survived after spontaneous or DEC-induced Loa encephalopathy showed sequellae including motor defects, extrapyramidal disorders, ataxia, disturbances of balance, aphasia, psychomotor slowing, psychoneuropathic disorders, or dementia. Fortunately, all three patients who survived their PLERI showed no neurologic problems several months after treatment. This progressive clinical improvement was consistent with the progressive disappearance of the EEG abnormalities in cases 2 and 3.

Presently, there is no consensus on the best treatment for patients who develop L. loa encephalopathy, especially since there is still uncertainty as to the pathophysiological mechanisms responsible for the condition. The principles to follow would appear to be early hospitalization, good nursing, maintenance of fluid, electrolyte, and nutritional balance, antihistamines and/or corticosteroids for putative inflammatory lesions in the CNS, and antibiotics to prevent or control possible secondary infections. The two patients in the present series who died had been treated with corticosteroids because of the seriousness of their conditions after several days of coma. However, it is possible that this drug may have contributed to the appearance of the infectious or hemorrhagic complications that led to the fatal outcome. The three patients who recovered were treated with either antihistamines or tetracosactide, but we cannot be certain that this contributed to their recovery.

The means of preventing PLERI require further investigation. This problem is difficult because at the present time during mass IDPs, there is no feasible method of routinely assessing pretreatment mf loads of L. loa. However, an interesting finding is that DEC-induced L. loa encephalopathy seems to be related to the dose of the drug. It is possible that doses of ivermectin lower than 150 μg/kg may reduce the risk of neurologic reactions by slowly reducing the L. loa microfilaraemia below the risk threshold. Subsequent annual doses of ivermectin for onchocerciasis could then be given without risk at the usual dose of 150 μg/kg because the concentrations of L. loa do not usually build up to more than 10–15% of their pretreatment levels over the period of a year after treatment.

As can be seen from the results, ivermectin-induced L. loa encephalopathies associated with disorders of consciousness are rare. However, in addition to the five cases referred to here, several patients with high pretreatment L. loa microfilaraemia developed a serious non-neurologic condition after treatment with ivermectin. This serious condition was defined by the existence of a functional impairment lasting more than one week. For ethical reasons, no lumbar puncture was performed on these patients, but it appears that this post-treatment condition parallels the pretreatment L. loa mf load, which suggests in turn that they have a pathologic process in brain tissue similar to, but milder than, that developed by those patients who developed serious neurologic manifestations. Thus, there may be continuum between the mild, marked, and serious non-neurologic cases and those with serious, neurologic conditions. Several cases of serious non-neurologic reactions have been reported in previous observations, but in a brief or anectodal manner. The incidence study carried out in the Lekie area has convinced us that reactions of this type, although less serious than PLERI, are nevertheless worrisome in the context of African rural communities and thus should, like the PLERI cases, be recorded early. It should be emphasized that patients who develop such reactions are very weak and require careful medical attention because they are susceptible to life-threatening complications such as dehydration or deterioration of an underlying infection. Those involved in ivermectin distribution programs should be aware that such serious, non-neurologic reactions may occur and that they can be readily managed without hospitalization, but only by ensuring correct rehydration and nourishment. The patient and his family should also be reassured by explaining to them frankly the cause and the transient characteristics of the condition.

The findings reported here suggest several avenues of operational research that could help to reduce the risk of PLERI. 1) More extensive epidemiologic surveys of the distribution of loiasis need to be undertaken to identify populations at risk of PLERI in areas designated for mass IDPs. 2) Low-cost and practical methods need to be developed to identify individuals in those populations who are at high risk because of their high Loa microfilarial load. 3) Specific health educational measures, including information on the risk of serious reactions, and monitoring strategies need to be developed where mass IDPs are organized against onchocerciasis in areas in which loiasis is co-endemic. 4) The effect of ivermectin given at doses less than 150 μg/kg on O. volvulus and L. loa mf load needs investigation. 5) If and when cases arise, observations on the most appropriate treatment of PLERI should be made.

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