Reverse-Transcriptase Inhibitors in the Aicardi–Goutières Syndrome


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TO THE EDITOR: The Aicardi–Goutières syndrome is a genetic encephalopathy that is associated with childhood illness and death. The syndrome is hypothesized to be due to misidentification of self-derived nucleic acids as nonself and the subsequent induction of a type I interferon–mediated response that simulates an antiviral reaction. Endogenous retroelements, mobile genetic elements that can be transcribed to RNA and then to DNA by reverse transcription, constitute 40% of the human genome and represent a potential source of immunostimulatory nucleic acid in patients with this syndrome.

In a single-center, open-label, pilot study involving patients with the Aicardi–Goutières syndrome (ClinicalTrials.gov number, NCT02363452), we administered a combination of three nucleoside analogue reverse-transcriptase inhibitors — abacavir, lamivudine, and zidovudine — for 12 months, at doses used in children with human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) infection. The study protocol is available with the full text of this letter at NEJM.org. The primary aim was to determine the effect of treatment on the interferon score, calculated from the expression of six interferon-stimulated genes; higher scores indicate greater interferon signaling, and scores higher than 2.47 are considered to be abnormal.

Eight of 11 patients who were recruited from a pool of 68 patients in France known to have the syndrome completed the study (Table S2 in the Supplementary Appendix, available at NEJM.org). Three patients withdrew owing to an inability to swallow the volume of the study medication. There was an effect of treatment on interferon signaling, with the median interferon score across all 8 patients falling from 9.66 (interquartile range, 6.51 to 13.23) to 5.33 (interquartile range, 2.76 to 10.90) (P<0.001) (Fig. 1A). Interferon-α protein levels in serum and plasma and interferon antiviral activity in CSF were also reduced with treatment (Table S3 in the Supplementary Appendix). This effect was greatest among the 4 patients with mutations in components of the RNase H2 complex (with the median score in these 4 patients falling from 8.16 [interquartile range, 5.41 to 11.94] to 3.51 [interquartile range, 2.49 to 5.46]). RNA sequencing indicated a reduction of global interferon-stimulated gene expression after 12 months of treatment and a return
to pretreatment levels 6 months after discontinuation of therapy (Figs. S5 and S6 in the Supplementary Appendix). There was an increase in cerebral blood flow during the treatment period in 3 of 5 patients with data that could be interpreted (Fig. S8 and Table S7 in the Supplementary Appendix).

These results support the hypothesis that HIV-1 reverse-transcriptase therapy can reduce interferon signaling in patients with the Aicardi–Goutières syndrome by inhibition of reverse transcription of endogenous retroelements. Changes in interferon signaling and cerebral blood flow suggest that treatment could have clinical value, perhaps in combination with other therapies (e.g., inhibitors of Janus kinase 1 and 2). The open-label design of the study and small sample require that a larger group of patients be evaluated in a controlled clinical trial.

Gillian I. Rice, Ph.D.
University of Manchester
Manchester, United Kingdom
Candice Meyzer, M.D.
Naïm Bouazza, Ph.D.
Assistance Publique–Hôpitaux de Paris
Paris, France

Marie Hully, M.D.
Nathalie Bodaert, M.D.
Hôpital Necker–Enfants Malades
Paris, France

Michaëla Semeraro, M.D., Ph.D.
Université Paris Descartes
Paris, France

Leo A.H. Zeef, Ph.D.
University of Manchester
Manchester, United Kingdom

Flore Rozenberg, M.D., Ph.D.
Université Paris Descartes
Paris, France

Vincent Bondet, Ph.D.
Darragh Duffy, Ph.D.
Alba Libre, Ph.D.
Institut Pasteur
Paris, France

Jinmi Baek, M.Sc.
Mame N. Sambe, B.Sc.
Elodie Henry, M.Sc.
Valerie Jolaine, M.Sc.
Assistance Publique–Hôpitaux de Paris
Paris, France

Christine Barnierias, M.D.
Hôpital Necker–Enfants Malades
Paris, France

Magalie Barth, M.D.
Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Angers
Angers, France

Alexandre Belot, M.D., Ph.D.
University of Lyon
Lyon, France

Claude Cances, M.D.
Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Toulouse
Toulouse, France

François-Guillaume Debray, M.D., Ph.D.
University of Liège
Liège, Belgium

Diane Doummar, M.D.
Hôpital Armand Trousseau
Paris, France

Marie-Louise Frémond, M.D.
Naoki Kitabayashi, B.Sc.
Alice Lepelley, Ph.D.
Institut Imagine
Paris, France

Virginie Levrat, M.D.
Centre Hospitalier Annecy Genevois
Pringy, France

Isabelle Melki, M.D., Ph.D.
Hôpital Robert Debré
Paris, France

Pierre Meyer, M.D.
Université de Montpellier
Montpellier, France

Marie-Christine Nougues, M.D.
Hôpital Armand Trousseau
Paris, France

Florence Renaldo, M.D.
Hôpital Robert Debré
Paris, France

Mathieu P. Rodero, Ph.D.
Institut Imagine
Paris, France

Diana Rodriguez, M.D., Ph.D.
Sorbonne Université
Paris, France

Agathe Roubertie, M.D., Ph.D.
Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Montpellier
Montpellier, France

Luis Seabra, M.Sc.
Institut Imagine
Paris, France

Carolina Uggenti, Ph.D.
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Hendy Abdoul, M.D., Ph.D.
Jean-Marc Treluyer, M.D.
Assistance Publique–Hôpitaux de Paris
Paris, France

Isabelle Desguerre, M.D.
Stéphane Blanche, M.D.
Hôpital Necker–Enfants Malades
Paris, France

Yanick J. Crow, M.D., Ph.D.
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, United Kingdom
yanickcrow@mac.com

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