Tuberculosis in Liver Transplant Recipients: A Report of Eight Cases During a Five Year Period

Tuberculose em Transplantados Hepáticos: Uma Série de Oito Casos Durante um Período de Cinco Anos

Diana PÓVOAS1, João MACHADO1,2, Rui PERDIGOTO2, Ana MORBEY1, Júlio VELOSO1,2, Helena GLÓRIA2, Élia MATEUS2, Américo MARTINS2, Fernando MALTEZ1, Eduardo BARROSO1

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Tuberculosis incidence in Portugal ranged from 20 to 22 cases per 100 000 inhabitants between 2010 and 2014. Tuberculosis incidence in liver transplant recipients is not precisely known, but it is estimated to be higher than among the general population. Tuberculosis in liver transplant recipients is particularly challenging because of the atypical clinical presentation and side effects of the antibacterial drugs and their potential interactions with immunosuppressive therapies.

Material and Methods: We retrospectively reviewed the clinical records of liver transplant recipients with post-transplant tuberculosis occurring from January 2010 to December 2014 at a liver transplantation unit in Lisbon, Portugal. Demographic data, baseline and clinical features, as well as treatment regimen, toxicities and outcomes, were analyzed.

Results: Among 1005 recipients, active tuberculosis was diagnosed in eight patients between January 2010 and December 2014 (frequency = 0.8%). Late onset tuberculosis was more frequent than early tuberculosis. Mycobacterium tuberculosis complex was isolated from cultures in almost every case (7; 87.5%). Extra-pulmonary involvement and disseminated tuberculosis were frequent. Two patients developed rejection without allograft loss. Crude mortality was 37.5%, with 2 deaths being related to tuberculosis.

Discussion: Despite the uncertainty regarding treatment duration in liver transplant recipients, disease severity, as well as number of active drugs against TB infection, should be taken into account. There was a need for a rifampin-free regimen and immunosuppression adjustment in patients who experienced acute graft rejection.

Conclusion: Although the number of cases of tuberculosis is low, its post-transplant frequency is significant and the observed mortality rate is not to be neglected. The cases of hepatoxicity and graft rejection seen in this case series demonstrate the challenges associated with tuberculosis diagnosis in liver transplant recipients and management of the interactions between immunosuppressors and rifampin. This study strengthens the recommendation of latent tuberculosis infection screening and treatment in liver transplant candidates or recipients.

Keywords: Liver Transplantation; Mycobacterium tuberculosis; Portugal; Tuberculosis

RESUMO

Introdução: A incidência de tuberculose em Portugal entre 2010 - 2014 foi de 20 a 22 casos por 100 000 habitantes. A incidência de tuberculose em transplantados hepáticos não é conhecida, estimando-se que seja mais elevada do que a da população em geral. O manejo da tuberculose em transplantados hepáticos constitui um desafio, não só pela apresentação clínica frequentemente atípica, mas também pelos efeitos secundários da terapêutica antibacilar e suas interações farmacológicas com a medicação imunossupressora, necessária no período pós-transplante.

Material e Métodos: Os autores fizeram uma revisão retrospectiva dos casos de doentes transplantados hepáticos com tuberculose pós-transplante diagnosticada durante o período entre janeiro 2010 e dezembro 2014 no centro de transplantação hepática em Lisboa, Portugal. Foram analisadas os dados demográficos, características clínicas, a par do regime antibacilar, toxicidade e evolução.

Resultados: Num total de 1005 transplantados foi diagnosticada tuberculose ativa em oito doentes entre janeiro de 2010 e dezembro de 2014 (frequência de 0,8%). O desenvolvimento de tuberculose tardia foi mais frequente do que a doença precoce. Foi isolado Mycobacterium tuberculosis complex no exame cultural de sete doentes (87,5%). Foram frequentes a presença de envolvimento extra-pulmonar, assim como doença tuberculosa disseminada. Dois doentes desenvolveram rejeição aguda, sem perda de enxerto. A taxa de mortalidade global foi de 37,5%, com duas mortes directamente atribuíveis à tuberculose.


Conclusão: Apesar do baixo número de casos de tuberculose, a sua frequência pós-transplante é significativa e a mortalidade associada não é negligenciável. Os casos de hepatoxicidade e rejeição de enxerto demonstram os desafios no diagnóstico da tuberculose em transplantados hepáticos e a dificuldade do manejo das interações entre imunossupressores e a rifampicina. Este estudo reforça a recomendação de rastreio e tratamento de tuberculose latente em transplantados ou candidatos a transplante hepático.

Palavras-chave: Mycobacterium tuberculosis; Portugal; Tuberculose; Transplante de Fígado

INTRODUCTION

Tuberculosis (TB) remains a serious opportunistic infection that may affect transplant recipients. TB infection prevalence in liver transplant recipients is uncertain, with reported rates ranging from 1% to 6% in some case series.1,2 Most TB cases occur as a result of disease reactivation, most frequently within the first year after transplantation, when

2. Centro Hepato-Bilio-Pancreático e Transplantação. Hospital de Curry Cabral. Lisboa, Portugal.

* Autor correspondente: Diana Póvoas. d.pvoas@gmail.com

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immunosuppression is maximal.\(^1\) Although pulmonary TB occurs in 50% to 60% of transplant recipients, disseminated forms are not uncommon.\(^3,4\) Diagnosis requires a high degree of suspicion and is often delayed, since only a small percentage of transplant recipients present the classic TB symptoms.\(^5\)

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This retrospective study was conducted in a liver and pancreas transplantation unit at Hospital Curry Cabral in Lisbon, Portugal. This unit performed 1428 liver transplants between 1992 and 2014, which roughly corresponds to 40% of liver transplants performed in Portugal throughout that period. Liver transplant recipients diagnosed with TB during the period from January 2010 to December 2014 were included. Patients' records were reviewed for baseline characteristics, country of origin, immunosuppressive regimen, latent TB screening or evidence of previous TB infection, site of Mycobacterium tuberculosis (\(M.\) tuberculosis) infection, clinical, epidemiological and radiographic features, HIV screening, diagnostic procedures, post-transplantation time to diagnosis, treatment, clinical outcomes and mortality.

TB diagnosis was made either by culture of \(M.\) tuberculosis complex or by presence of a caseous granuloma on histology of a biopsy specimen. Disseminated TB was considered when \(M.\) tuberculosis was isolated from two or more noncontiguous organs or when there was isolation of \(M.\) tuberculosis from one organ along with demonstration of acid-fast bacilli or granulomas at a different site.

Crude mortality was defined as all deaths occurring during follow-up. Mortality was considered to be tuberculosis-related when death occurred during the course of treatment and there was microbiological or histological evidence of active tuberculosis at the moment of death.

**RESULTS**

Among 1005 liver transplant recipients on current cumulative follow-up, eight liver transplant recipients developed active TB (Table 1).

Most were men (62.5%), with a mean age of 53.5 years (38 - 72 years). Most TB cases were diagnosed more than 12 months after liver transplantation (6; 75%). The mean time between liver transplant and TB diagnosis was 61.5 months (median 39.1; range 5.6 - 229.1 months). The most frequently reported symptom was fever (5; 62.5%), along with constitutional symptoms (3; 37.5%). Only one patient was asymptomatic, in which case TB diagnosis was done during study of a solitary lung nodule detected on a routine chest X-ray.

The mean duration of symptoms before TB diagnosis was 4.6 months (median 3.1; range 0.8 - 13 months).

### Table 1 – Demographic and clinical characteristics of liver transplant recipients with tuberculosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient n° (age, sex)</th>
<th>LT year</th>
<th>Underlying disease</th>
<th>TB diagnosis</th>
<th>Mean time to TB diagnosis after LT (m)</th>
<th>Immunosupression</th>
<th>TB risk factors</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (49, male)</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>HCV</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>Cyclosporine</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (46, male)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Alcoholic cirrhosis, HBV</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Tacrolimus and MMF</td>
<td>Long stay in Africa before LT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (42, male)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Sclerosing cholangitis</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>16.8</td>
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<td>2013</td>
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<td>9.5</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>5 (72, male)</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>HCV, HCC</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>Everolimus</td>
<td>Radiological evidence of past tuberculosis</td>
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<td>6 (53, female)</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>56.0</td>
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<td>7 (38, female)</td>
<td>1991-2006</td>
<td>Auto-immune hepatitis</td>
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The mean duration of symptoms before TB diagnosis was 4.6 months (median 3.1; range 0.8 - 13 months).
Four patients presented pulmonary tuberculosis, one of them with disseminated disease. There was another case of disseminated disease, without pulmonary findings. The remaining three patients had pleural (n = 2) and intestinal disease (n = 1).

In one of the two cases of disseminated TB there was involvement of the graft liver, demonstrated by the presence of granulomas containing acid-fast bacilli on liver biopsy obtained during exploratory laparotomy. None of the patients had acid-fast bacilli on sputum smear. All cases required invasive diagnostic procedures. In seven cases (87.5%) there was cultural isolation of M. tuberculosis complex; in the remaining case the diagnosis was based on the presence of acid-fast bacilli on pleural biopsy. None of the isolates were resistant to first-line anti-tuberculosis drugs and induction treatment was initiated with a four-drug regimen containing isoniazid, rifampin, pyrazinamide and ethambutol in all cases.

Four patients had elevated liver enzymes throughout the course of treatment (50%). In only one case were these changes attributable to antibacillary drugs toxicity. In two patients, liver biopsy showed acute rejection and in the remaining one, changes were attributable to Hepatitis B virus (HBV) reactivation.

Three patients presented simultaneous infections. One patient had HBV reactivation, one had positive cytomegalovirus (CMV) antigenemia, which prompted preemptive treatment and another one had pneumonia due to Pneumocystis jiroveci (PPC). This last patient died.

Crude mortality during follow up was 37.5%, while mortality directly attributable to TB was 25%.

**DISCUSSION**

Incidence of tuberculosis in solid organ transplant recipients has been reported to range from 0.35 to 15%,

hence being eight to 100-fold higher than among general population in the respective countries. 

TB incidence in liver transplant recipients ranges from 0.9% to 2.3%. 

In Portugal, TB incidence ranged from 20 to 22 cases per 100 000 inhabitants during the period analyzed.

In this case series the frequency of TB in liver transplant recipients was 0.8%. Even though this report doesn’t allow us to estimate the incidence of TB in liver transplant recipients in Portugal, this frequency is important, since the short-term mortality rate for liver transplant recipients with active tuberculosis is 31%. 

Although about two-thirds of reported cases of active tuberculosis disease in transplant recipients occur early, commonly defined as the first post-transplant year, we in our study late-onset TB infection, defined as disease occurring after the first twelve months pos-transplantation, was more frequent (n = 6; 75%).

It has been suggested that patients with prior clinical or radiological evidence of tuberculosis tend to develop the disease earlier than patients without these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic procedures</th>
<th>Localization/Radiologic features</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Treatment**</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lobectomy</td>
<td>Pulmonary infiltrates</td>
<td>Cultural (lung tissue)</td>
<td>2 (HRZE) 4 (HR)</td>
<td>Mild to moderate cholestasis due to antituberculous drugs</td>
<td>Completed treatment. Death not attributable to TB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory laparotomy</td>
<td>Disseminated</td>
<td>Cultural (lymph node, urine)</td>
<td>2 (HRZE) 10 (HR)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Completed treatment, Asymptomatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoscopy, pleural biopsy</td>
<td>Pleural fluid and pleural biopsy</td>
<td>Cultural (pleural fluid and pleural biopsy)</td>
<td>HRZE, change to LSE due to increased liver enzymes. Liver biopsy showed acute rejection Later H reintroduction and maintenance therapy with HLE</td>
<td>Ongoing treatment. Asymptomatic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoscopy, pleural biopsy</td>
<td>Pleural</td>
<td>Histological</td>
<td>2 (HRZE) 4 (HR)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Completed treatment, Asymptomatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoscopy, upper and lower GI endoscopy</td>
<td>Intestinal</td>
<td>Cultural (intestinal biopsy)</td>
<td>2 (HRZE) 10 (HR)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Ongoing treatment, Asymptomatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoscopy</td>
<td>Pulmonary</td>
<td>Cultural (BAL)</td>
<td>HRZE</td>
<td>2 weeks of treatment when death occurred</td>
<td>Death attributable to TB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoscopy</td>
<td>Pulmonary atelectasia and obstructive pneumonia</td>
<td>Cultural (BAL)</td>
<td>HRZE, temporary suspension to due to increased liver enzymes. Liver biopsy showed acute rejection. Change to HREM.</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Death attributable to TB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excision of axillary adenopathy</td>
<td>Disseminated</td>
<td>Cultural (lymph node)</td>
<td>2 (HRZE) 10 (HR)</td>
<td>HBV reactivation</td>
<td>Ongoing treatment. Asymptomatic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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antecedents, due to higher risk of reactivation during the first months after transplantation, independent of the type of immunosuppression received. However, in our report, none of the patients with TB risk factors who developed late TB disease were treated for latent TB infection. Also, as shown in Table 1, patients with radiographic changes that could suggest past TB infection developed active disease more than 1 year after liver transplantation.

Primary tuberculosis infection in liver transplant recipients is not frequently reported in the literature. However, we think that patient seven, who had pulmonary atelectasy and obstructive pneumonia with endobronchial tuberculosis seen in the bronchoscopy may have very likely had primary TB, since the radiological and endoscopic features presented by this patient are usually described as highly suggestive of primary disease (Fig. 1).

The most frequent clinical presentation of TB in our study was nonspecific fever and constitutional symptoms, which is in accordance to other case series. Fever is significantly more likely to occur in transplant recipients with disseminated infection than in those with localized tuberculosis. Although pulmonary TB occurs in more than 50% of transplant recipients, disseminated forms are frequently reported. Similarly to other series, approximately 37% of our cases were disseminated or occurred at extra-pulmonary sites.

In our case series we highlight the tuberculous involvement of the graft liver in one patient (patient two) and the case of intestinal tuberculosis (patient five), in which cardinal symptoms were fever, anemia and weight loss. In this last case, diagnosis was particularly difficult to establish and the patient underwent three colonoscopies that showed multiple ulceration and significant ileum disease (Fig.s 2 - 5).

All patients were treated with a four-drug induction regimen for two months. This drug scheme was changed to a free-rifampin regimen in the two patients that had acute graft rejection (Table 1). After induction regimen, the remaining patients were treated with a two-drug maintenance regimen with isoniazid and rifampin during four or 10 months, depending on disease severity and extension.

Despite the uncertainty regarding treatment duration in liver transplant recipients, disease severity, as well as number of active drugs against TB infection, should be taken into account. In our case series, patients with pulmonary TB were treated for six months and the remaining for 12 months.

Rifampin is a strong inducer of the microsomal enzymes that metabolize cyclosporine and tacrolimus, which poses a major difficulty in the treatment of transplant recipients with tuberculosis and may complicate the maintenance of adequate levels of immunosuppressive drugs. Hence, during TB treatment in transplant recipients, liver function tests must be closely monitored and dosages of cyclosporine and tacrolimus should be adequately adjusted, usually requiring an increase of at least 2 - 3 fold. The decrease in serum levels of calcineurin inhibitors and corticosteroids caused by rifampin has been associated with a high risk of graft rejection that may be up to 25%.

In this case series, two patients with liver enzyme elevation had acute rejection confirmed by liver biopsy. Both acute rejection episodes occurred during the first month of antibacillary treatment and were very likely due

![Figure 1](image1.png) - Main right bronchius showing a nipple-like lesion with a mucosal hyperemia

![Figure 2](image2.png) - Longitudinal ulcer and cobblestone appearance at the distal third of transverse colon

![Figure 3](image3.png) - Ulcer with a polypoid lesion at the proximal third of the transverse colon
to low tacrolimus levels and not tuberculosis treatment. Our approach in this two cases consisted in immunosuppression adjustment and change to an antituberculosis rifampin-free regimen.

In our series crude mortality was 37.5%, while mortality directly attributable to TB was 25%. Both deaths registered in our case series occurred in patients with pulmonary TB. In patient seven, simultaneous PPC contributed to the non-favorable outcome. In the other one, regretfully, post mortem examination was not possible, and the presumable cause of sudden death was most likely cardiovascular, since the patient had obesity, diabetes and pulmonary hypertension.

In our transplantation unit, skin testing with purified protein derivative (PPD) is usually reserved for patients with prior clinical or chest X-ray findings suggestive of past TB. Hence, we had no sufficient data in order to characterize the impact of this feature in our case report throughout the period analyzed. However, it is important to underline that transplant recipients with a positive PPD test have a relative risk of 4.3 of developing symptomatic TB. Also, liver transplant recipients have an 18-fold increased risk of TB reactivation in comparison with the general population and even possibly higher in areas with high incidence of TB, as was the case of Portugal during the period in question, during which TB incidence ranged from 20 to 22 cases per 100 000 inhabitants. European guidelines now recommend that all transplant candidates should have a tuberculin test or a TB interferon-gamma release assay (IGRA) test carried out in order to decide chemoprophylaxis.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, despite limitations inherent to the study design, we present a review of TB cases in a large series of liver transplant recipients. During this 5-year period, eight patients developed active TB infection and the observed mortality rate was not to be neglected. The reported tendency to non-pulmonary disseminated TB illustrates the challenge in diagnosing TB infection in liver transplant recipients, as well as the need to perform early invasive diagnostic procedures. Although the number of patients is small, it is worth noticing that none of the eight patients had lung cavitation, as this has been described to be a rare feature in solid organ transplant recipients. The cases of drug toxicity and acute graft rejection reflect the difficulties in the management of interactions between immunosuppressors and rifampin. Our study also strengthens the recommendation of latent TB infection screening and treatment in liver transplant candidates or recipients.

PROTECTION OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS
The authors declare that the procedures were followed according to the regulations established by the Clinical Research and Ethics Committee and to the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association.

DATA CONFIDENTIALITY
The authors declare having followed the protocols in use at their working center regarding patients’ data publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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No subsidies or grants contributed to this work.

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