Adverse Events Following Smallpox Vaccination With ACAM2000 in a Military Population

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Background: Generalized vaccinia and benign exanthems are 2 adverse events that have been associated with the smallpox vaccination. Accurate incidence and prevalence rates of each are not readily available, but these events are thought to be uncommon. To our knowledge, this is the first case series to provide clinical as well as pathologic descriptions of multiple papulovesicular eruptions occurring after receiving the second-generation smallpox vaccine, ACAM2000 (Acambis, Canton, Massachusetts), among a vaccinia-naïve military population. In addition, we report the first confirmed case, to our knowledge, of generalized vaccinia following administration of the ACAM2000 vaccine.

Observations: All patients received primary smallpox immunization as well as 1 to 3 concurrent or near-concurrent (within the preceding 21 days) immunizations for typhoid, anthrax, hepatitis B, and/or seasonal influenza. One patient presented with a flulike prodrome and diffuse vesicopustules covering the face, neck, chest, back, and upper and lower extremities. Vaccinia polymerase chain reaction confirmed generalized vaccinia. The remaining 7 patients presented with unusual, painful, and pruritic papulovesicular eruptions occurring on the extensor surfaces of their upper and lower extremities without systemic symptoms. Histologic findings revealed 2 general patterns, including a dermal hypersensitivity reaction with lymphocytic vasculitis and a vesicular spongiotic dermatitis with eosinophils.

Conclusions: We present the first confirmed case of generalized vaccinia following immunization with the second-generation smallpox vaccine ACAM2000. In addition, we describe 7 cases of benign, acral, papulovesicular eruptions thought to be associated with ACAM2000 administration. Further research is needed to discern the pathogenesis of these benign eruptions as well as their incidence and prevalence and that of generalized vaccinia with ACAM2000.

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ports from the 1960s note that most benign eruptions tend to occur 4 to 10 days after vaccination.9,10 However, more recent reports describe eruptions occurring as late as 12 to 19 days following vaccination.8,11,12 The clearance time for these benign eruptions varies widely in the literature. Early data suggested resolution within 2 to 4 days11,13, however, subsequent studies report a delay of 10 to 20 days.11,12 No specific treatment is required, although antihistamines, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and topical or oral steroids have been reported to provide some degree of symptomatic relief. Vaccinia immune globulin is not recommended as treatment for these cutaneous reactions.6

**METHODS**

We reviewed 8 cases of cutaneous reactions that occurred following smallpox vaccination with ACAM2000 that took place from July 2008 through July 2009. During that time, more than 150,000 members of the US military were vaccinated (data from T. Vactor, June 17, 2009, contained in an e-mail forwarded from M. Hartshorn, MSHP, CMPE, on June 18, 2009). Patients were identified through multiple sources within Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, to include the Vaccine Healthcare Center (2 cases), emergency department (2 cases), and pathology department (1 case). Additional cases throughout the military were identified using the Army Medical Department teledermatology system (3 cases). A dermatologist (C.M.H.) was involved in the immediate care (either directly or via the teledermatology system) of all patients. Clinical photographs were taken of all but 1 patient, and at least 1 punch or shave biopsy specimen was obtained from each patient. Laboratory studies were neither standardized nor consistent among patients; however, studies included the following: vaccinia polymerase chain reaction (PCR), viral culture, bacterial culture, IgG/IgM assays for Varicella zoster virus (VZV), and IgG assays for herpes simplex virus (HSV) 1 and 2. All specimens were examined by the same dermatopathologist with histopathologic analysis for various substrates, including C3, C5b-9, fibrinogen, IgG, IgM, IgA, HSV, and VZV were also performed in select cases.

**REPORT OF A CASE**

**GENERALIZED VACCINIA**

A 34-year-old man who was negative for the human immunodeficiency virus with an otherwise benign medical history received his initial anthrax, typhoid, and hepatitis B immunizations along with the seasonal influenza immunization on April 23, 2009, and subsequently received his primary smallpox vaccination with ACAM2000 per the manufacturers’ instructions 6 days later on April 29, 2009. On postvaccination day (PVD) 11, the patient developed headache, dizziness, shortness of breath, decreased appetite, and fatigue and subsequently presented to the medical clinic the following day (PVD 12) with similar symptoms. He was diagnosed as having pharyngitis and given a prescription for azithromycin, guaifenesin, nasal saline solution, and loratadine. That evening the patient presented to the emergency department with pain, swelling, ery-
4 to 6 months. The patient is currently deployed to a remote location with follow-up immunologic and hematologic evaluations planned on his return.

**REPRESENTATIVE CASE OF A PAINFUL AND PRURITIC PAPULOVESICULAR ERUPTION**

A 22-year-old Asian American woman with a medical history of human papilloma virus cervicitis but who was otherwise presumed to be previously healthy received her primary smallpox vaccination with ACAM2000 (Acambis) per the manufacturer’s instructions along with anthrax (series 3) on July 29, 2008. On PVD 16, the patient developed a skin eruption that was described as on August 18, 2008 (PVD 20), as the following: 15 to 20 vesicles, 1 to 4 mm in size, over both knee extensors, and 30 to 40 vesicles on palmar and dorsal surfaces of the hands, especially on the fingers, 15 to 20 vesicles along right arm and over the elbow extensor, and 7 to 10 vesicles on the dorsolateral surfaces of each foot, sparing the soles. The patient also had a few lesions on her lips, ear, and scalp. A 10 × 6-mm erosion with crust was noted on the left lateral proximal arm at the site of the smallpox vaccination. The lesions were described as painful and pruritic. The patient further denied any systemic symptoms or fevers. On PVD 20, a punch biopsy specimen of a vesicle on the right forearm showed a vesicular/spongiotic dermatitis with eosinophils (Figure 2A). Further diagnostics included negative viral and bacterial cultures as well as a negative vaccinia PCR and negative direct immunofluorescent studies for VZV and HSV. The patient was initially treated with diphenhydramine, acetaminophen–oxycodone, ibuprofen, and a 7-day course of valacyclovir hydrochloride and fluocinonide topical cream, 0.05%. On PVD 23 the patient did not have any new lesions; however, she had worsening erythema at the vesicle bases (Figure 3) and was started on a 4-day burst of prednisone, 60 mg/d. After completing the burst (PVD 27), the patient’s lesions were shrinking, drying up, and healing, and she further denied pruritus or pain (Figure 4). Despite continued resolution of her lesions (Figure 5), she experienced a recurrence of her symptoms and noted the eruption of 2 new vesicles on PVD 34 that subsequently resolved following a 3-week steroid taper.

### RESULTS

All patients were young adults on active duty in the military and primary vaccinees who received ACAM2000 (per the manufacturer’s guidelines). In addition, all of the patients received either concurrent or near-concurrent (within the preceding 21 days) vaccinations of a combination of typhoid, anthrax, hepatitis B virus, and influenza. Specifically, all of the patients received the anthrax immunization either concurrently or within 21 days prior to receiving the smallpox immunization. Five of the 8 patients received the typhoid vaccination either concurrently or within 21 days prior to receiving the smallpox immunization. Two patients received hepatitis B virus vaccinations either concurrently or within 6 days of receiving the smallpox immunization, and 1 patient received the influenza vaccine 6 days prior to receiving the smallpox immunization. None of the patients reported any acute illnesses prior to immunization. A few patients had preexisting medical conditions, including hypertension and depression. None of the patients reported any contact with sick persons or previous adverse events following prior immunizations.

Of the more than 150 000 military members who received the ACAM2000 smallpox vaccine between July 2008 and July 2009, we observed 8 cases of adverse cutaneous eruptions following immunization. One case revealed a patient who presented with flu-like symptoms and on PVD 11 subsequently developed a diffuse rapidly progressing vesiculopustular eruption. The patient had a brief, unevent-
ful hospitalization, and the eruption subsequently cleared within 14 days. Vaccinia PCR of a swab from a distant biopsy site confirmed the diagnosis of GV, and the biopsy specimen revealed a mixed pattern of spongiotic dermatitis with neutrophils and eosinophils.

The remaining 7 cases revealed patients who developed dramatic, pruritic, and painful papulovesicular/bullous eruptions that were located predominantly over the extensor surfaces of the upper and lower extremities without any systemic symptoms. The eruptions occurred on PVDs 10 to 18 and resolved within 14 to 71 days. As stated in the “Methods” section, diagnostic tests were not consistently obtained; however, all patients did undergo at least 1 biopsy, and photographs were taken of all of the patients. Biopsy findings revealed 2 nonspecific patterns, including 4 cases of epidermal vesicle formation and spongiosis with superficial dermal eosinophils (Figure 2A) and 3 cases of a dermal hypersensitivity reaction with lymphocytic vasculitis (capillaritis) (Figure 2B). All patients required some form of pharmacotherapy for symptomatic relief to include oral and topical steroids, antihistamines, NSAIDs, and antibiotics. Specifically, 6 patients required oral steroid tapers using prednisone (range, 5 days to 3 weeks), and 2 patients experienced relapses of their eruptions when they completed and/or stopped their steroid tapers and subsequently required prolonged treatment. No patients received vaccinia immune globulin. Table 1 provides a summary of individual patient clinical and pathologic data as well as vaccinia PCR result when available.

**COMMENT**

We describe 2 uncommon adverse events following immunization with ACAM2000, a case of GV, believed to be the first confirmed case in 6 years and the first among patients receiving ACAM2000, and 6 cases of an acral, vesiculopustular dermatosis. Currently, there is a lack of data in the literature to accurately calculate incidence and preva-
of generalized maculopapular rashes that occur around Studies from the 1960s most commonly discuss rare cases common and have been previously described elsewhere. Benign cutaneous eruptions following vaccination with ACAM2000 were poorly defined during clinical trials, but anthrax vaccine, alone or in combination with other vaccines such as anthrax, the immunization. While these reactions could be due to one that were clinically distinct from the acral papulovesicular lesions seen in this series. Findings from their biopsy specimens revealed similar nonspecific inflammatory changes consisting of some degree of epidermal spongiosis and a dermal perivascular lymphocytic infiltrate with scattered eosinophils. Frey et al also described similar findings of erythematous rashes and erythema multiforme as well as cases of localized and generalized vesicular eruptions. 

Table 1. Demographic, Clinical, Pathologic, and Vaccinia Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) Data of Patients Experiencing Papulovesicular Eruptions After Smallpox Vaccination With ACAM2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient No./Sex/Age, y</th>
<th>Interval Between Inoculation and Eruption, d</th>
<th>Length of Eruption Until Clearance, d</th>
<th>Gross Morphologic Findings</th>
<th>Histologic Characteristics</th>
<th>Vaccinia PCR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/F/22b</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Papulovesicles on hands, elbows, knees, feet</td>
<td>Vesicles with a spongios dermatitis and eosinophils</td>
<td>Nonreactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/F/32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Vesicobullous on hands, elbows, knees, feet</td>
<td>Vesicles with a spongios dermatitis and eosinophils</td>
<td>Nonreactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/M/22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Papules on hands</td>
<td>Spongios dermatitis and eosinophils</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/M/25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Plaques on shoulder, elbow</td>
<td>Dermal hypersensitivity reaction with lymphocytic vasculitis (capillaritis)</td>
<td>Nonreactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/M/22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Papules on hands, elbow</td>
<td>Dermal hypersensitivity reaction with lymphocytic vasculitis (capillaritis)</td>
<td>Nonreactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/M/19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Papules, plaques on hands, elbows, knees</td>
<td>Vesicles with a spongios dermatitis and eosinophils</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/M/26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Papules on hands, elbow</td>
<td>Lympohocytic vasculitis with spongios dermatitis (capillaritis vs dermal hypersensitivity)</td>
<td>Nonreactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/M/34c</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Vesiculopustules on scalp, axilla, trunk, arms, legs</td>
<td>Mixed pattern with predominantly pustule/vesicle formation and spongios dermatitis with neutrophils and eosinophils</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: NA, not applicable.

Table 2. Comparison of Generalized Vaccinia (GV) and the Benign Papulovesicular Eruptions Observed in This Case Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Etiology</th>
<th>Time of Onset</th>
<th>Clinical Manifestations</th>
<th>Laboratory Finding</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Contributing Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GV</td>
<td>Vaccinia virema</td>
<td>Typically within 7 d of vaccination</td>
<td>Vesicles and/or pustules at 4 sites separate from the vaccination</td>
<td>Confirmation of vaccinia virus in the blood or lesions other than the vaccination site</td>
<td>Supportive therapy, consider vaccinia immune globulin for extensive disease</td>
<td>Immunodeficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acral, papulovesicular eruption</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10-18 d postvaccination</td>
<td>Erythematous papules and vesicles located over acral extensor surfaces</td>
<td>Nonspecific</td>
<td>Supportive therapy, consider oral glucocorticoid taper if GV is unlikely</td>
<td>Unknown; however, concurrent immunization may be contributory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PVD 7,10 More recently, controlled studies using different formulations and dosages of early-generation smallpox vaccines have been conducted. Greenberg et al 12 described multiple benign and self-limited eruptions, including urticaria, exanthems, and folliculitis, that occurred during PVDs 6 to 9 and resolved within 4 to 20 days. Bessinger et al 13 described similar findings in which cases of urticaria, exanthems, and erythema multiforme-like reactions occurred at roughly the same interval between PVDs 7 to 11 that were clinically distinct from the acral papulovesicular lesions seen in this series. Findings from their biopsy specimens revealed similar nonspecific inflammatory changes consisting of some degree of epidermal spongiosis and a dermal perivascular lymphocytic infiltrate with scattered eosinophils. Frey et al 14 also described similar findings of erythematous rashes and erythema multiforme as well as cases of localized and generalized vesicular eruptions. Table 2 provides a brief comparison of GV and the acral papulovesicular eruptions described herein.
While the etiology of these acral papulovesicular eruptions remain unclear, several previously proposed hypotheses for benign skin reactions include an allergic reaction to the vaccine’s “vehicle,” a hypersensitivity reaction, and a mild form of GV. We propose an additional etiologic hypothesis similar to the mechanism of HSV-associated erythema multiforme, in which viral proteins have been identified within biopsy specimens of typical skin lesions.  

Although previous attempts to culture these eruptions have been unsuccessful, we are currently pursuing further work attempting to identify vaccinia protein deposits within these eruptions by testing the biopsy specimens with immunohistochemical antibodies against various vaccinia proteins.

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REFERENCES