Economic cost and epidemiological characteristics of fibromyalgia.

George E Erlich

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*The Journal of Rheumatology* is a monthly international serial edited by Earl D. Silverman featuring research articles on clinical subjects from scientists working in rheumatology and related fields.
Ms Robinson replies

To the Editor:

As my colleagues and I mention in our article1, the clinical understanding of fibromyalgia (FM) is evolving, the pathophysiology is unknown, and the diagnosis is often not made correctly. While Dr. Ehrlich and others may believe that FM is not a “real” disorder, the very fact that 4699 patients had an insurance claim with an ICD-9 diagnosis of FM is obvious evidence that many physicians disagree with his opinion. By way of comparison, there was also divergence of opinion regarding the biological basis of major depressive disorder prior to the advent of effective pharmacotherapy.

The point of our article was to demonstrate that patients with insurance claims related to FM are suffering and face great burdens, which include hidden costs of disability and burden to health care systems. Published data on FM have grown considerably from the time the term was coined in 1976. Medline search of “fibromyalgia” represents a growing trend in the literature, from 114 in the 1970s, 227 in the 80s, and 1144 in the 90s, and already 658 since 2000. Patients and physicians want answers. We have a responsibility to patients to gain better understanding of FM, whether or not there is complete agreement within the clinical community about its legitimacy as an illness.

In fact, the uncertainty of the disease is even more reason to publish and gain understanding of this disorder in order to help patients. Patients with an ICD-9 code for FM represented 2.8% of the large-employer data we analyzed. Compared with overall beneficiaries, FM claimants had 2.6 times more medical claims, almost 3 times more prescriptions for study selected medications, and had 2 times the total health care costs. We concluded there is a great need for better understanding of FM.

Where better to publish these results than with the experts in the field, rheumatologists?

REBECCA ROBINSON, ms. Health Outcomes Research Scientist, Eli Lilly and Company, Lilly Corporate Center, Indianapolis, Indiana 46285, USA.

REFERENCES


Drs. Dobkin and Bernatsky reply

To the Editor:

Dr. Ehrlich seems to advocate banishing the publication of articles pertaining to fibromyalgia (FM) in The Journal of Rheumatology. His viewpoint apparently stems from his rejection of the diagnostic label “fibromyalgia.” He, among others (e.g., Ford1, Quintner and Cohen2), purports that use of the diagnostic label contributes to the spread of misinformation and perpetuation of an epidemic. Apparently, the lack of objective evidence underly ing the symptoms described by patients renders research pertaining to FM unworthy of public dissemination. Yet one could easily name many health problems whereby “the patient is the evidence,” e.g., low back pain, migraine headaches, etc. Without patients presenting their symptoms (via self-report) most clinicians would be unable to diagnose diseases with known pathology (e.g., systemic lupus erythematosus).

So why bother investigating and reporting empirical work pertaining to the syndrome defined by the American College of Rheumatology over a decade ago? First, because it is the second most common diagnosis in rheumatology clinics3. Second, because health service utilization is high, as are the costs to society and individuals with FM4. Third, because as scientists we seek to understand the nature of the syndrome (see Pillemer, et al5 and Croft4). Fourth, because as clinicians we feel compassion for other human beings who are suffering and hope to find an effective means of treating them (see Wilke4).

As a clinical psychologist I cannot help but see that the term “fibromyalgia” elicits a negative reaction in many medical doctors (among others). Why does this particular syndrome bring out the worst in some otherwise competent and caring physicians? Do time pressures experienced by doctors make it harder to fit these patients into their grueling schedules? Does the lack of effective treatment make seeing them seem futile?
Even if it is true that the label “fibromyalgia” is just a new term for muscular rheumatism, or neurasthenia, or fibrositis, or that it represents a “common distress disorder”, the fact remains that up to 2% of the adult population complains of the symptoms consistent with FM. The good news is the label itself does not appear to alter health status, function, or health service utilization.

PATRICIA L. DOBKIN, PhD, Associate Professor, Division of Clinical Epidemiology, Department of Medicine, McGill University, 1650 Cedar Avenue, Suite L10 417, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1A4, Canada, E-mail: patricia.dobkin@mcgill.ca; SASHA BERNATSKY, MD, McGill Epidemiology, Department of Medicine, McGill University, 1650 Cedar Avenue, Suite L10 417, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1A4, Canada, E-mail: patricia.dobkin@mcgill.ca

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To the Editor:

Autoantibodies Following Silicone Implant Rejection

An Unusually Complicated Case of Primary Sjögren’s Syndrome: Development of Transient “Lupus-type” Autoantibodies Following Silicone Implant Rejection

To the Editor:

We describe the appearance of transient “lupus-type” autoantibodies (anti-Sm and anti-RNP) with no clinical evidence of systemic lupus erythemato-
patient it was initially combined with a mild hypogammaglobulinemia, distinctly rare in this disorder, which might have been related to previous therapy with immunosuppressives such as MTX, thus possibly adding to her predisposition to recurrent infections. Garcia-Carrasco, et al.10 investigated the frequency of hypogammaglobulinemia in a group of Spanish patients with SS, and found 8% had low IgG levels. These investigators also found evidence of previous parvovirus infection in 35%. As the hypogammaglobulinemia in our patient was transient, it is possible that it may have been drug induced. However, the frequency of infections seemed not to decrease following normalization of the gammaglobulin levels, and because of this, the infections may have been related to the underlying SS itself (because of mucosal abnormalities seen in this condition), combined with the neutropenia and not because of immunosuppression from drugs or the hypogammaglobulinemia. Another explanation might be an occult polymorphonuclear cell dysfunction or abnormality of T cell subsets.

There was a persistent monoclonal gammopathy and a diagnosis of monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance was also made. According to several authorities, this may be predictive for the future development of myeloma.

Monoclonal gammapathies have also infrequently been documented in association with SS. However, Sugai, et al.11 studied 12 Japanese patients with pSS and found a large variety of monoclonality in their group, while Broggini, et al.12 in 358 patients with SS found this to be present in 6% of patients.

Our patient, in addition, also had hypothyroidism. She thus represents another example of the “mosaic of autoimmunity” as described by Shoenfeld and Isenberg.13

The question arises as to the relationship of the silicone implant leakage and its probable rejection and the transient development of these autoantibodies. This case is not dissimilar to our report of a 45-year-old woman who, upon inhalation of a polyclonal lymphocyte-activating factor, developed 6 different autoimmune diseases associated with a panoply of autoantibodies. The combination of an environmental factor and a genetic predisposition is therefore well known as leading to an overt autoimmune disease.

In our case the silicone may have acted as an “adjuvant”. Indeed, injections of silicone to MRL/lpr strains of mice have been followed by increased titers of SLE autoantibodies as well as cytokine changes. Illnesses resembling rheumatoid arthritis, SLE, and SS, termed “siculo-autoimmune diseases,” following silicone breast augmentation have been reported, as well as a fibromyalgia/chronic fatigue syndrome.

Infections such as mycobacterial, gram-negative, and specifically Epstein-Barr virus14 are also known to be associated with the emergence of SLE related autoantibodies and even overt SLE. The transient appearance of these antibodies simultaneous to the silicone implant rejection, and their disappearance with its speedy removal, makes a strong case for not considering such transplants in patients with preexisting autoimmune disease or diathesis.

Ronalda A. Asherson, MD, FRCP, Rheumatic Diseases Unit, University of Cape Town Health Sciences Center, Groote Schuur Hospital, Cape Town and The Rosebank Clinic, Johannesburg, South Africa; YeHuda Shoenfeld, MD, FRCP, Center for Autoimmune Diseases, Department of Medicine B, Sheba Medical Center, Tel-Hashomer, Israel; Chris Bosman, MB, FCPSA, The Kenridge Hospital, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Book review


This handbook is part of a series called Fast Facts, Indispensable Guides to Clinical Practice, which focuses on providing pocketbook synopses of diseases. Previously published Fast Facts topics have included “Osteoporosis” and “Soft Tissue Rheumatology.” The authors of this text are experts in their field and provide an overview of rheumatoid arthritis. The resulting reference is a concise yet comprehensive review of RA.

There are 10 chapters, including sections on Aetiology, Clinical Features, and Investigation. However the authors have elected for their first chapter to concentrate on normal joint anatomy, which suitably provides the reader with some fundamental tools to approach the chapter on Pathogenesis. There is up to date information on treatment, including a section on Management with Biological Response Modifiers. Despite the acknowledged purpose of being a quick reference text, the reader will be pleasantly surprised to find a chapter devoted to assessment of rheumatic disease activity. Well organized tables, figures, and pictures complement the easy to read text. Each chapter aptly concludes with a summary of the pertinent points as well as key references for those who wish to do further detail.

This is a well organized and thorough review that is appropriately directed to medical students and residents as well as family practitioners.

Bindu Nair, MD, FRCP, Assistant Professor of Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W8, Canada.

Correction

Østergaard M, Peterfy C, Conaghan P, et al. OMERACT rheumatoid arthritis magnetic resonance imaging studies. Core set of MRI acquisitions, joint pathology definitions, and the OMERACT RA-MRI scoring system. J Rheumatol 2003;30:1385–6. Page 1386, column 2, line 4, should read: Bone edema. Bone edema is scored 0–3 by the volume of edema: 0, no edema; 1, 1–33% of bone edematous; 2, 34–66%; 3, 67–100%. We regret the error.