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Severe Anemia in Malawian Children

TO THE EDITOR: Calis et al. (Feb. 28 issue) report a significant association of bacteremia with severe anemia in Malawi. Bacteremia in case patients and control patients was mainly due to nontyphoid salmonella. The study showed that nontyphoid salmonella bacteremia was present in 10.0% of case patients with severe anemia and in 1.5% of controls. This association has been consistently noted in other studies of childhood bacteremia in tropical Africa.

As discussed in the report, the association does not necessarily mean that nontyphoid salmonella bacteremia is a common cause of severe anemia. There are data suggesting that nontyphoid salmonella bacteremia is more likely to be a consequence of severe anemia, especially when anemia is due to hemolysis rather than to other causes, such as blood loss. The question of whether nontyphoid salmonella bacteremia is a cause or a consequence of severe anemia has implications for clinical management and potential preventive strategies.

Stephen M. Graham, F.R.A.C.P.
University of Melbourne
Melbourne, VIC 3052, Australia
steve.graham@rch.org.au

TO THE EDITOR: On the basis of plasma folate measurements, Calis et al. assert that folate deficiency was absent among Malawian children with severe anemia. However, the authors did not conclusively rule out folate deficiency by measurement of plasma homocysteine (and methylmalonic acid). 1,2

Low plasma folate values support the diagnosis of folate deficiency in uncomplicated anemia, but because erythrocyte folate values are 30 times as high as plasma folate values, even a small degree of (intravascular) hemolysis can raise plasma folate values and mask cellular folate deficiency. The burden rests on these investigators to unambiguously establish the absence of folate deficiency in sick and undernourished children. 3

Asok C. Antony, M.D.
Indiana University School of Medicine
Indianapolis, IN 46202

THE AUTHORS REPLY: In response to Graham: bacteremia — and especially nontyphoid salmonella — is a common finding in severely anemic children in Malawi. Excessive hemolysis may benefit the growth of nontyphoid salmonella, 4 and thus, nontyphoid salmonella may not necessarily cause severe anemia. We found that gross hemolysis was not a major feature in our population (unpublished data). Alternatively, nontyphoid salmonella may cause or worsen the anemia and can jeopardize bone marrow function. We concluded that, since 15% of the severely anemic children had bacteremia, routine treatment with antibiotics may be justified.

In response to de Mast and colleagues: we assessed the diagnostic accuracy of peripheral-blood markers for iron status using iron-stained bone marrow slides as the standard and found that the ratio of soluble TfR to log ferritin best predicted bone marrow iron status. 2 Using this ratio, we assessed the iron status in the case–control study and found a reversed odds ratio. We validated this finding using four other, well-known markers of iron deficiency (see Table 3 of our article). All analyses showed the same reversed odds ratio, which makes it unlikely that our findings can be explained by an effect of inflammation on erythropoiesis.

In response to Antony: it is theoretically possible that hemolysis and vitamin B 12 deficiency have masked folate deficiency. We performed an additional analysis to study the possible confounding effect of hemolysis. Laboratory values compatible with hemolysis were found in only a minority of severely anemic children. We found folate deficiency in the absence of abnormal hemolysis. We did not evaluate the source of dietary folate intake in these children in detail, but green vegetables and fruits account for a large proportion of the dietary intake of children in Malawi and are well-known sources of folate. Considering the diet in Malawi and the findings of previous studies from Africa on folate deficiency and supplementation, our findings are not surprising. 3,4

Job C.J. Calis, M.D.
Karnija S. Phiri, M.D.
Michaël Boele van Hensbroek, M.D.
Malawi–Liverpool–Wellcome Trust
Blantyre, Malawi
job.calis@gmail.com

2. Phiri KS. Assessment of iron deficiency in Malawian children living in an area of high malaria and bacterial infection morbidity. Liverpool, England: Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, 2006.