Immunological effect of co-trimoxazole on platelets

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Summary and conclusions
Diminished survival of transfused platelets occurred in two patients given co-trimoxazole, and a third patient taking this drug developed thrombocytopenia. By means of an indirect immunofluorescence assay antibodies against donor platelets coated with co-trimoxazole were found in the sera in all cases. These antibodies were directed against the trimethoprim component of co-trimoxazole and not against sulphamethoxazole.

Co-trimoxazole is a potent antimicrobial agent and is advocated for treatment and prophylaxis in leukaemia. Hence its adverse effect on platelets is of great importance.

Introduction
Co-trimoxazole (trimethoprim-sulphamethoxazole), a potent antimicrobial drug, is effective in various infections. The antimicrobial activity is due to sequential blockade of the synthetic pathway of folic acid: sulphamethoxazole competes with para-aminobenzoic acid in the synthesis of dihydrofolate, and trimethoprim inhibits dihydrofolate reductase, the enzyme that converts dihydrofolate to tetrahydrofolate.1 Reported haematological effects of co-trimoxazole 2 mostly concern megaloblastic transformation, which probably results from the effect of trimethoprim on dihydrofolate reductase.1 It is not clear, however, whether thrombocytopenia or neutropenia or both in the absence of megaloblastic changes are also due to trimethoprim or caused by the sulphonamide component.2

Two patients receiving platelet transfusions showed diminished survival of transfused platelets during treatment with co-trimoxazole, and a third patient taking the drug developed thrombocytopenia and neutropenia. We therefore used an indirect immunofluorescence assay to test sera from all cases. These antibodies were directed against the trimethoprim component of co-trimoxazole and not against sulphamethoxazole.

METHODS
Platelet survival—Usually preparations from four different donors containing an average of 150 x 10^9/1 platelets were transfused. In the absence of immunological destruction this would be expected to increase the circulating platelet count by 20-30 x 10^9/1 (20 000-30 000/µl) one hour after transfusion (in an adult of about 70 kg). Survival of transfused platelets was regarded as poor when the increase was less than 10 x 10^9/1.

Isolation of platelets—EDTA blood (1 part 5%, sodium EDTA and 9 parts blood) was centrifuged for 15 minutes at 150 g. The upper layer of plasma containing the platelets was washed three times with phosphate-buffered saline containing 0.3%, sodium EDTA, and a 1 x 10^9/ml suspension was made in this same medium.

Indirect immunofluorescence—Sera from the patients and controls were tested against platelets from healthy donors. Two drops of platelet suspension were incubated with two drops of test serum for 60 minutes at room temperature. After washing three times the platelets were incubated with two drops of TRITC-labelled goat-antihuman IgG(Fc) (Nordic Pharmaceuticals, Tilburg) for 30 minutes at room temperature. The platelets were then washed three times and the preparations examined by immunofluorescence microscopy.

Direct immunofluorescence—Platelets from case 2 were tested by direct immunofluorescence. Two drops of platelet suspension were incubated with two drops of TRITC-labelled goat-antihuman IgG(Fc) for 30 minutes at room temperature.

Results
In the indirect immunofluorescence tests sera from all three patients were found to contain antibodies against platelets incubated with co-trimoxazole. These antibodies were directed against the trimethoprim component only (table). During co-trimoxazole treatment in case 2 the patient's platelets were tested by direct and indirect immunofluorescence with his own serum; both tests were positive regardless of whether the platelets had been incubated with co-trimoxazole. Four weeks after stopping co-trimoxazole direct immunofluorescence on the platelets was negative with and without co-trimoxazole incubation. Nevertheless, when the platelets were incubated with co-trimoxazole the indirect immunofluorescence test became positive, indicating that the antibody was still present in his serum.

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Drug-induced immune thrombocytopenia has been shown for several other drugs. The best known examples are quinine and quinidine,1,2 allylisoprocyclicarbamate3; sulphafurazone, diazepam, and phenytoin4; and rifampicin5 have also been implicated. Why some patients develop these antibodies and others do not remains a subject for further study.

We thank Dr H L Haak and Dr J Nauta for their co-operation, Dr J S Thompson and Professor Dr R van Furth for critically reading the manuscript, and Ms Jeanne van Nassau for preparing the manuscript.

This study was in part supported by the National Institutes of Health (contract NO1-AI-82553); the Dutch Organisation for Health Research (FUNGO); the Dutch Foundation for Medical Research (FUNGO), which is subsidised by the Dutch Organisation for the Advancement of Pure Research (ZWO); and the J A Cohen Institute for Radiopatology and Radiation Protection.

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(Accepted 7 August 1978)