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.

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TO THE EDITOR: The conclusion by Calis et al. that iron deficiency was not a prominent cause of severe anemia in Malawian children would have been more convincing if the results of bone marrow iron staining in the case patients had been reported. Analysis of the amount of stainable iron in bone marrow aspirates is considered to be the most valuable tool for assessing whether sufficient iron is available for erythropoiesis. Furthermore, the accuracy of the ratio of soluble transferrin receptor (TfR) to log ferritin for diagnosing iron deficiency may have been hampered by the high prevalence of viral, bacterial, and parasitic infections in the case patients. TfR levels are predominantly determined by erythropoietic activity, and suppressed erythropoiesis is a common observation in infections, such as malaria and human immunodeficiency virus infection. Moreover, inflammation increases ferritin levels independently of body iron stores.

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1. This week’s letters
2. Severe Anemia in Malawian Children
3. Multifactorial Intervention in Type 2 Diabetes
4. Iron-Overload–Related Disease
5. Catheter Ablation in Patients with ICDs
6. Athletes with Repolarization Abnormalities
7. Neurogenic Orthostatic Hypotension
8. A PCSK9 Missense Variant and Reduced Risk of Myocardial Infarction
In response to Graham: We concluded that, since 15% of the severely anemic children had bacteremia, routine treatment with antibiotics may be justified.

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).

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.

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The authors reply: In response to Antony: it is theoretically possible that hemolysis and vitamin B<sub>12</sub> 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.

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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.