Original Article

Characteristics of Anemia in Malignant Disorders in Sana'a - Yemen

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Introduction: Anemia is associated with its own set of debilitating signs and symptoms and can have a significant effect on morbidity and mortality. These are aggravated in patients with malignant disorders.
Objective: To evaluate the characteristics of anemia in Yemeni patients with malignant disorders in Sana'a.
Methods: This is a prospective study, involved 60 patients with malignant disorders (30 males and 30 females) referred from National Oncology Center, Al-Thawra Hospital and The Military Hospital in Sana'a for six months (from Jun. 1st to Dec. 30th, 2017).
Results: Anemia among solid tumors was higher than in hematological malignancies. Males showed higher anemia with hematological malignancies while females showed higher anemia with solid tumors. Common cancers with anemia were GIT cancers, breast and leukemias. In males, common cancers with anemia were GIT cancers, leukemias and lymphomas, while in females, breast cancers, GIT cancers and gynecological cancers.
The common morphology of anemia was normocytic normochromic followed by microcytic hypochromic pictures. The common grades of anemia were grade 1 and 2, severe degree anemia was in 21.7%. Anemic patients with cancers showed significantly lower mean Hb, RBC count, Htc and MCHC, and significantly higher mean serum ferritin and B12 concentrations.
Conclusion: This study concluded that anemia is a common finding in cancer patients and attributed to increased RBCs destruction and cytokins mediated decreased production and recommended further studies.

Introduction

Anemia is a common complication of malignant disorders, occurring in over 50% of patients.[1] It is defined as an inadequate circulating level of hemoglobin or RBCs, and may arise as a result of the underlying disease, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy.[2]

Anemia is associated with its own set of debilitating signs and symptoms and can have a significant effect on morbidity and mortality, as well as on the level of care that patients require, despite this knowledge, anemia may not be optimally managed in the cancer patients' population, the underlying issues that contribute to this suboptimal care may be related to the failure of many clinicians to recognize the impact that anemia has on the lives of their patients and the inadequacies of current treatment options.[1,2]

However, the continuing development of novel erythropoietic agents,[3] progress in defining parameters to better predict a patient's response to anemia treatment,[4] along with emerging data that consider the effect of anemia on end points such as survival and cognitive function,[5] may help to overcome these issues, such initiatives suggest a promising future for the optimal management of anemia in the cancer patients.

This study was conducted with the aim of raising awareness about current knowledge and practice in management of anemia in patients with malignant disorders.

Patients and Method

This was a prospective study for 60 anemic patients with malignant disorders referred from the National Oncology Center, Al-Thawra Hospital and The Military Hospital in Sana'a for six

months (from Jun. 1st to Dec. 30th, 2017). Excluding patients with malignant neoplasm already on chemo and/or radiotherapy, patients received supplement therapy or blood transfusion during the last three months of presentation.

Patients were subjected to the followings; complete history taking, thorough clinical examination with special focus on the signs and symptoms of anemia. Abdominal ultrasonography, CT scan of neck, chest, abdomen, pelvis for cancer staging. Routine laboratory investigations, included CBC, blood film, and reticulocyt count. Special tests including serum ferritin, folic acid and vitamin B_{12}.

Anemia was defined according to WHO definition (Hb <13g/dl in men and <12g/dl in women) and classified into mild, moderate and severs according to WHO classification.[6] The grade of anemia was classified into 0 to5 according to the NCI classification.

Ethical consideration

The study was performed to achieve a social benefit and for the well being of the humanity. The study design was clearly formulated in protocol and was conducted under supervision of competent clinical professionals. Every participant in the study was assured with sufficient information about the study objectives, content of the questionnaire and possible benefit and risk. Verbal consents were obtained before blood sampling.

Statistical analysis:

The statistical analysis was done by using the statistical software package SPSS version 24. Data were first tested by the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test which showed a normal parametric distribution, then parametric tests were applied. Chi-square or Fisher exact tests were used to identify the presence of significant difference between groups having qualitative variables. Student t-test was used for the presence of significant difference between 2 groups having quantitative variables (mean SD). P-values of ≤ 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results:

The involved 60 anemic patients with different malignant disorders. They were 30 male and 30 female patients. The studied patients with anemia were having solid tumors 41(68.3%) more than hematological malignancies 19(31.7%%). In regard to sex of patients, it was found that male patients reported significantly higher percentage of hematological malignancies (HM) than

solid tumors. While female patients reported significantly higher percentage of solid tumors. Even the ratio of male to females showed similar significant pattern of distribution ($p<0.05$). [Table 1]

The common type of the studied malignant disorders with anemia were GIT cancers followed by breast cancers and leukemias. The remainders were lymphomas, gynecological and myeloma. In male patients, the common malignant disorders after GIT cancers were leukemias and lymphomas, while in female patients, the common malignant disorders with anemia were breast cancers, GIT cancers followed by gynecological cancers and lymphomas. [Table 2]

Hematological parameters in the studied anemic patients with malignant disorders showed that the mean Hb, RBC count and hematocrit were significantly lower among anemic patients with solid tumors than in hematological malignances ($p<0.05$). Serum ferritin concentration showed higher value among anemic patients with solid tumors than those with hematological malignancies, but without significant statistical variation ($p>0.05$). [Table 3]

In anemic patients with solid tumors, the common morphological type of anemia was normocytic normochromic anemia, while in anemic patients with hematological malignancies the common morphological types were normocytic normochromic and microcytic hypochromic anemias. About 58.5% of anemic patients with solid tumors were in grade 0 and I, while 52.7% of anemic patients with hematological malignancies were in grade 3 and 4 ($p<0.05$). Severe degree of anemia was statistically significantly higher in anemic patients with hematological malignancies (52.6%), while moderate degree of anemia was significantly higher in anemic patients with solid tumors (58.5%). [Table 4]

Discussion:

Anemia is common in patients with malignant disorders, frequently observed at the time of diagnosis and during treatment. The causes and mechanisms are complex, so that the term "multifactorial" has been applied. Among these malignancies, we observed variable hematological and solid tumors associated with anemias. However, the percentage of solid tumors with anemia was higher in this study. Similar finding was also reported by the study of Ludwig et al (2013),[7] in Austria among 1528 cancer patients. They found that anemia was detected in 50.4% of patients with solid tumors and 43.7% of patients with hema-

Table 1: Distribution of patients with malignant disorders by sex and type of malignant disorders

Types of malignant neoplasm	Male		Female		Mean age (years)		M : F ratio
	№	%	№	%	№	*%	
Solid tumors (n=41)	17	41.5	24	58.5	17.5 ± 54.9 (80 – 18)		1.4 : 1
Hematological malignancies (n=19)	13	68.4	6	31.6	18.8 ± 38.8 (65 – 16)		1 : 2.2
Total	30	50.0	30	50.0	19.2 ± 50.1 (80 – 16)		1 : 1

M:F ratio: male to female ratio.   *[χ² = 4.59, p = 0.032] Statistically significant.*

Table 2: Diagnosis of the studied malignant disorders with anemia by sex

Diagnosis	Male (n = 30)		Female (n=30)		Total (n = 60)	
	№	%	№	%	№	%
Gastrointestinal cancers	11	36.7	8	26.7	19	31.7
Breast cancer	—	—	10	33.3	10	16.7
Leukemia	8	26.7	2	6.7	10	16.7
Lymphoma	3	10.0	3	10.0	6	10.0
Gynecological cancers	—	—	5	16.7	5	8.3
Multiple myeloma	2	6.7	1	3.3	3	5.0
Bronchogenic carcinoma	2	6.7	—	—	2	3.3
Other malignant disorders	*4	13.3	**1	3.3	5	8.3

*Include 2 neuroblastoma and 2 nasopharyngeal carcinoma   ** Include parotid gland cancer

**Table 3: Hematological parameters of malignant disorders' patients with anemia
by the type of malignancy**

Parameter	Solid tumors n= 41		HM n = 19		p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Hemoglobin concentration (g/dl)	7.7	2.1	9.4	0.9	*0.00001
Red blood cells count ($X10^{12}$/L)	3.29	1.1	3.97	0.69	*0.006
Hematocrit (%)	26.9	8.1	32.9	4.9	*0.001
Reticulocytes count (%)	1.1	0.8	1.3	0.6	0.289
MCV (fl)	82.5	10.8	82.9	11.3	0.905
MCH (pg)	26.5	4.3	25.9	3.3	0.545
MCHC (g/dl)	31.4	1.8	30.5	2.6	0.194
Serum ferritin (ng/mL)	418.2	338.8	284.1	97.0	0.154
Serum folic acid (ng/mL)	12.1	18.3	12.0	10.1	0.991
Serum vitamin B_{12} (pg/mL)	832.9	552	757.6	449	0.153

SD: standard deviation   Hb: hemoglobin   MCV: Mean corpuscular volume
MCH: Mean corpuscular hemoglobin   MCHC: Mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration
*p-value < 0.05 is statistically significant

tological malignancies. That is solid tumors are more frequent than hematological malignancies in the frequency of anemia. This might be attributed to the higher frequency of solid tumors over hematological malignancies, which was evident in previous studies that estimated a ratio of 4 to 1 for solid tumors over hematological malignancies.[8]

The current study showed significant association between patient's sex and hematological versus solid tumors (p: 0.03) with anemia. It was observed that more males affected with HM (68.4%) and more females affected with solid tumors (58.5%). This is also reported in other studies such as the study of King Abdul-Aziz University Hospital (Saudi Arabia), they reported significant relationship between sex of patients with hematological versus solid tumors and anemia. In HM, they reported 20 anemic males out of 27 patients, and in solid tumors they reported 32 anemic females out of 46 patients.[9]

In the current study, the common malignant disorders with anemia were GIT cancers, breast cancers, and leukemias, followed by lymphomas, gynecological and myeloma. This is not due to the preponderance of anemia in such cancers; however, it is running parallel to the locally reported distribution of common cancers in Yemen.[10] Cancers of the GIT were also common types to be presented by anemia in China. In the study of Gao,[11] among 1133 solid tumors, they reported the common cancers with anemia as gastric cancers (38.02%), colorectal cancers (23.13%) and hepato-pancreato-biliary cancers (22.06%).

Dicato et al (2010),[12] reported that inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor-a (TNF-a) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), play a major role in the pathophysiology of anemia in the cancer patient not only through complex mechanisms of the purely inflammatory situation but also through genetic regula-

**Table 4: Characteristics of anemia in malignant disorders' patients
by the type of malignancy**

Characteristics of anemia	Solid tumors n= 41		HM n = 19		Total n= 60	
	№	%	№	%	№	%
Morphological types of anemia:						
Microcytic hypochromic	13	31.7	8	42.1	21	35.0
Macrocytic normochromic	5	12.2	2	10.5	7	11.7
Normocytic normochromic	23	56.1	9	47.4	32	53.3
[χ^2 = 0.62 , p= 0.73] statistically insignificant						
Grade of anemia:						
0	1	2.4	—	—	1	1.7
1	23	56.1	6	31.6	29	48.3
2	14	34.1	3	15.8	17	28.3
3	3	7.3	4	21.1	7	11.7
4	—	—	6	31.6	6	10.0
[^{2} = 15.6, p = 0.0004] Statistically significant*						
Degree of anemia:						
Mild	14	34.1	4	21.1	18	30.0
Moderate	24	58.5	5	26.3	29	48.3
Severe	3	7.3	10	52.6	13	21.7
[χ^2 =15.8, p = 0.0003] Statistically significant						

Chi square test was calculated after joining grade 0 with1 and grade 3 with 4

tory aspects of erythropoiesis via GATA-1 and GATA-2, and other factors. Because cytokins can induce iron sequestration and decrease RBC production, it can affect the morphology of the produced RBC. In the current study, blood films were carefully examined for every patient and the common morphological type of anemia was found to be normocytic normochromic picture. This may reflect the early stages of cancer that are associated with low levels of cytokins production. In late stages of cancer; the percentage of normocytic normochromic picture decreases with slight increase in the percentage of microcytic hypochromic picture. This may reflect the time of increased levels of cytokins production with decreasing availability of iron to the RBC production that result in microcytic hypochromic picture in addition to impaired iron homeostasis associated with chronic disease, chronic blood loss and nutritional deficiencies (e.g. cancer-induced anorexia).[13]

Anemia definitions vary internationally, with the World Health Organization and the US National Cancer Institute classifying anemia by grade (0-4, with 0 representing "normal" and 4 the most "severe"). In these classification schemes, more severe anemia grades are identical in terms of Hb thresholds (6.5-7.9 g/dl for grade 3 <6.5 g/dl for grade 4), but less severe grades are identified by slightly different Hb thresholds. In the current study, we classified anemia according to the US National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) which defined anemia as mild (Hb <10-11 g/dl), moderate (Hb 8-10 g/dl), and severe (Hb < 8 g/dl), and we found 21.7% of our anemic cancer patients with severe anemia. This severe anemia was significantly higher among hematological malignances more than in solid tumors, (52.6% vs. 7.3%).

Similar to our finding, Ludwig et al,[7] reported moderate to severe anemia to be higher among hematological malignancies more than solid tumors (31.2% vs. 29.7%). The studied pa-

tients were not seen before cancer affection, and no documents explained the previous hematological parameters. The changes in hematological parameters were attributed to the present pathology since all of them reported clinical well-being just before the diagnosis of cancer.

Serum ferritin was found higher among anemic patients with malignant disorders. This finding was reported previously by Omari et al,[14] in their study among newly diagnosed patients with lymphomas and they suggested that higher ferritin level may indicate the increase of erythropoietin activity.

Factors leading to high ferritin levels in malignancies can include: inflammatory response in malignancy leads to anemia and iron accumulation in the reticuloendotelial system. Tissue necrosis can cause direct release of cytosolic ferritin and can increase ferritin levels. Experimental data revealed that ferritin is cleared from the circulation by liver parenchymal cells. Dysfunction due to liver disease can lead to prompt decrease in clearance and serum ferritin levels will rise. Ferritin synthesis in malignant cells can show qualitative and quantitative abnormalities.[15,16]

In the current study, it was found that serum folic acid is significantly low in anemic patients with cancer. This finding was reported by different previous studies.[17,18] Our finding in serum folic acid was consistent with these studies and it may confirm the role of folic acid as a protective agent in some cancer development which was suggested by the study of Stevens et al, [19] among colorectal cancers.

Conclusion and recommendation:

This study concluded that anemia in Yemeni patients with malignant disorders is not due to nutritional deficiency of iron or

B$_{12}$, however, it may be attributed to other pathophysiological mechanisms such as increased destruction of red blood cells and decreased production of functional red blood cells that was mediated through inflammatory cytokines. It is recommended that further studies should be conducted with a large sample size in a national pattern in Yemen.

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