

Virus Pneumonia and Its Treatment With Vitamin C

FRED R. KLENNER, M.D., Reidsville, North Carolina

VIRUS PNEUMONIA (primary atypical pneumonia, non-specific pneumonitis, epidemic non-bacterial pneumonia, disseminated focal pneumonia, viral pneumonia) has been accepted as an entity and has been under observation in this country and abroad for the past twelve years. No bacteriological studies have confirmed the etiology of this disease other than by negative findings. The sputum shows the usual flora of gram-positive and gram-negative organisms. In 1938, Reimann reported that a filterable infectious agent was recovered from the nasopharynx of one and from the blood of another out of a series of eight cases, but not sufficient evidence could be found to determine such as the causative factor. It must be closely allied to the virus causing influenza, because in the first twenty-four to thirty-six hours it is very commonly thought to be that type of infection. Horsfall and his co-workers at the Rockefeller Institute have cultured an organism, which they have designated *Streptococcus MG*, from a large percentage of their patients with primary atypical pneumonia. The exact role of this bacterium is not known, but it is seldom found except in persons ill of this disease. Since it is not present in all cases, it is not the primary cause, but only a characteristic secondary invader or associate. The disease also resembles psittacosis in many respects and since penicillin might be of value in such cases it is of great importance to establish the diagnosis quickly.

The onset of this type of virus infection is always gradual. Like all virus diseases there is a wide variation of the prodromal symptoms. There might be none; there might be the classical generalized malaise. This disease is highly contagious, and our observations over a five-year period point to a definite incubation period of from five to fourteen days. We have also noted that the longer the incubation period the milder the infection: the shorter the incubation period the more severe is the infection. This must be interpreted in the first instance as either a mildly virulent organism or a high degree of resistance or immunity on the part of the host and in the second instance as a very virulent organism or no immunity at all on the part of the host. In some instances, however, the patient will have a slight attack with apparent recovery due either to good resistance against a weak virus or good response to treatment only to be followed in seven to ten days by a return of symptoms in a more severe form and producing a

critically ill patient. This type of case cannot be classified as a fourteen-day incubation period, but rather it is one in which the virus was only attenuated or else there has been the factor of a second infection.

The chief complaint, however, will always be one of sudden onset, since the patient begins his concept of his illness from the time he first experienced waves of chilly sensations or a frank chill alternating with hot spells and associated with burning in the nose, a sore throat, hoarseness, a bad taste in his mouth, moderate vertigo, nausea and grade-two type frontal headache. This picture will then develop to the point where severe frontal headache is noted along with a feeling of weakness in the lower extremities so marked that the patient complains of a dragging sensation when moving about in bed. This weakness persists for some days after clearing of all symptoms and negative chest films. The patient can hardly support his body weight without the feeling of buckling at the knees. Added to the above might be substernal pain or generalized tightness in the chest with varying degrees of tracheo-bronchitis. The fever is usually found during this phase to be about 102° F. After pulmonary involvement of as much as 6 by 8 cm. areas have been reached the fever will be up to 103 and 104° F. in adults and up to 105° F. in infants and early childhood. Dry hacking cough is a most constant factor especially after the second day of illness. Occasionally this cough is paroxysmal, and if the invasion is severe enough it will in the final clearing stage of the disease be thick, tenacious, brownish-gray — even blood-streaked. This disease shows remarkable versatility in that it will vary its symptoms and signs to fit with that of a mild cold on one hand to a very serious medical complexity on the other. It suggests sometimes that more than one bacteriologic unit is involved. The pulse will be increased in a very definite ratio to the toxic effect of the virus. If the invasion is mild the pulse rate will be normal even though the fever may be recorded at 103° F. If, however, the invasion is severe, meaning that physical findings approximating those of a lobar pneumonia (with or without a definite complicating encephalitis or meningitis) are present, or with an accompanying pleurisy, then the pulse rate will be rapid and will follow the temperature curve. Sweating is common and it is usually very profuse. Cyanosis and dyspnea occurred only in those patients that had at least as much as a lobe of lung involvement and where the fever continued to climb to a 104° F. each night.

The physical findings are limited to the head and chest. There is marked rhinitis with swelling of the turbinates. The accessory nasal sinuses are involved; the frontals being the chief offenders. The tonsil bed is not remarkable but the lymphoid tissue on the posterior pharyngeal wall is thickened and edematous and scarlet in color. The vocal cords appear like those seen in any simple laryngitis. In the lungs diminished breath sounds with moist and dry rales (sometimes very coarse) are usually the only evidence of disease. When there are extensive areas of consolidation the usual dullness to percussion, tubular breathing and pectoriloquy are present.

The laboratory findings are of little importance. The white blood count and differential are nearly always within normal limits. A 6500 white count is typical regardless of the lung pathology. The sedimentation rate will be normal except in very acute cases, with cerebral symptoms. The sputum examination is valuable only in its negative findings.

Chemotherapy may be tried where x-ray facilities are not convenient or not obtainable. If sulfonamides and/or penicillin are given for twenty-four to thirty-six hours without response both should be discontinued and treatment for virus infection instituted. In our age it requires some measure of boldness to discontinue these important drugs so early especially with the patient still running a fever of from 102 to 104° F. In this case boldness counts.

There is no constant x-ray picture to be found in virus pneumonia, but some evidence of pneumonitis will nearly always be present regardless of the physical signs—even when the physical signs are absent. The chest film will show anything from extensive consolidation to a patchy and sometimes fleecy infiltration suggestive of tuberculosis. This patchy form will be scattered in all diameters of the lung fields. Plates taken daily or every second to third day will often show the pneumonic process clearing in some areas while new areas are developing at other points. The disease begins as an infiltrative process starting at the hilus, and then, by a peribronchial route gradually spreading to the interbronchial regions. Usually there will be an involvement of several segments of lung comprising several lobes. These isolated segments soon become confluent, giving the film a smoky appearance. This process may go on to involvement of an entire lobe and in many respects look like a lobar pneumonia. The marked difference lies in the fact that even when the density is massive a streaky background can always be seen; the shadow in virus pneumonia is never entirely solid. Resolution, either spontaneous or from some method of treatment, may give positive x-ray films days and even

weeks after there has been a complete clinical response.

The treatment of virus infections, including frank virus pneumonia, has been for the most part without specific recommendations. Oppenheimer in 56 cases employed x-rays in doses from 35r to 90r which he states relieved cough and shortened the course of the disease. Offutt employed 100r doses daily or every other day, depending on the severity and response, alternating front and back or alternating sides if both lungs were involved. None in his series of twelve cases received over four treatments. Both men report surprising uniformity in the disappearance of fever and symptoms after one or two exposures. No unfavorable reactions occurred in either series. Aminophyllin in doses of three grains every four hours has been given with varying results in the belief that it improved the circulation through the lung fields. We have employed the drug in smaller doses when there was evidence that the patient had a coexisting coronary impairment. Since this was given along with the drug of our choice, ascorbic acid, this paper cannot evaluate its merits. Multiple transfusions from multiple donors and blood from patients convalescing from virus pneumonia have also been used.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a new and different form of treatment for this type of virus infection which in 42 cases over a five-year period has given excellent results. The treatment has doable merit due to the simplicity of its schedule. The remedy used was vitamin C (ascorbic acid) given in massive doses. Since it is common knowledge that there are definite individual variations in absorption of vitamin C from the intestinal tract and under certain pathological conditions still greater variations in the absorption factors the I. V. and I. M. routes were used. When a diagnosis of virus pneumonia was entertained the patient was given 1000 mg. vitamin C intravenously every six to twelve hours. If it was by chance that a diagnosis was established in the home the usual initial dose was 500 mg. given in the gluteal muscle. Subsequent injections were given I. V. because the injection was thus made painless and the response was faster. In infants and very small children, however, 500 mg. I. M. every six to twelve hours was the method of choice. From three to seven injections gave complete clinical and x-ray response in all of our cases. The series comprised types of cases from very slight consolidation to those resembling lobar pneumonia. Two cases were complicated by cerebral manifestations. Vitamin C was also given by mouth in one-third of this series but there was no outstanding difference in the response. The dosage was from 100 to 500 mg., depending on the age of the pa-

tient, and it was given every four to six hours. In almost every case the patient felt better within an hour after the first injection and noted a very definite change after two hours. Nausea was relieved by the first injection as was the headache. The heat regulating center showed a quick response and it was the rule to find a drop of 2° F. several hours after the first 1000 mg. Penicillin was given in conjunction with ascorbic acid in five cases. It was our observation that penicillin had some retarding effect on the action of vitamin C, since the response was not so rapid and in one case the results were not obtained until the penicillin was discontinued.

Supportive treatment was given by forcing fluids, particularly fruit juices, to tolerance. Soda-water was given to adults in the amount of four glasses in 24 hours, each glass containing one teaspoonful sodium bicarbonate. Infants and children were given this alkaline drink in proportion to age. The rationale of bicarbonate of soda is based on the findings of Hawley and others that the amount of vitamin C excreted in the urine may vary according to the acid:alkali content of the diet, a highly alkaline urine having lower amounts of vitamin C than a highly acid urine. Codeine sulfate and aspirin were given by mouth. In adults the dose was codeine 0.5 grain, aspirin 10 grains given every six hours. Infants and children according to age. Some few patients complained of severe chest pain and some others of a constricting sensation that they described as cutting off their breath. These symptoms were relieved by employing either Numotizine as a plaster or the old-fashioned mustard plaster. The mustard plaster was made up with cold water and was applied cold for a period of about 15 minutes. The proportions used were one part mustard and two parts flour. The amount of flour used in preparing the plaster for children was according to age but in no instance was the ratio greater than one to six. In childhood an expiratory grunt was taken as an index to use plasters. Oxygen inhalation was not employed even though cyanosis existed in twelve cases of the series; an additional injection of 500 mg. of vitamin C was given with almost spontaneous alleviation of the distressing condition. In two cases codeine sulfate was given in one grain amounts because of the weight of the patient. Diet was forced even though there was no desire to eat.

It is difficult to evaluate the role played by vitamin C against the virus organism. We have seen ascorbic acid give response in other types of virus infections but not sufficient evidence is on hand to state that it is a virus killer. It has been shown histologically that vitamin C regulates the intercellular substance of the capillary wall. In the human body its chief function is concerned

with the formation of colloidal intercellular substances. The intercellular substances which appear to be regulated by vitamin C are of mesenchymal origin—this means the collagen of all fibrous tissue structure, all non-epithelial cement substances including the intercellular substance of the capillary wall. Gothlin found increased capillary fragility in individuals with blood levels of 1 mg. of vitamin C per liter or less. It must be remembered too, however, that ascorbic acid has been reported to function as a respiratory catalyst, aiding cellular respiration by acting as a hydrogen transport.

Finally we consider the case of the liver in that the saturation of the blood plasma with vitamin C betters the detoxifying powers of this organ. It has been known that fever, toxemia and specific bacteria do act on the vitamin C concentration of the blood plasma with a lowering effect. Could it be that, by maintaining a high blood level of this vitamin, all body tissue is allowed to return to normal in spite of the existing fever and the presence of the specific organism, and that, acting as a respiratory catalyst, it enables the body to build up adequate resistance to the invader?

SUMMARY

Virus pneumonia is a true clinical entity. Although it gives symptoms similar to influenza in the early stage of illness the virus has not been identified. The onset is gradual and has an incubation period of five to fourteen days. The usual beginning is a hanging-on cold or generalized malaise. The chief symptoms, although not all are necessarily present each time, are chilly sensations or a single frank chill, followed with hot spells, burning in the nose, sore throat, hoarseness, bad taste in mouth, nausea, frontal headache, dry cough at first—later productive in the clearing phase of the disease—sweating, and this is usually profuse, normal pulse unless complicated with cerebral symptoms, pleurisy or a condition approximating lobar pneumonia when it will be rapid. Fever is from 100 to 104° F. The physical findings are inflammation of the turbinates and accessory nasal sinuses, hypertrophy of the lymphoid tissue on the posterior pharyngeal wall. Breath sounds are diminished and moist and dry rales are sometimes present. In extensive consolidation dullness to percussion, tubular breathing and pectoriloquy are found. The laboratory findings show the blood picture within normal limits; the sputum is negative. Sulfonamides and penicillin are good diagnostic aids since they have no effect on the disease. The x-ray findings can be anything from negative films through pneumonitis on to frank consolidation. Vitamin C in doses of 1000 mg. every six to twelve hours for three to seven injections has been specific in the experience of the author. X-ray in

To Page 46

VIRUS PNEUMONIA—From P. 38
doses from 35 to 100r daily, or every second to third day, for not more than four exposures, aminophyllin and transfusions from convalescing or multiple donors have some usefulness as adjuvants in some cases.

References

1. OPPENHEIMER, A: Röntgen Therapy of Virus Pneumonia. *Amer. Jour. of Roentgenology*, 49, No. 5.
2. REIMANN, H. A.: An Acute Infection of Respiratory Tract with Atypical Pneumonia. *Jour. A. M. A.*, 111: 2377, 1938.
3. OFFUTT, V. D.: Diagnosis and Treatment of Primary Atypical Pneumonia. *Southern Med. & Surg.*, Jan., 1944.
4. SEEDS, E., and MASER, M. L.: Virus Pneumonia. *Am. J. Roentgenology*, 49:30-38, 1943.
5. REIMANN, H. A., and HAVENS, W. P.: An Epidemic Disease of the Respiratory Tract. *Arch. Int. Med.*, 65:138, 1940.
6. DINGLE, J. H.: Primary Atypical Pneumonia. *Amer. J. Pub. Health*, 34:347, 1944.
7. Current Concepts of Pneumonia. *Scope*, Jan., 1945.
8. HAWLEY, ESTELLE E., FRAZER, J. P., BUTTON, L. L., STEVENS, D. J.: The Effect of the Administration of Sodium Bicarbonate and of Ammonium Chloride on the Amount of Ascorbic Acid Found in the Urine. *J. Nutrition*, 12:215, 1936.
9. GOTHLIN, G. F.: A Method of Establishing the Vitamin C Standard of Requirement of Physically Healthy Individuals by Testing the Strength of Their Capillaries.
10. A Symposium of the Vitamins. *Amer. Med. Assn.*, 1939.