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*Lesson of the week***Musculoskeletal pain in female asylum seekers and hypovitaminosis D₃**

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Female asylum seekers with persistent non-specific musculoskeletal pain should be screened for hypovitaminosis D₃

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Deficiency of vitamin D, which can lead to osteomalacia, is common in elderly patients in Western countries. However, it is still widely underdiagnosed in young immigrant women, even though the condition has been extensively reported in the immigrant Indo-Asian population in the United Kingdom since the 1960s.¹⁻⁴ A recent study reports an average 59 months before diagnosis was established,⁵ and another study found a prevalence of 78% of hypovitaminosis D₃ (compared with 58% in controls) in an Indo-Asian population attending a UK rheumatology clinic.⁶ When recognised, hypovitaminosis D₃ is easily treatable. A study on osteomalacic myopathy in veiled Arabic women in Denmark found that muscle strength returned to normal (except in maximal voluntary contraction) after six months' treatment.⁷

We expected to see this disease in female asylum seekers, especially in those from societies with different customs regarding exposure to sunlight and diet. We report 11 cases of symptomatic hypovitaminosis D₃ in female asylum seekers (table 1). We focus on the pathology encountered by the primary care doctors caring for these 11 patients, the length of time between the appearance of symptoms, and the establishment of the diagnosis of hypovitaminosis D₃ as well as the women's response to treatment by the improvement of a wide range of clinical symptoms—bone pain, muscular weakness, and fatigue.

Case reports

The primary care doctors of an academic primary care centre serving a population of 100 000 provided the cases. The patients presented with minimal exposure to sunlight and a history of bone pain, proximal muscular weakness, change in gait, or fatigue. Treatment for most patients was two intramuscular injections of 18 750 nmol (300 000 IU) of cholecalciferol at monthly intervals and an ongoing course of oral

calcium (1000 mg) and cholecalciferol (20 µg). All patients gave their informed consent.

We measured 25-hydroxycholecalciferol (the best laboratory indicator of vitamin D status) with a radioimmunoassay and an iodine-125 labelled tracer and calcium concentrations with spectrophotometry.⁸ The reference ranges are 21-131 nmol/l and 2.15-2.55 mmol/l. The reference range for 25-hydroxycholecalciferol is from a healthy predominantly white group of 20 men and 24 women from the midwest United States, aged between 23 and 67 years who volunteered during the month of October.

The first diagnoses, before the diagnoses of hypovitaminosis D₃ were made, were possible somatisation disorder in three patients, chronic back pain in four patients, and multiple unexplained somatic symptoms in three patients. Doctors considered and mentioned hypovitaminosis D₃ in only one case after being formerly told of the possible high prevalence of the disease and suspecting it on presentation.

The mean duration of symptoms before diagnosis was 38 months and 3 days (3.18 (standard deviation 4.15) years). Most complaints (with the exception of those of patient 11) were typical of hypovitaminosis D₃ from the outset. With treatment, most patients' symptoms disappeared within one to three months. One patient needed seven months of treatment.

At diagnosis, the mean serum 25-hydroxycholecalciferol concentration was 10.9 (3.8) nmol/l (table 2). These concentrations were during November to May, when the intensity of the sun is low at latitude 46.3°. For 10 patients, the mean concentration of blood calcium on diagnosis was 2.19 (0.09) mmol/l, and four patients had hypocalcaemia (<2.15 mmol/l).

Discussion

Asylum seekers are at risk because of the possible high prevalence of hypovitaminosis D₃ and difficulty in recognising the condition. The first diagnosis considered, in an often psychologically difficult context, is one suggestive either of somatoform disorder, as described in ICD-10 (international classification of diseases, 10th revision)⁹ or somatisation. Patients with psychological disorders may report multiple unexplained somatic symptoms,¹⁰ but pain due to hypovitaminosis D₃ is well defined. Generally, this pain is symmetrical and starts in the lower back then spreads to the pelvis, upper legs, and ribs. It is felt mainly in the bones; not in the joints. Patients may also have proximal muscle weakness.

Symptoms may last for some time before diagnosis, causing important psychosocial repercussions in an already vulnerable population. This confirms the poor knowledge of hypovitaminosis D₃ in doctors.⁵

With treatment, complete resolution is rapid—usually within three months. Doctors simultaneously treated patient 11 for a suspected venous insufficiency

Table 1 Demographic and clinical data for 11 female asylum seekers with hypovitaminosis D₃

Patient	Age	Origin	Time in Switzerland (years)	Veil	Complaints
1	52	Bosnia	11	Yes	Pain in ribs and neck then lower back and thighs
2	57	Afghanistan	3	Yes	Weakness and pain in thighs; occasional lower back pain
3	27	Somalia	10	Yes	Lower back pain; occasional mid-back and rib pain
4	30	Albania	6	No	Lower back and pelvic pain
5	42	Somalia	4	Yes	Back, knee, and shoulder pain
6	43	Bosnia	4	Yes	Back pain then diffuse bone pain
7	45	Somalia	10	Yes	Diffuse back and lower limb pain; fatigue
8	63	Somalia	3.5	Yes	Back pain with diffuse lower limb pain
9	20	Ethiopia	6.5	No	Lower back and lower limb pain; scapular pain
10	51	Bosnia	1	Yes	Lower limb pain
11	62	Bosnia	6	Yes	Lower right limb pain

Table 2 Clinical and laboratory data for 11 female asylum seekers with hypovitaminosis D₃

Patient	Diagnosis considered	Duration of symptoms (months)	Time of response to treatment (months)	25-hydroxycholecalciferol concentration (nmol/l)	Calcium concentration (mmol/l)
1	Somatoform disorder	36	3	16.0	2.28
2	Weakness of unknown origin	6	3	7.7	2.08
3	Lower back pain with functional component	60	1	10.5	*
4	Possible somatoform disorder	24	3	11.5	2.34
5	Knees: arthritis; no other formal diagnosis	36	2	13.5	2.23
6	Back pain then no formal diagnosis	27	2	9.2	2.05
7	Somatoform disorder	12	1	4.5	2.11
8	Chronic back pain	180	2	10.7	2.19
9	Mechanical back pain	24	7	6.2	2.14
10	Restless legs; polyneuropathy; unexplained symptoms	12	2	13.7	2.24
11	Atypical sciatalgia; venous insufficiency; osteomalacia	2	2	16.2	2.24

*Calcium concentration was not measured.

(varicose veins bilaterally and slight right foot oedema); the resolution of symptoms was due to either the combination of vitamin D and calcium or the treatment for venous insufficiency (support stockings, diosmin, and hesperidin tablets and heparin-allantoin-dexpanthenol gel) or both. The literature suggests that the resolution of symptoms associated with hypovitaminosis D₃ typically occurs between three and six months: three months for symptoms due to the osteopathy⁵ and six months for the myopathy.⁷

The patients in our cases had low concentrations of 25-hydroxycholecalciferol. Even though the reference range for serum 25-hydroxycholecalciferol is difficult to determine, because it varies with season and geography, concentrations below 20 nmol/l indicate severe deficiency.¹¹⁻¹² Concentrations greater than 50 nmol/l prevent secondary hyperparathyroidism.¹³ Other authors have proposed that the cut-off concentration is 78 nmol/l,¹⁴ and for elderly people it may be greater than 100 nmol/l.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Concentrations of at least 75 nmol/l are necessary to maintain cellular function.¹⁸ Achieving these concentrations requires the elimination of some risk factors, such as reduced exposure to sunlight (covering arms and legs while outdoors, winter season, and housebound status) and a strict vegetarian diet, which are the most reliable predictors of hypovitaminosis D.¹⁹⁻²¹ Nevertheless, large educational campaigns within an Asian community resulted in an improvement in vitamin D deficiency among only the children.²² Routine vitamin D supplementation seems to be beneficial for populations at risk.⁸⁻¹² Various authors recommend a daily intake of 800-1000 IU (50-62.5 nmol; 20-25 µg) for benefits in health.¹²⁻¹⁷

A recent study found that 28% of patients (immigrants and non-immigrants) presenting with persistent non-specific musculoskeletal pain in a community health centre in Minnesota had severe vitamin D deficiency, emphasising the importance of this disorder.²³ Hypovitaminosis D₃ in female asylum seekers may remain undiagnosed with a prolonged duration of chronic symptoms and the associated pitfall of potential misdiagnosis of the symptoms as somatisation. Treatment is beneficial, with a rapid resolution of symptoms. Doctors should be aware of the importance of the disease and the impact of rapid diagnosis and treatment. Future research should consider routine supplementation in this population.

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Contributors: GdeTdeJ initiated the study, collected the data in the patients' files, wrote the text, and saw patients for their written consent. AP gave authorisation for the study to be done in the outpatient clinic and supervised it. BF initiated and supervised the study. BF is guarantor.

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