Case Study

Monocytic Crisis of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia in the Era of Tyrosine Kinase Inhibitor

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A 47-year-old man was diagnosed with Philadelphia chromosome-positive chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) in October 2005. He could not receive treatment with imatinib mesylate due to his economic circumstances. He was consequently treated with hydroxyurea with partial hematological remission until June 2008. Although imatinib mesylate was started thereafter, the adherence to this treatment was poor because of his occupational circumstances. In September 2009, imatinib mesylate was switched to nilotinib, with a subsequent phase of acceleration of the disease, presumably due to his poor adherence to the treatment. Dasatinib was started in September 2010, with transient hematological response and final blastic crisis of the disease in January 2011, regardless of improved adherence. Blast cells showed immature monocytic morphology and were positive for α-naphthylbutyrate esterase staining. They also expressed surface CD14 and CD64 antigens. A diagnosis of rare monocytic crisis of CML was made. He was treated with low-dose nilotinib following cyto reduction with MEC (mitoxantrone, etoposide, and cytarabine) chemotherapy. Severe leucopenia without circulating leukemic cells continued for about 2 months with sustained hepatosplenomegaly, and he died of pneumonia in March 2012. Necropsy showed severe bone marrow hypoplasia with focal infiltration of mature leukemic cells and similar infiltration in the liver. [J Clin Exp Hematop 53(3): 227-233, 2013]

Keywords: monocytic crisis, chronic myeloid leukemia, tyrosine kinase inhibitor, bone marrow necrosis

INTRODUCTION

Chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) is a myeloproliferative disorder characterized by the expansion of clonal hematopoietic cells that carry the Philadelphia (Ph) chromosome and are capable of terminal differentiation to every cell lineage during the chronic phase.1 In terms of its natural history, CML typically progresses from the chronic phase to terminal blastic phase/blast crisis via an accelerated phase.2 Blast crisis is often accompanied by additional chromosomal abnormalities in addition to the Ph chromosome as a result of secondary molecular evolution. The most common phenotype of the blasts at the time of crisis is a myeloid one, comprising approximately two-thirds of cases, which is followed by B lymphoid, megakaryocytic, erythroid, basophilic, and rarely monocytic, T lymphoid, and eosinophilic phenotypes.3 The development of ber-abl-targeted tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) as the treatment of chronic-phase CML has dramatically reduced the incidence of transformation of chronic-phase CML to blast crisis.4,5 However, it is well known that the outcome of CML patients who exhibit failure or suboptimal response to the treatment with imatinib mesylate is poor,6 indicating that poor responders to TKI treatment have a risk of developing blast crisis of CML. In this article, we report on a patient who developed rare monocytic crisis, presumably due to poor adherence to TKI treatment.

CASE REPORT

A 47-year-old man came to Kobe City Medical Center General Hospital because of abdominal fullness in October 2005. Physically, the spleen was palpable 10 cm below the costal margin. Hematological tests revealed a white blood cell (WBC) count of 123 × 10^9/L with some immature granulocytes and a platelet count of 393 × 10^9/L. A bone marrow aspirate showed granuloid hyperplasia with 0.4% blast cells. Cytogenetic analysis of the marrow cells demonstrated an abnormal karyotype of t(9;22)(q34;q11.2) (Table 1).
Fluorescence in situ hybridization showed a bcr-abl fusion signal in 94.6% of marrow cells analyzed. Reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction also showed the major bcr-abl transcript. A diagnosis of Ph chromosome-positive CML in chronic phase was made and the Sokal score was intermediate risk. Although imatinib mesylate was available to him in June 2008, CHR was not obtained because of his poor adherence to the treatment. Therefore, he discontinued the treatment for 2 months owing to his occupational circumstances in July 2009. As a result, his WBC count elevated to 350 × 10^9/L with a differential count of 1% blast/immature monocyte counts. After 1 week of discontinuation, the blast count decreased with severe neutropenia to less than 0.01 × 10^9/L, and severe pancytopenia.

Since the WBC count increased from 12.7 × 10^9/L to 130.8 × 10^9/L 6 days after admission, he received combination chemotherapy consisting of mitoxantrone, etoposide, and cytarabine in addition to nilotinib at 400 mg/day. However, the effect of the combination chemotherapy was transient, with possible life-threatening infection; therefore, a combination with nilotinib and hydroxyurea was started for the control of blast/immature monocyte counts. After 1 week of administration of this combination, the blast count decreased with severe neutropenia to less than 0.01 × 10^9/L, and severe pancytopenia.

### Table 1. Graded accumulations of additional chromosomal abnormalities in addition to Ph chromosome along with the progression of CML in the present patient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Karyotype</th>
<th>No. of cells with abnormal karyotype/No. of cells analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CP: chronic-phase</td>
<td>AP: accelerated phase</td>
<td>BC: blast crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46, XY</td>
<td>t(9;22)(q34;q11.2)</td>
<td>19/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46, XY</td>
<td>XY</td>
<td>1/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>46, XY, t(9;22)(q34;q11.2)</td>
<td>20/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>53, X, -Y, +t, +2, +13, +17, +17, +19, add(17)(p11.2), add(19)(p11), +add(22)(q11.2), +t(9;22)(q11.2), +t(9;22)(q22), +add(22)(q22)</td>
<td>5/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55, idem, +18, +21</td>
<td>6/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58, idem, +2, +add(17)(q11), +17, +18, +21</td>
<td>2/13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
nia continued thereafter. He had an HLA-matched sibling donor; therefore, he was moved to Shinko Hospital for possible bone marrow transplantation in February 2011. The pancytopenia with few blasts and neutrophils continued with the combination of nilotinib and hydroxyurea, although prominent hepatosplenomegaly persisted. A bone marrow biopsy performed in March 2011 revealed extensive bone marrow necrosis (Fig. 3A). Although we conducted bone marrow transplantation at this time, he developed leukemic meningitis accompanied by convulsion and blindness of the left eye. Intrathecal chemotherapy improved the convulsion; however, he developed recurrent massive melena. These complications made us unable to perform marrow transplantation, and he ultimately died of pulmonary hemorrhage due to...

Fig. 1. Smear preparations of a bone marrow aspirate at the diagnosis of blast crisis. Many monocytoid blast cells with abundant cytoplasm containing some vacuoles are seen (A; Wright-Giemsa stain, × 1,000). Cytochemical analysis shows that these cells are strongly positive for α-naphthyl butyrate esterase stain (B; × 1,000), but negative for myeloperoxidase staining (C; × 1,000).

Fig. 2. Abnormal karyotype observed at the time of blast crisis. The karyotype is 53, X, -Y, +1, +3, +6, +8, +8, t(9;22)(q34;q11.2), +13, -17, +19, add(19)(q13), +21, +der(22)(t(9;22)).
Stenotrophomonas maltophilia in April 2011. Necropsy showed severe bone marrow hypoplasia with focal infiltration of mature leukemic cells (Fig. 3B) and similar infiltration in the portal area of the liver (Fig. 3C) and spleen (data not shown). In addition, necropsy specimen of the lung showed extensive alveolar hemorrhage, possibly due to *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* infection (Fig. 3D).

**DISCUSSION**

Monocytic crisis is a rare phenotype of blast crisis in CML. To the best of our knowledge, only 11 cases of monocytic crisis have been described in the English literature or abstracts, and all cases except for the present one were reported before the availability of imatinib mesylate. Clinical data of these 11 and the present patients are summarized in Table 2. Furthermore, in the era of TKI of the second generation, blast crisis itself is rare. Therefore, the facts that the present patient could not initially start treatment with imatinib mesylate and that his adherence to subsequent TKI treatments was very poor may be instructive in terms of risky situations regarding blast crisis. Indeed, the adherence to imatinib mesylate as the critical factor for achieving a cytogenetic or molecular response has been reported.

It is speculated that *bcr-abl* affects the DNA repair process, and altered DNA repair leads to genomic instability, which consequently causes clonal evolution and, finally, blast crisis. In the present patient, uncontrolled and sustained *bcr-abl* activity in CML cells may have caused the accumulation of genetic instability. Indeed, a leukemic cell line was established from bone marrow cells at the initial period of the blast crisis in the present patient. Interestingly, multiple amplification of *bcr-abl* was demonstrated in these cultured cells (Arima et al., personal communication). This highly ampli-
fied bcr-abl may have contributed to the genomic instability in the present patient. The loss of 17p due to −17, which was observed in the karyotype at the time of blast crisis in the present patient might have diminished the function of the p53 gene and subsequently enhanced the progression of CML.21

In relation to possible bcr-abl-caused genetic evolution, blast crisis is often associated with additional cytogenetic and secondary molecular changes that contribute to the enhanced proliferation and survival, as well as differentiation arrest, of CML cells.22 With the transition from CML chronic phase to blast crisis, 60% to 80% of patients acquire chromosomal changes in addition to the Ph chromosome.23 The most common changes include double Ph chromosome, trissomy 8, trisomy 19, and isochromosome 17.23 Previous cases of monocytic crisis also showed chromosomal abnormalities involving chromosomes 8, 19, and 22, as observed in the present case; however, these abnormalities are not specifically restricted to monocytic crisis. Of interest, the karyotype at the time of blast crisis was quite different from that during the accelerated phase in the present patient (Fig. 2); the karyotype during the crisis was hyperdiploid with 53 to 58 chromosomes and contained many trisomies and some monosomies. As a speculation for the mechanism of hyperdiploid change, previous treatment with hydroxyurea may have contributed to the development of chromosomal abnormalities because a review regarding cytogenetic evolution in CML20 indicated a close relationship between previous treatment with hydroxyurea or busulfan and hyperdiploid changes with +8, +Ph, i(17q), +19, +21, +17, −7, or −17 during the advanced stage of CML, many of which were present in the karyotype during the crisis in the present patient. Therefore, previous hydroxyurea treatment and bcr-abl amplification might have caused multi-step molecular genetic evolution resulting in the hyperdiploid tumor cells from the period of accelerated phase to that of blast crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref.</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Age/</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Year of onset</th>
<th>Cytochemistry</th>
<th>Surface antigen</th>
<th>Lysozyme</th>
<th>Karyotype at the time of BC</th>
<th>Therapy prior to BC</th>
<th>Extra-medullary disease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>38/M</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>26/M</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+)</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>54, XY, +2, +3, +5, +6, +8, +19, +21, +9,22(q41), +del(22)(q23), +der(22)(q23) (q34) [15]</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>liver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>22/M</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>(9;22)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>69/M</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>OKM1(+) 4F2(+) OK1(+) OKT1(+)</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>56/F</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>62, XX, +1, +2, +3, +5, +6, +8, +10, +del(11), +13, +16, +17, +18, +19, +21, +22</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>euph.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>72/F</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>CD13(+)</td>
<td>CD14(+)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>62/F</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>CD13(+)</td>
<td>CD14(+)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>65/M</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>CD13(+)</td>
<td>CD14(+)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>78/F</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>CD13(+)</td>
<td>CD14(+)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>69/F</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>MPO(+) a-NB(+) ASD(+)</td>
<td>CD13(+)</td>
<td>CD14(+)</td>
<td>BU</td>
<td>Double Ph[13/21]</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Abbreviations: BC, blastic crisis; lysozyme, serum lysozyme (μg/ml); MPO, myeloperoxidase; a-NB, alpha-naphthylButyrate BU, busulfan; 6-MP, mercaptourine; ACNU, nimustine; DNR, Daunorubicin; VCR, vincristine; IFN, interferon; ASD, naphtholASD chl oroacetate; HU, hydroxyurea; N.D., not described;
crisis in the present patient.

Resistance of CML cells to TKIs is induced by several mechanisms and is frequently associated with a specific point mutation in the bcr-abl kinase domain. There have been several reports regarding other mechanisms of resistance, including the amplification of bcr-abl, over-expression of the multidrug resistance P-glycoprotein, and activation of alternative signaling pathways, such as those involving the Src family kinases, Ras, phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase, Janus kinase, and the signal transducer and activator of transcription. CML cells in the present patient apparently showed resistance to imatinib and dasatinib, although the exact efficacy and resistance were unclear because of poor adherence to each treatment. Nevertheless, no known and available bcr-abl point mutation was detected at any phase of CML. The amplification of bcr-abl as observed in the established cell line, therefore, may have contributed to the resistance to imatinib in the present patient.

After the onset of blast crisis, we treated the present patient with nilotinib, which had brought about CHR in the chronic phase of CML. The efficacy of nilotinib for CML in the accelerated phase or blast crisis may have been established. This agent suppressed the proliferation of leukemic cells in the peripheral blood for a long time in the present patient, although normal hematopoiesis hardly recovered, and focally residual leukemic cells were present in the bone marrow, liver, and spleen. Extensive bone marrow necrosis observed during the period of severe leucopenia under the treatment with nilotinib may have contributed to the recovery failure of normal hematopoiesis. Bone marrow necrosis in CML has been reported in at least 14 patients, most of whom were in the blastic phase. The necrosis results from cellular hypoxia due to ischemia of marrow microcirculation as a consequence of inflammatory damage or mechanical obstruction. Bone marrow necrosis has also been associated with the use of imatinib mesylate. These reports suggest that overgrowth of leukemic cells during blast crisis of CML causes failure of the microcirculation. Thus, the causative role of nilotinib in bone marrow necrosis should be investigated in patients with CML blast crisis in future.

DISCLOSURE

We have no conflicts of interest with regard to any companies or individuals.

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