A screening of skin changes, with special emphasis on neurochemical marker antibody evaluation, in patients claiming to suffer from “screen dermatitis” as compared to normal healthy controls


Abstract: In the present study, facial skin from so-called “screen dermatitis” patients were compared with corresponding material from normal healthy volunteers. The aim of the study was to evaluate possible markers to be used for future double-blind or blind provocation investigations. Differences were found for the biological markers calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP), somatostatin (SOM), vasoactive intestinal polypeptide (VIP), peptide histidine isoleucine amide (PHI), neuropeptide tyrosine (NPY), protein S-100 (S-100), neuron-specific enolase (NSE), protein gene product (PGP) 9.5 and phenyl-ethanolamine N-methyltransferase (PNMT). The overall impression in the blind-coded material was such that it turned out easy to blindly separate the two groups from each other. However, no single marker was 100% able to pin-point the difference, although some were quite powerful in doing so (CGRP, SOM, S-100). However, it has to be pointed out that we cannot, based upon the present results, draw any definitive conclusions about the cause of the changes observed. Whether this is due to electric or magnetic fields, a surrounding airborne chemical, humidity, heating, stress factors, or something else, still remains an open question. Blind or double-blind provocations in a controlled environment are necessary to elucidate possible underlying causes for the changes reported in this investigation.

Reports of skin complaints in people exposed to video display terminals (VDTs) are becoming an increasing phenomenon in several countries (1–4). Very little is known about the cause of these health complaints. The symptoms may be grouped into objective ones, including erythema, papules and pustules, as well as subjective ones including sensations of heat, itch, pain, smarting, etc. (3–8). Clinical dermatologists have regarded the symptoms to be mostly of rosacea or rosacea-like dermatitis nature (9). A large-scale epidemiological study has shown that the subjective facial skin symptoms where more common among VDT-exposed persons, but no significant differences between exposed and non-exposed groups in objective skin signs or skin disease were reported (10). The early notion that employees with VDT-work might have specific facial histological changes could not be confirmed by Berg et al. (11) in their histopathological study. In the present investigation, the highly sensitive indirect immunofluorescence methodology (12) has been utilized. The aim of the study was to evaluate possible markers to be used for future double-blind or blind provocation investigations.

Material and methods

Subjects

3 groups were investigated. The material was sampled and taken by 2 professional dermatologists (see
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Acknowledgements) at the Department of Dermatology, Karolinska Hospital. The groups consisted of normal healthy controls (no VDU work; no skin symptoms; n=3; males: 33, 34 and 44 years of age), “screen dermatitis” patients (VDU work; subjective skin symptoms; n=4; 1 male, 3 females; 42, 43, 44 and 52 years of age) and “screen dermatitis” patients (VDU work; subjective and objective (erythema, telangiektasia) skin symptoms; n=8; 2 males and 6 females; 26, 38, 42, 49, 49, 52, 59 and 60 years of age). Of the latter patients, 3 (females; 38, 52 and 60 years of age) were omitted from the study because of improper technical handling, such as inferior fixation. The “screen dermatitis” patients had been suffering for several years from facial skin symptoms. The patients did not have any on-going medication or any systemic or dermatological diseases, including acute infections.

Biopsies

The subjects arrived, one at a time, to the clinic (Department of Dermatology, Karolinska Hospital). Punch biopsies (2 mm) were taken under local anaesthesia with lidocaine (0.5%) without epinephrine from the lateral part of the face, over the arcus zygomatricus. The biopsies were taken at exactly the same place regardless of the actual symptoms. The idea behind this strategy was to enable for the dermatologists to have an anatomically defined spot and, thus, to avoid variation in the material due to different localities. Finally, the biopsies were blind-coded by the dermatologists.

Preparation of tissue

The biopsies were immersed for 2 h at 4°C in a solution of 14% saturated picric acid and 10% formalin. All the tissue samples were then rinsed for at least 24 h in 0.1 M Sörensen’s buffer containing 10% sucrose, 0.01% NaN₃ and 0.02% Bactracin, and 14 μm sections were cut using a cryostat (Microm, Heidelberg). The sections were thawed on to gelatine-coated slides and processed for indirect immunohistochemistry (see below).

Antibodies

Rabbit or mouse antibodies to calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP), neuropeptide KG₂ (NPKG₂), galanin (GAL), somatostatin (SOM), γ-melanocyte stimulating hormone (γ-MSH), vasoactive intestinal polypeptide (VIP), peptide histidine isoleucine amide (PHI), neuropeptide tyrosine (NPY), protein S-100 (S-100), neurofilament (NF), neuron-specific enolase (NSE), protein gene product 9.5 (PGP 9.5) and phenylethanolamine N-methyltransferase (PNMT) were used. The characteristics of the antibodies are summarized in Table 1. Two (SOM polyclonal; PGP 9.5) of the antibodies were added at a later stage of the investigation, therefore, the first biopsies were not incubated with these antibodies.

Immunohistochemistry

The indirect immunofluorescence technique (12) was used for demonstrating the neuropeptides and neuroactive substances. The sections were kept in a humid atmosphere, incubated with the above-mentioned antibodies overnight at 4°C, rinsed in phosphate buffered saline (PBS), incubated for 30 min at 37°C in rhodamine (TRITC)-conjugated goat anti-rabbit or anti-mouse IgG (1:80 or 1:40; Boehringer Mannheim), rinsed and mounted. All antibodies were diluted in 0.3% Triton X-100. For observation and photography a Nikon Microphot-FXA or Optiphot fluorescence microscope was used. The material was evaluated by 2 independent observers using

<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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a 5-graded semiquantitative scale. For further technical details, see Ljungberg & Johansson (13).

Results

In the following, no description of the normal material is given, since this has been published in extenso in the literature. Only differences observed in the "screen dermatitis" material compared with the normal control tissue are given below. This is against the background given in our aim, thus, to evaluate possible markers to be used for future double-blind or blind provocation investigations.

CGRP: 4 out of the 9 (4/9) "screen dermatitis" patients had few-to-very few nerve fibers in the dermis (Fig. 1A). The other patients revealed a normal-looking image concerning the nerve fiber number and distribution. However, 3 others had a very high
between the normal healthy control material and the "screen dermatitis" patients.

GAL: no conclusive differences were observed between the normal healthy control material and the "screen dermatitis" patients. It may be noted, that in 2/9 patients single GAL immunoreactive, round-to-oval dermal cells with a central, oval nucleus were observed. Such cells have not previously been observed in normal material.

SOM, monoclonal: 5/9 patients had single, very weak and very thin processes in the dermis. 6/9 had a very weak staining of the myelin.

SOM, polyclonal: 7 patients were investigated. All (7/7) showed a higher number of SOM positive dendritic cells. 1 patient had a remarkably high number as well as cells entering the epidermis (Fig. 2A). Another patient also had a remarkably high number of SOM immunoreactive dendritic cells in the dermis, but, no cells were seen in the epidermis (Fig. 2B). Four patients had cells located perivascularly. One patient instead showed very few cells.

γ-MSH: polymorphonuclear cells immunoreactive to γ-MSH were found in 3/9 "screen dermatitis" patients. 8/9 had a higher background fluorescence in the stratum papillare.

VIP: 2/9 did not reveal any nerve fibers at all around blood vessels, sweat glands or other dermal appendages. Furthermore, yet another 2/9 had a decreased number of nerve fibers as compared to normal healthy skin.

PHI: 2/9 did not reveal any nerve fibers at all around blood vessels, sweat glands or other dermal appendages. Furthermore, yet another 2/9 had a decreased number of nerve fibers as compared to normal healthy skin (Fig. 1B). PHI immunoreactive cells were seen in 8/9 patients. Of these, 3/9 revealed small cells with paranuclear staining, 2/9 had somewhat larger, round cells in groups. Their nuclei were eccentrically located. 3/9 had polymorphonuclear-like cells.

NPY: 1/9 did not reveal any NPY positive nerve fibers at all. 3/9 had a decreased number as compared to normal, healthy material. Single, small dermal cells were observed in 4/9 of the patients. Such cells have not been described in normals.

S-100: in the dermis, generally the pattern looked normal. However, the S-100 immunoreactive dendritic cells of the epidermis could be grouped into several different patterns of change. First, 3/9 pa-

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**Figure 3.** Immunofluorescence micrographs from normal (A) and "screen dermatitis" (B, C) skin after incubation with S-100 antibodies. A partial loss of epidermal dendritic cells could sometimes be seen (cf. A and B). In addition, certain cells revealed fewer and weaker dendritic processes, and even showing a complete loss of them (C). Bars indicate 50 μm.
patients showed partial loss of epidermal dendritic cells, i.e., along the epidermis areas of complete cellular loss were seen (cf. Fig. 3A, B). In addition, the remaining cells were located to the stratum basale and revealed fewer and weaker dendritic processes, even sometimes showing complete loss of processes (cf. Fig. 3A, C). Secondly, one group (5/9) had cells located at their normal position, but their processes were fewer, weaker and sometimes even absent. A certain overlap could be observed between these two groups. Finally, only one patient had a normal-looking pattern regarding frequency, location as well as morphology.

NF: no conclusive differences were observed between the normal healthy control material and the “screen dermatitis” patients.

NSE: in the dermis, no clear-cut differences were observed between the normal healthy control material and the “screen dermatitis” patients. In the epidermis, a complete loss of nerve fibers were found in 2/9, in 2/9 nerve fibers were only seen in the stratum basale, and in yet 2/9 fewer nerve fibers were revealed, however, with a normal location within the epidermis.

PGP 9.5: 5 patients were investigated. All (5/5) showed epidermal fibers running all the way up to, and including, the stratum granulosum, however, one patient revealed a highly decreased number. This patient did not reveal nerve fibers equally high up in the epidermis. 3/5 had an increased number. In addition, it may be noted that one of these latter patients had nerve fibers running in a more straight fashion.

PNMT: 1/9 had a massive number of PNMT positive cells (with granular fluorescence) in the entire dermis (cf. Fig. 4A, B). 4/9 had a somewhat lower number of equally-looking cells (cf. Fig. 4A, C). The other “screen dermatitis” patients had a more normal appearance, i.e., single PNMT immunoreactive cells were revealed.

In summary, the two independent observers could easily, in the blind-coded fashion, distinguish, based on the above-given description, the “screen dermatitis” patients from the normal healthy volunteers. It may be noted, that two rosacea patients being processed in parallel did not differ from the normal material apart from earlier reported findings, but, were clearly not similar to the “screen dermatitis” tissue.

Figure 4. Immunofluorescence micrographs from normal (A) and “screen dermatitis” (B, C) skin using PNMT immunohistochemistry. One patient had a massive number of PNMT positive cells (with granular fluorescence) in the entire dermis (cf. A and B). 4 other patients had a somewhat lower number of equally-looking cells (C). In addition, the epidermis often revealed a general increase in fluorescence. Bar in A indicates 50 µm.
Discussion

In the following, our results will be discussed. However, it has to be pointed out that we cannot, based upon the present results, draw any definitive conclusions about the cause of the changes observed. Whether this is due to electric or magnetic fields, a surrounding airborne chemical, humidity, heating, stress factors, or something else, still remains an open question. Blind or double-blind provocations in a controlled environment are necessary to elucidate possible underlying causes for the changes reported in this investigation.

In the present study, clear differences between normal healthy skin and corresponding tissue from “screen dermatitis” patients were found for the biological markers CGRP, SOM (polyclonal), VIP, PHI, NPY, S-100, NSE, PGP 9.5 and PNMT. The overall impression in the blind-coded material was such that it turned out easy to blindly separate the two groups from each other. However, no single marker was 100% able to pin-point the difference, although some were quite powerful in doing so (CGRP, SOM (polyclonal), S-100). From a statistical point of view, it is not likely at all, that the observed differences can be explained by mass significance phenomena, but, naturally further and larger studies have to be initiated to rule out any such influences.

Certain markers could very well explain some of the claimed clinical, subjective and/or objective, symptoms. For instance, changes in the CGRP immunoreactive nerve fibers could be the basis for sensory symptoms, such as itch, pricking pain, and smarting. The autonomic markers VIP, PHI and NPY (but perhaps also (through axon-reflex actions) CGRP) may explain redness and oedema. SOM and S-100 within epidermal and dermal dendritic cells could account for the general subjective sensation of an on-going inflammation and susceptibility to skin infections as well as sensitivity to ordinary light. The morphologic markers NSE and PGP 9.5 most likely reflect structural differences between the two groups, however, it is not easily understood if they are primary or secondary in sequence. Furthermore, they are also seemingly contradictory to each other, but it should be pointed out that only 5/9 patients were incubated with PGP 9.5. It may also reflect the possibility that NSE and PGP 9.5 actually show 2 different nerve fiber populations, something never clearly investigated. Finally, PNMT is more difficult to understand, since this is regarded as a more or less negative control marker in normal healthy skin, only showing single immunoreactive cells. But, in one patient a massive number of PNMT positive cells (with granular fluorescence) was seen in the entire dermis, and 4/9 patients had a somewhat lower number of equally-looking cells. It should be remembered that PNMT is the norepinephrine-converting enzyme, leading to the production of epinephrine. Maybe this is the chemical basis for a local stress-like reaction, not dependent on stress-mediated increased levels of adrenal medullary catecholamines, but, instead dependent on true physical factors, such as electric and/or magnetic fields, humidity, heating, etc., influencing the skin? If electric and/or magnetic fields are involved, with the on-going public debate in mind, they most probably are of high frequency nature, including both MHz and GHz ones. Of course, our data cannot exclude psychological stress as an important confounder.

The initial aim of the present study was to evaluate possible markers to be used for future double-blind or blind provocation investigations. This goal has been fulfilled. At the same time, new and highly remarkable observations were made. The fact that the two independent observers easily could, in the blind-coded fashion, distinguish the “screen dermatitis” patients from the normal healthy volunteers came as a big surprise to us. Naturally, this will lead us into further strong efforts to throw more light onto the very difficult health issue of “screen dermatitis.”

It is evident from our preliminary data that biological differences are present in the patients claiming to suffer from “screen dermatitis”. In view of the recent epidemiological studies pointing to a correlation between long-term exposures from magnetic fields and cancer (14, 15; Flodérus B. et al., personal communication), our data definitely ought to be further analyzed.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by grants from the Swedish Work Environment Fund (proj. no. 93-0344 and 94-0375), Nokia Monitors, Sun Microsystems AB, Radians Innova AB, Sun-Flex Datamål AB, Liberel AB, AST Computer Sweden AB, Köro Produktion AB, Cancer- och Allergifonden, Svenska Industriföreningen, SIF, Sveriges Civilingenjörerförbund Sveriges, Miljofond, Magn. Bergvall Stiftelse, funds from the Karolinska Institute, and the generous support of private donors. Drs. R.P. Elde, Minneapolis, J. Fahrenkrug, Copenhagen, M. Goldstein, New York, K.Haglid, Göteborg, L. Olson, Stockholm, L. Terenius, Stockholm and E. Theodorsson-Norheim, Stockholm are gratefully acknowledged for their generous support, and Ms Gunnilla Holmkvist and Ms Eva-Karin Johansson for their expertise in technical and secretarial assistance, respectively. Drs. M. Berg and S. Lidén, Department of Dermatology, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, very kindly provided the blind-coded specimens, and we owe them our most cordial acknowledgements.

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