Rapid progression of encephalopathy in a patient with hepatitis B infection

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SUMMARY The mortality rate of fulminant hepatic failure was high until liver transplantation was presented as a potential therapy. We encountered a patient with hyperacute fulminant hepatic failure due to hepatitis B virus infection. Living donor liver transplantation was planned but abandoned because her brain edema progressed too rapidly to complete the donor evaluation. The present case reveals the limitation of living donor liver transplantation as a treatment for hyperacute fulminant hepatic failure.

Key Words: Fulminant hepatic failure, brain edema, hepatic encephalopathy, hyperacute, fulminant hepatitis B

Introduction

Fulminant hepatic failure (FHF) is characterized by the acute onset of progressive jaundice, increased liver transaminase, prolonged prothrombin time, decreased liver size, and hepatic encephalopathy. The 1-year survival rate ranges from 65% to 92% in deceased donor liver transplantation (1-4) and 59% to 90% in living donor liver transplantation (LDLT, 5-7). We encountered a patient with a rapid course of FHF and here discuss the indications of LDLT for FHF.

Case Report

A 22-year-old previously healthy woman felt general malaise on April 16th, 2004. Her body temperature became elevated 3 days after onset, and she was admitted to a hospital on April 21st. The patient was conscious and lucid; physical examination revealed no abnormalities except for mild conjunctival jaundice. Biochemical data were as follows: total bilirubin, 5.7 mg/dl (normal, 0.3-1.3 mg/dl); direct bilirubin, 3.5 mg/dl (0.0-0.2 mg/dl); aspartate aminotransferase, 6,090 IU/l (9-38 IU/l); serum alanine aminotransferase, 6,410 IU/l (4-36 IU/l); prothrombin time, 51.8 sec (10-13.5 sec); and ammonia, 111 μg/dl (< 90 μg/dl). Serologic analysis was positive for hepatitis B surface antigen, negative for hepatitis B surface antibody, positive for hepatitis B envelope antigen, negative for hepatitis B envelope antibody, and positive for IgM-hepatitis B core antibody.

Plasma exchange and hemodiafiltration were started. Methylprednisolone (1 g), interferon beta (3 × 10⁶ U), and lamivudine (100 mg) were administrated. In spite of intensive medical care, the patient’s consciousness was disturbed. She developed stage 2 encephalopathy (3,8, Table 1) 12 h after admission. She was diagnosed with hyperacute FHF due to hepatitis B infection (9).

She was transferred to our hospital on April 22nd for liver transplantation. On admission, her electroencephalogram showed diffuse slow waves. Computed tomography of the brain performed immediately after admission revealed mild brain edema. She was responsive only to noxious stimuli and her neurologic status had advanced to stage 4-grade 2. Corneal light reflex was preserved. Abdominal computed tomography revealed a total liver volume of 772 mL, corresponding to 80% of her standard liver volume (10).

Plasma exchange and hemodiafiltration were continued after admission to our hospital. Urgent transplantation was prepared although transplantation...
Table 1. Hepatic encephalopathy and coma classifications (3,8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encephalopathy classification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1: Slowness of mentation and affect, euphoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 2: Drowsiness, inappropriate behavior, presence of asterixsis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 3: Incoherent words, marked confusion, reaction to vocal stimuli</td>
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<td>Stage 4: Deep coma without vocal stimuli</td>
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<td>Coma sub-classification for encephalopathy stages 3 and 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 1: Uncoordinated reactivity to vocal stimuli</td>
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<td>Grade 2: Absence of reactivity to vocal stimuli, coordinated response to nociceptive stimuli</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 3: Uncoordinated response to nociceptive stimuli</td>
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<td>Grade 4: Brain death</td>
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was not indicated for the patient according to the criteria of the King’s College group (11), Takahashi et al. (12), or Yoshiha et al. (13). The patient’s 42-year-old mother was willing to donate part of her liver and we began the necessary physical, psychological, and biochemical examinations. During evaluation of the patient’s mother as a potential donor, however, the patient’s neurologic status progressed to stage 4 encephalopathy and grade 3 coma on April 23rd. An electroencephalogram showed electrocortical silence. Brain computed tomography showed that the sylvian fissures and cerebral sulcus had completely disappeared. LDLT was abandoned and the patient died 12 h after her arrival at our hospital (36 h after the onset of encephalopathy).

Discussion

In the present case, encephalopathy progressed rapidly. The time period between the appearance of jaundice and the development of encephalopathy was 36 h and the patient was classified as hyperacute (9). Evaluation and preparation of the potential living donor was not completed in time. Hattori et al. encountered two patients who suffered brain death within 3 days while awaiting LDLT (14). Donor safety must remain the first priority in high acuity situations, however, and the donor work-up is more difficult due to the time constraints (15). Careful screening for any conditions that represent an increased risk to the donor is essential. The same exclusion criteria that apply in elective situations must also apply in emergent cases, and no exceptions should be made to accommodate the needs of the recipient.

The incidence of neurologic death is 4% to 11% after deceased donor liver transplantation for FHF (3,16), suggesting that preoperative evaluation of the neurologic status or prediction of the neurologic results after transplantation is difficult. Whether LDLT should be performed for FHF with severe encephalopathy and brain edema is controversial. The Kyoto group treated a patient that developed widespread brain necrosis after LDLT with preoperatively diffuse brain edema (14), though the patient ultimately died of sepsis without neurologic recovery. Sterneck et al. reported three FHF patients that died of cerebral herniation after LDLT (17). Intracranial pressure is now monitored to evaluate brain edema (18,19) in patients with grade 3 or 4 coma. It is not used in our department, however, to avoid complications including hemorrhage and infection. The intracranial hemorrhage rate is 8% to 10%, which includes 2.7 % to 3.4% in fatal cases (20,21).

During donor evaluation, LDLT was contraindicated due to the advancement of the patient’s encephalopathy. In high acuity situations, donor selection should be completed as soon as possible in the event of sudden progression of encephalopathy. The present case reveals the limitations of LDLT as a treatment for hyperacute FHF.

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References