Pathology of perinatal and early onset nephrotic syndrome

Guido Monga¹, Lorenzo Daniele², Gianna Mazzucco²

¹Department of Health Sciences, University of the Eastern Piedmont, Novara, Italy
²Department of Medical Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Abstract

Nephrotic syndrome rarely occurs in the first year of life. There are some cases which share the pathological changes observed in older children or in adults, but two forms, the congenital nephrotic syndrome of the Finnish type (CNF) and the diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS) show peculiar morphologic findings.

CNF is characterized in its early phases by the focal dilation of the proximal tubules with formation of small cysts and by mesangial hypercellularity. With progression of the disease, tubular dilation spreads from the deep to the outer cortex and focal-segmental and global glomerulosclerosis become evident.

DMS may be renal-limited or be associated with male pseudohermaphroditism and Wilms’ tumor (Denys-Drash syndrome). It shows the increase of the mesangial matrix and mesangial hypercellularity in the early phases of the disease and extensive glomerulosclerosis in the later ones. Podocytes are hypertrophic around the sclerotic areas and form pseudocrescents. Tubular dilations and cysts may be present, but in lesser extent compared with CNF. Interstitial fibrosis occurs with increasing severity from the inner to the outer cortex.

Apart from the negative reaction from nephrin in CNF, immunohistochemistry has no diagnostic relevance in both diseases. Electron microscopy shows in both diseases a diffuse effacement of the foot processes and microvillous transformation of the podocytes. Glomerular basement membrane may show changes recalling those found in Alport disease.

Due to the rather similar changes in CNF and DMS, a pathological diagnosis may be difficult on small tissue specimens provided by needle biopsies. It follows that accurate clinical and genetic investigations are needed in addition to the pathological study.
Keywords

Congenital nephrotic syndrome, infantile nephrotic syndrome, nephrotic syndrome of the Finnish type, diffuse mesangial sclerosis, focal-segmental glomerulosclerosis, membranous glomerulonephritis.

Corresponding author

Guido Monga, Dipartimento di Scienze della Salute, Università del Piemonte Orientale, Novara, Italy; e-mail: guido.monga@med.unipmn.it.

How to cite


Introduction

Congenital nephrotic syndrome is a term applied to those forms which develop before or within 3 months of life, whereas the term infantile nephrotic syndrome refers to the occurrence of the disease between 3 and 12 months of age [1, 2].

Due to genetic and immunological studies, a large variety of clinocopathological entities with different etiology, course and outcome have been identified over the time (Tab. 1). As to the morphologic appearance, several early onset disorders share their pathologic findings with the nephrotic diseases observed in older children and adults (minimal change disease, focal-segmental glomerulosclerosis [FSGS], membranous glomerulonephritis, endocapillary or mesangial proliferative glomerulonephritis). In this setting, two entities are worth stressing: a) the autosomal recessive FSGS due to mutations of gene NPHS2 mapped on the chromosome 1q25-q31 which encodes podocin [3], a protein expressed in the podocytes which is critical for the organization of the slit diaphragm [4]; b) a severe form of membranous glomerulonephritis due to the deposition along the glomerular basement membrane of immune complexes (neutral endopeptidase-antineutral endopeptidase antibodies) produced by the pregnant woman and transferred to her fetus [5]. Conversely, there are some other conditions such as congenital nephrotic syndrome of the Finnish type (CNF) and diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS) which are unique to this younger age group and show peculiar pathologic changes.

Table 1. Renal pathology in congenital and infantile nephrotic syndrome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Renal pathology</th>
<th>Congenital</th>
<th>Infantile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nephrotic syndrome of the Finnish type</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (isolated or associated to Denys-Drash Syndrome)</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal segmental glomerulosclerosis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autosomal recessive</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autosomal dominant</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epidermolysis bullosa</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenital HIV infection</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiopathic</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal change disease</td>
<td>Congenital HIV infection</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesangial proliferative glomerulonephritis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenital toxoplasmosis</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiopathic</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membranous glomerulonephritis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenital Syphilis</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupus glomerulonephritis</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-neutral endopeptidase antibodies</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercury poisoning</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiopathic</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>α-1 antitrypsin deficiency</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aim of the present work is to describe the morphologic features of the latter diseases which are of occasional occurrence in routine nephropathology and therefore less known among pathologists and clinicians.

**Congenital nephrotic syndrome of the Finnish type**

CNF is a disease with an autosomal recessive mode of inheritance due to mutations of **NPHS1** gene localized to the long arm of chromosome 19. The protein product of **NPHS1** is nephrin, a major component of the slit diaphragm. Since it plays a pivotal role in the normal function of the glomerular filter [6], its defective synthesis leads to the podocytes dysfunction and to severe proteinuria.

CNF was described for the first time by Hallman and Hjelt in 1959 [7] and is most frequent in Finland, with an incidence of 10 to 12 x 10^5 live birth [8], but was reported with various frequency in studies from several countries [9-13].

**Gross findings**

The kidneys are large up to twice the normal size, pale with swollen cortex.

**Light microscopic findings (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2)**

The earliest feature is the focal dilation of the proximal tubules, with the formation of scattered small cysts, first observed in the deep cortex and at the corticomedullary junction. The dilation progressively involves a greater number of tubules and the cysts increase in size reaching 300-400 µm in diameter. The dilated tubules seem to spread radially from the deep to the outer cortex. Their epithelium becomes flattened and eventually...
The spared tubules are lined by cells containing protein and lipid reabsorption droplets. The involvement of the proxymal tubules is not usually reported, but it was pointed out by Rapola et al. in their ultrastructural study [14].

Glomeruli may be normal in the early stages of the disease, with a number of fetal forms not exceeding that found in the normal controls. The earliest pathologic findings are the widening of the urinary spaces of the fetal glomeruli and the increase in number of the mesangial cells. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that mesangial hypercellularity may be difficult to judge at this age, since the mesangium is more cellular in infants than in older children [8]. With progression of the disease, focal segmental and then global glomerulosclerosis and periglomerular fibrosis develop. In the second half of the first year most glomeruli are sclerotic and the interstitium becomes fibrotic with various amount of inflammatory cells.

Vascular changes are rare and non specific. It has occasionally been reported the increase in thickness of the muscular wall of the small cortical arteries and the arteriolar fibrinoid necrosis in the patients affected by accelerated hypertension.

Immunofluorescence findings

No immunoglobulins and complement fractions are usually detected. However, IgM and C3 lumps can be found in the sclerotic areas in the later phases of the disease. As expected, nephrin is not identifiable along the glomerular basement membranes [15, 16].

Ultrastructural findings (Fig. 3)

A widespread effacement of the foot processes is evident and the slit diafragms are not present among the residual foot processes. The glomerular basement membranes may show a widening of the lamina rara interna and occasional lamellation of
the lamina densa, recalling the findings observed in Alport disease.

**Diffuse mesangial sclerosis**

DMS was reported for the first time by Habib and Bois in 1973 [9] and then fully described by the same French group [17]. The disease is mostly renal-limited, but may be associated with other renal and extra-renal abnormalities. The best known clinicopathologic setting is the Denys-Drash syndrome [18] characterized by male pseudohermaphroditism and Wilms’s tumor in addition to DMS. The disease is related to mutations in the Wilms’s tumor gene localized to chromosome 11p13 and involved in renal and gonadal development. Mutations are identified in almost all patients affected by Denis-Drash syndrome and less frequently in the subjects with isolated DMS. It must be emphasized that renal changes are the same in both cases.

**Light microscopic changes (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5)**

The distinctive and early change is the increase of the mesangial matrix associated with mesangial hypercellularity whereas the tubulointerstitial damage is absent. As the disease progresses, first focal segmental and then global glomerulosclerosis occur. Podocytes around sclerotic areas may be hypertrophic and form the so-called pseudocrescents. True epithelial cell proliferation with crescent formation has been only occasionally reported [19].

Tubulointerstitial damage becomes evident in the advanced phases and is characterized by tubular atrophy, severe fibrosis and chronic inflammatory reaction. Tubular dilation and microcysts may be present, but in a lesser amount compared with CNF. In their exhaustive study, Habib et al. [17] pointed out a gradient of severity of the pathologic changes from the outer to the inner cortex. The outer cortex shows severe fibrosis, tubular atrophy, an abundant infiltration
Figure 4. Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS). Needle biopsy of a 4 month old male. In the early phase of the disease the glomeruli show an increase of the mesangial matrix and mesangial hypercellularity. Arrow points out hypertrophic and polystratified podocytes. There is no evidence of dilated tubules. Masson trichrome.

Figure 5. Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS). Needle biopsy of a 4 month old female. With progression of the disease, glomeruli appear more compact with poor evidence of the capillary lumina or show severe sclerotic changes. PAS reaction.
of chronic inflammatory cells and global sclerosis of most glomeruli. Abnormalities become less extensive and severe in the inner cortex and even less evident in the iuxtamedullary areas. Due to their topographical distribution and variation in severity, the above reported lesions are difficult to be identified and graded on needle biopsies which are small and often provide only material of the outer cortex, whereas the lesions are well evident on larger histological sections from autoptical or nephrectomy specimens. In the patients affected by Denys-Drash syndrome, nephroblastoma occurs later in life, likely arising from nephrogenic rests which have an increased incidence in the kidneys of these patients.

**Immunofluorescence findings**

Immunofluorescence investigation usually gives negative results or may show non specific staining for IgM and C3 in the sclerotic glomeruli.

**Ultrastuctural findings (Figures 6-8)**

Foot processes are extensively effaced and podocytes are hypertrophic with microvillous transformation of their surface. The glomerular basement membranes are thickened with waving of its external surface and presence of collagen fibers in the lamina densa [20].

**Pathological findings in transplanted kidneys**

Several patients affected by either DMS or CNF have been transplanted and the recurrence of the nephrotic syndrome is not known in the former, whereas it has been reported in roughly 25% of the latter [21]. The renal damage is characterized by the foot process effacement and decreased slit diaphragms, but the overall pattern observed in CNF is not present. Since the nephrin is absent in the native kidneys of these patients and antibodies anti-nephrin are found in their

![Figure 6](image-url). Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS). Ultrastructural findings at low magnification. The mesangial stalk is widened and the mesangial matrix is increased. Foot processes are completely effaced and podocytes show extensive microvillous transformation.
Figure 7. Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS). A nonsclerotic capillary displays foot process effacement and irregular outline of the external surface of the glomerular basement membrane. Some thin fibrils are evident in the rarefied areas of glomerular basement membrane.

Figure 8. Diffuse mesangial sclerosis (DMS). At higher magnification fibrils show a periodic structure pointing out their collagen nature.
serum, an immunologic mechanism has been suggested.

Conclusive remarks

Nephrotic syndrome rarely occurs in the first year of life and therefore the observations of the findings reported above are absolutely occasional apart from in highly specialized institutions (e.g. the Hopital Necker Enfants Malades) where cases are sent from different countries or in specific geographic areas (e.g. Finland). In addition, some disorders share their pathological findings with the nephrotic syndrome occurring in older children or in adults, which are due to different and various pathogenetic mechanisms. On the other hand, the better known entities, the CNF and the DMS, do not display specific morphologic features, but some changes such as tubular dilation with cysts formation, glomerulosclerosis and interstitial fibrosis are present in both, even though in different percentages and in various locations. These subtle differences may not be detectable on small specimens provided by needle biopsy. It follows that cumulative data gathered from a careful clinical investigation, an exhaustive genetic study and an accurate pathological evaluation are needed to achieve the correct diagnosis.

Declaration of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References