Failure to suppress TSH in thyroid cancer – could it be Addison’s disease?

Fowler GE¹, Wadsley J², Webster J³, Balasubramanian SP¹

1 - Endocrine Surgery unit, Directorate of General Surgery, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals; 2 - Department of Oncology, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals; 3 - Department of Endocrinology, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals.

Background

• Papillary thyroid cancer is the commonest thyroid malignancy.
• Surgery is first-line treatment, followed by radiiodine and long-term, high dose levothyroxine to suppress TSH.
• Physiological levels of cortisol are known to suppress TSH secretion by the pituitary¹,²,³; although the mechanism remains unclear. Correspondingly, hypocortisolism may raise TSH levels (Figure 1)³,⁴.

Case Summary

• A 64 year old woman underwent a near-total thyroidectomy for hyperthyroidism and a right sided cold nodule. At presentation, her TPO antibodies were raised (141 IU/ml).
• Histology showed multinodularity, focal lymphoid infiltrate and multifocal papillary cancer (pT1mpN0pMxR0). Further treatment included radiiodine ablation and TSH suppression with thyroxine.
• TSH remained supressed at <0.1 mIU/L for 5 years following surgery (at ~250 mcg/day of thyroxine), but later started to rise (Figure 2). The thyroxine dose had to be increased gradually to 350 mcg/day to ensure a low TSH. Non-compliance to treatment was considered unlikely.
• After a further few years at this dose (350 mcg/day; Figure 2), she reported ‘severe tiredness’ and ‘not losing a tan’ 8 months after a holiday. Her sister (non-medical background) suggested Addison’s disease following an online search based on these symptoms.

Discussion

• The increase in Thyroxine required to suppress TSH in this patient may have been an early sign of Addison’s disease.
• In patients on long-term thyroxine, an increasing T4 requirement (either for replacement or TSH suppression) should raise the suspicion of Addison’s disease; in addition to more common causes such as non-compliance.
• Adrenal hormone replacement therapy in patients with adrenal insufficiency and apparent hypothyroidism has been shown to normalise thyroid function tests without thyroid hormone replacement⁶.

References


Figure 1 Affect of Cortisol on TSH Levels

• Subsequent examination demonstrated cutaneous and mucosal hyperpigmentation and a short synacthen test (basal and 30 minute cortisol of 61 and 66 respectively; normal response >500 nmol/L at 30 minutes) confirmed the diagnosis.
• After starting hydrocortisone, lower doses of thyroxine (currently 225 mcg/day; Figure 2) were needed for TSH suppression.

Figure 2 TSH and Thyroxine Dose Timeline

- 2002 – Presentation of (R) neck lump
- 2003 – Total thyroidectomy
- 2008 – Poorly controlled TSH levels
- 2013 – Addison’s disease diagnosed

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