Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection in Patients With Leukemia

By Grace Y. Minamoto, David A. Scheinberg, Kathleen Dietz, Jonathan W.M. Gold, Nancy Chein, Timothy Gee, Lilian M. Reich, Jack Hoffer, Klaus Mayer, Donald Armstrong, Janice Gabriolove, and Bayard Clarkson

Eighteen human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-seropositive patients were found among 211 previously treated adult patients with a variety of leukemias who had been multiply transfused before April 1985. Patients known to be homosexual or intravenous drug users were excluded from this study. The spouse of one HIV-seropositive patient became HIV infected and subsequently developed the acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Patients with leukemia who were multiply transfused before the availability of screening of blood products for HIV antibody should be counseled regarding their individual risks of HIV infection and the risk to sexual contacts.

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From the Infectious Disease, Hematology-Lymphoma, and Clinical Immunology Services, Department of Medicine, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.


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Address reprint requests to Grace Y. Minamoto, MD, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, 1275 York Ave, New York, NY 10021.

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blood products began on April 18, 1985. Of interest whether the rate of transfusion-acquired HIV infection in multiply transfused leukemia patients for several reasons: patients were tested only if sera were available, some patients were tested because of symptoms suggesting HIV infection, later specimens if available on some seronegative patients might have tested positively for the antibody, and the immune suppression associated with leukemia and its treatment may have impaired the antibody response in some patients.

The large number of platelet transfusions, unique to this patient population, may confound comparison of this group of patients with other heavily transfused patients. There is no evidence to suggest that patients with hematologic malignancies are intrinsically more susceptible to HIV infection. Because of their larger transfusion requirements, however, they are probably at higher risk for HIV infection than other patients. There was no evidence that a single donor was responsible for multiple cases, as in the recently described cluster of HIV infections among 25 patients with a variety of neoplasms including solid tumors who had received 1 to 2 units of blood products from the same HIV-seropositive donor.

The routine screening of blood products for evidence of HIV infection since April 1985 should markedly reduce the risk of transfusion-acquired HIV infection in patients transfused since then; however, the HIV infection of patients transfused before that time may have a major impact on their prognoses, as illustrated by those patients in remission of leukemia who were symptomatic for HIV infection. Furthermore, the sexual contacts of these patients are at risk for developing HIV infection.

Screening for HIV infection in multiply transfused leukemia patients, especially those who received transfusions before April 1985, should be initiated, with adequate counseling, because of the risks of HIV infection in these patients and their sexual contacts. Studies of the effect of HIV infection on the outcome of leukemia and other neoplasms and their treatment are needed. In addition, all persons transfused between 1978 and April 1985 who are planning to have children or who are sexually active and their sexual contacts should be advised of the risks of HIV infection in terms of time, place, and number of transfusions. Counseling and HIV antibody testing for these patients and their sexual contacts should be available to help control the spread of infection.

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