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PRECOCIOUS LESIONS OF THE CAROTID VESSELS IN HIV-1-INFECTED PATIENTS TREATED WITH PROTEASE INHIBITORS

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BACKGROUND: The introduction of protease inhibitors (PI) in therapeutic combinations based on the use of three antiretroviral drugs determined an unprecedented decline in the morbidity and mortality of HIV-infected patients. However, these regimens have been found to have various adverse side effects. In particular, these drugs have been associated to the onset of hyperlipidaemia, insulin resistance and lipodystrophy. Moreover, some vascular complications have been recently described in patients subjected to prolonged treatment.

OBJECTIVES: To evaluate the presence of precocious atherosclerotic lesions, and changes in the flow and wall of the common and internal carotid arteries in patients treated with PI for at least 12 months.

DESIGN: Thirteen HIV-1-positive patients (median age 35 years) treated with PI (7 indinavir, 2 ritonavir, 1 saquinavir, 1 nelfinavir, 1 nelfinavir and saquinavir, 1 indinavir and ritonavir) for a median of 14 months were submitted to Doppler ultrasound of the epiaortic vessels; characteristics of the intima, pulsation index, resistance index, minimal speed, peak speed, mean speed, were evaluated; atherosclerotic plaques, if present, were described.

RESULTS: A thickening of the intima was evidenced in four patients (3 IVDA, 1 partner); one patient (IVDA) had various plaques determining a bilateral stenosis of the internal carotids, one patient (IVDA) had a congenital kinking of the left internal carotid. The other seven patients (1 homosexual, 1 partner, 4 IVDA) did not show any lesions.

CONCLUSIONS: This preliminary report showed an higher than expected prevalence of precocious lesions of the carotid vessels. Previous drug addiction could represent an important predisposing factor. Further studies are warranted to confirm these observations.

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