

CASE REPORT

ANA Negative (Ro) Lupus Erythematosus with Multiple Major Organ Involvement: A Case Report

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Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is a chronic, life long autoimmune or connective tissue disease characterized by a breakdown of tolerance and the presence of auto-antibodies directed against cellular antigens resulting in inflammatory damage to multiple organ systems.¹ The incidence and prevalence varies according to ethnic background, age and sex.¹ The commonest age is between 20-40 years old with female predominance.² The etiology remains unknown. Genetic predisposition, sex hormones and environmental factors might play a role in the pathogenesis of SLE.² The diagnosis of SLE is made on clinical grounds with the support of laboratory investigations based on the America Rheumatism Association 1982 criteria (revised criteria for the classification of systemic lupus erythematosus).³ The disease can be mild or severe with predilection for involvement of joints, skin, kidneys, brain, serosa, lungs, heart and the gastrointestinal tract.² There are several subsets of SLE such as discoid lupus, drug-induced lupus, neonatal lupus and Ro lupus.¹ Ro lupus is defined by the absence of ANA and

SUMMARY Anti-nuclear antibody (ANA) negative systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) occurs in about 4-13% of SLE cases. A small group of ANA negative SLE patients with positive anti-Ro antibodies usually present with typical vasculitic skin lesions which can be associated with photosensitivity, renal disease, congenital heart block or neonatal lupus. We present a case of a persistently ANA negative patient who presented with joint pain, rashes, mouth ulcer and alopecia. Clinical diagnosis of systemic lupus erythematosus was made even though ANA was negative. She was started on steroids and went into remission. Later, she developed several episodes of convulsions associated with fever and prominent vasculitic lesions. The patient was also found to have microscopic hematuria, proteinuria, anemia and thrombocytopenia. Renal biopsy showed lupus nephritis class 1B. Due to the prominent skin lesions, we performed anti-extractable nuclear antigens (ENA) antibodies test and anti-Ro turned out to be positive. The final diagnosis was ANA negative SLE (Ro lupus) with cutaneous, renal, musculoskeletal, hematological and cerebral involvement.

the presence of partially photosensitive skin rash referred to as subacute cutaneous lupus erythematosus. ANA negative SLE seems to be a subgroup of SLE that is infrequently recognized. We report one persistently ANA negative SLE patient who presented with multiple joint pain, skin lesions, alopecia and mouth ulcers followed by hematological, cerebral and renal involvement and was later diagnosed as having Ro lupus.

initially presented to Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia in April, 1997 with multiple joint pain especially affecting the shoulders, elbows and knees. She also had a history of rashes on the face and the rest of the body, mouth ulcers and alopecia. On physical examination, her vital signs were normal. She had a malar rash on the face, alopecia and multiple mouth ulcers. The involved joints were tender but no swelling was noted. Other systems

CASE REPORT

A 22-year-old Chinese lady

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were normal.

Investigations revealed a hemoglobin of 11.4 g/dl, a white cell count of $7.0 \times 10^9/l$ and platelets of $368 \times 10^9/l$. The erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) was 130 mm/hour. A blood urea and serum electrolyte (BUSE) and renal function test were normal. Tests for anti-nuclear antibody (ANA) and rheumatoid factor (RF) done by indirect immunofluorescence (using Hep-2 cells substrate) and latex agglutination, respectively, were negative. The complement level C3 was 0.859 g/l (normal: 0.66-1.30 g/l) and C4 was 0.3 g/l (normal: 0.20-0.60 g/l). The international normalized ratio (INR) was 0.88 and the activated partial thromboplastin time (APTT) was 33.7 seconds with a control of 28.6 seconds. A diagnosis of systemic lupus erythematosus was made based on the clinical presentation. The patient was started on prednisolone 60 mg daily and went into remission. She was well during the follow-up period where ANA was persistently negative.

In July 2000, she was readmitted following 3 episodes of generalized seizures and fever of four days duration. She was again noted to have a malar rash, mouth ulcers, alopecia and multiple joint pain. The most prominent cutaneous manifestations during this admission were vasculitic lesions in the fingers and maculopapular lesions all over the body. During this admission, the investigation results were as follows: urine by dipstick and microscopic examination revealed proteinuria 2+ and microscopic hematuria, the 24-hour urine protein was 0.8 g/24 hours, the cerebrospinal fluid analysis was normal, the full blood count showed hemoglobin of 6.9 g/dl and peripheral blood film showed changes suggestive of iron deficiency with thrombocytopenia. Total white cell count was $6.5 \times 10^9/l$ and platelet count was

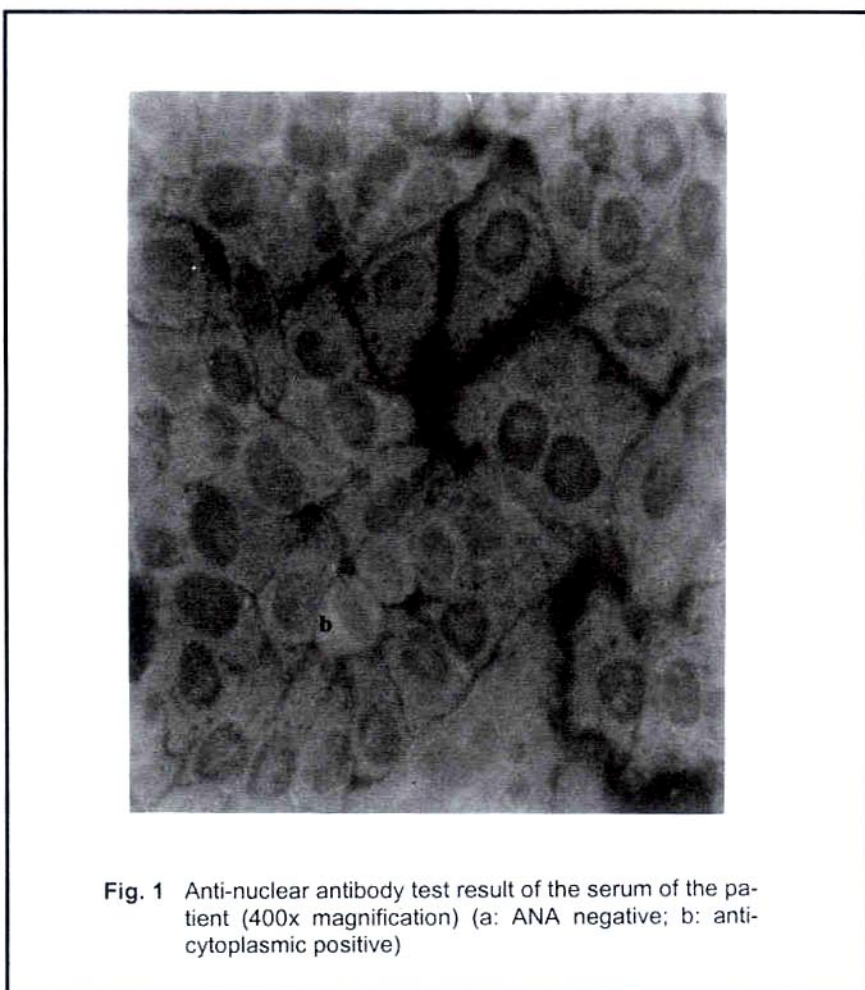


Fig. 1 Anti-nuclear antibody test result of the serum of the patient (400x magnification) (a: ANA negative; b: anti-cytoplasmic positive)

$33 \times 10^9/l$. No bone marrow study was performed since the anemia and thrombocytopenia were attributed to underlying SLE. The direct Coomb's test was positive (IgG 2+; C3d negative) but the indirect one was negative. However, the patient was transfused 2 units of packed cells without any problems. The serum ferritin level was 1,786 $\mu g/l$ (normal range: 5-96 $\mu g/l$). The brain CT scan showed generalized cerebral atrophy without any focal lesions. The electroencephalogram showed changes of a mild encephalopathy compatible with cerebral lupus. The septic work up such as typhidot test, anti-streptolysin O titer (ASOT), widal weil-felix (WWF) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) tests were all negative. The blood urea and serum electrolyte (BUSE) analysis showed: sodium 137 mmol/l, potassium 3.7 mmol/l and urea 1.6 mmol/l.

The serum creatinine was 67 $\mu mol/l$. Renal biopsy revealed lupus nephritis class 1B. Blood culture revealed growth of *Bacteroides fragilis*. The complement levels, INR and APTT were all normal. The VDRL was non-reactive. Anti-phospholipid and anti-dsDNA antibodies were not done. ANA remained negative but the cytoplasmic region was fluorescent (Fig. 1). In view of the prominent cutaneous manifestation, we performed anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies. Anti-Ro antibodies were found to be positive and anti-La antibodies were negative. The patient was diagnosed ANA negative SLE (Ro lupus) with involvement of the skin, joint, kidney, bone marrow and brain. The patient was treated with phenytoin and antibiotics. Intravenous methylprednisolone was given at a dose of 1 gram daily for 3 days followed by oral prednisolone. Her

condition improved and she was discharged well. She is still on follow-up at the Rheumatology and Nephrology outpatient clinics in our hospital and is currently in remission.

DISCUSSION

SLE is a multimeric condition of unknown aetiology. It is often being called the great imposter because of its ability to occur in almost any system in the body. It occurs much more common in females than in males especially in women of child bearing age.² SLE is often associated with HLA-DR2 and DR3 or deficiencies of C2 or C4.⁴ The diagnosis of SLE should be made on clinical grounds with the support of laboratory investigations. At least 4 out of 11 revised America Rheumatism Association (ARA) criteria should be fulfilled or present in order to make a diagnosis of SLE.³ In our patient, seven criteria were present in the form of malar rash, photosensitivity, oral ulcers, thrombocytopenia, seizures, arthritis and proteinuria. Other features that have been reported in ANA negative SLE are Raynaud's phenomenon, oculo-motor palsy and penile ulcer.⁵

The types of autoantibodies that can be found in SLE patients are ANA, ds-DNA, anti-Sm, anti-RNP, anti-Ro/SSA, anti-La/SSB, rheumatoid factor, lupus anti-coagulant, anti-phospholipid etc. Anti-nuclear antibody (ANA) is important as a screening test for the diagnosis of SLE. Besides the immunofluorescence method, ANA can also be detected by an enzyme immunoassay (ELISA).⁶ However, immunofluorescence has been the gold standard method. ANA will be positive at a titer of 1/40 or more with a speckled, homogeneous or peripheral pattern. ANA negative SLE patients may show antibodies to dsDNA. Negative serological

tests do not always exclude SLE as these tests may become positive at a later period.⁵ ANA negative SLE is rare, occurring in only about 4-13% of all cases.⁷ There are a few possibilities for ANA to be negative. The laboratory result for ANA may be false negative explicable on the basis of: (a) technical inaccuracy, (b) antibody is hidden within circulating immune complexes,⁸ (c) prozone phenomenon as observed by Ritchie,⁹ or (d) antibody which has been absorbed by tissues (e.g. ANA absorption by organs such as kidneys has been described in one case of ANA negative SLE where anti-cytidine antibodies were found in renal biopsy specimen).¹⁰ ANA may also be negative if the patient is in clinical remission with treatment.¹¹ Whatever the ANA status of a patient, it must be emphasized that the diagnosis of SLE can be made as long as the patient fulfills at least four of the 11 ARA criteria.¹²

Detection of cytoplasmic antibodies (Ro and La) is an important serologic feature of ANA-negative SLE. Anti-Ro is found in 25-40% of SLE cases.¹ Usually this small group of patients with negative ANA but positive anti-Ro antibodies present with typical vasculitic cutaneous manifestations. Other clinical features include photosensitivity, renal disease, congenital heart block and neonatal lupus.¹ No previous case of central nervous system involvement in anti-Ro lupus has been reported. However in patients with central nervous system disease associated with Sjögren's syndrome, the subset of patients with positive anti-Ro antibodies have more serious and extensive central nervous system disease compared to anti-Ro antibody negative patients.¹³ Excessive fetal morbidity and mortality have been noted in patients with systemic lupus erythematosus. The influence of anti-Ro antibodies on fetal outcome in

SLE patients has rarely been reported, but its high association with congenital heart block or neonatal lupus syndrome is well known.¹⁴ Although most women with systemic lupus erythematosus can achieve a successful pregnancy, fetal and maternal morbidity remain a major problem.¹⁵ The majority of affected infants acquire anti-Ro antibodies transplacentally from the maternal circulation and these antibodies are pathogenic.¹⁶ Early treatment with steroids and/or immunosuppressive drugs may minimize the damage and influence in a positive manner the significant morbidity and mortality observed in some anti-Ro antibody positive patients.¹⁷

ANA negative SLE seems to be a subgroup of SLE that has not been given adequate attention. It is important for the clinicians to be aware that some of the SLE patients may have persistently negative tests for ANA. Thus if a clinician suspects that his/her patient has SLE based on the clinical presentation, the first thing to do is to screen for ANA. A patient is suspected of suffering from SLE if ANA is positive accompanied by positive anti-dsDNA and/or positive anti-Sm. If ANA remains negative on repeat testing and the clinical suspicion of SLE is strong, tests to detect anti-Ro and anti-La antibodies should be performed which might reveal a small subgroup of patients with ANA negative (Ro lupus) as described here. But again, the final test is the presence of four out of the 11 ARA criteria.

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AUTHOR INDEX TO VOLUME 20

- Acik Y, 209
Abern MJ, 7
Aksomboon A, 57
Ardseungneon P, 257
Aroonparkmongkol S, 155
- Balachandra K, 93
Banchuin N, 37
Bhothisuwan K, 13
Bock HL, 113, 241
Boonsarhorn N, 93
Boonyasrisawat W, 37
- Chaicumpa W, 247
Chaiprasert A, 267
Chaisri U, 247
Chaitirayanon K, 257
Chanjanakitskul S, 23
Chatchatee P, 53
Chearskul S, 13
Chen FF, 223
Chen PC, 223
Chiang BL, 147
Chongsrisawat V, 53
Chotmongkol V, 235
Chou HC, 147
Chuenbal U, 247
Churintrapun M, 13
Cooper D, 105
- Deerochanawong C, 37
Deerojanawong J, 229
Dharakul T, 161
Direkwattanachai C, 77
Dogan N, 1
Duncombe C, 105
- Fuangthong R, 77
- Gengvinij N, 267
Grams R, 257
- Hassink EA, 105
Haustein UF, 197
Hoisanka N, 93
Honda M, 93
Huang JL, 121
Hutagalung Y, 241
- Intapan PM, 235
Ishak M, 279
- Kamalia MD, 279
Kamchaisathien V, 77
Kana K, 77
Kanistanon C, 161
Kanoksinsombat C, 99
Kao CC, 121
Kasitanon N, 85, 175, 179
Khawsuk W, 257
Khuplupsup K, 135
Kirtsreesakul V, 141
Klaewsongkram J, 77
Kleine-Tebbe J, 197
Kositanont U, 241
- Kosuwon P, 241
Kroon E, 105
Kunakorn M, 135, 267
- Lange J, 105
Lertprasertsuke N, 175
Liang CC, 223
Likansakul S, 99
Lin SJ, 121
Liu MF, 223
Louisiriratchanakul S, 99
Louthrenoo W, 85, 175, 179
Lu FL, 147
- Maleewong W, 235
Maraina CHC, 279
Matsuo K, 93
Meepool A, 257
Moonviriyakit K, 229
Mould TL, 7
- Ngowthammatas W, 127
Nikoloutsopoulos T, 187
Nookai S, 105
Nuglor T, 217
- Onreabroi S, 13
Orman A, 1
Ou LS, 121
- Paasch U, 197
Panichakul T, 167
Parisuthikul V, 77
Pattanapanyasat K, 37
Pawankar R, 43, 139
Phankhithongkum S, 203
Phanupak P, 77, 105
Phonrat B, 23
Phutiprawan T, 26
Piyasirisilp S, 179
Ploybutr S, 37
Polson Y, 235
Pongpaew P, 23
Poovorawan Y, 53, 229
Pothikamjorn SL, 77
Prapphal N, 229
Prayoonwiwat N, 267
Puangtabtim W, 29
- Reutrakul V, 167
Roberts-Thomson PJ, 7, 187
Rogalski C, 197
Rumsaeng V, 77
Ruxrungtham K, 77, 105
Rytter M, 197
- Sakolvaree Y, 247
Samransamruajkit R, 229
Sanghassapaviriyah A, 77
Sawanpanyalert P, 29, 93
Sawanyawisuth K, 235
Schelp FP, 23
Semprasert N, 13
Settaudom C, 135
Sirisinha S, 167
Sivayathorn A, 127
- Smith AJ, 187
Smith MD, 7
Sobhon P, 257
Songsivilai S, 161
Soonklang N, 257
Srasuebkul P, 77
Sri-ngam P, 26
Srisaimanee N, 267
Srivuthana S, 155
Stehr K, 113
Stück B, 113
Sukitawut W, 85, 175, 179
Sukpanichnant S, 127
Sunthornkacht R, 99
Supanit I, 99
Supawan V, 23
Sutra S, 241
Suttthent R, 93
Suttiithavil W, 77
- Tapchaisri P, 247
Taweethavonsawat P, 247
Thaisri H, 29
Thammanichanon D, 135
Thampanitchawong P, 77
Theamboonlers A, 53
Tiensiwakul P, 61
Trakultivakorn M, 217
Tsai MJ, 147
Tsao PN, 147
Tsou KI, 147
Tug T, 209
Tungtrongchitr R, 23
- Ubolyam S, 105
Ungsedhapand C, 105
Ünlü M, 1
Upathum SE, 257
- Vanapongtipagorn P, 229
Vannasaeng S, 37
Vichainun P, 85, 179
Vichasri-Grams S, 157
Vichyanond P, 203
Viravan T, 77
Visitsunthorn N, 203
Visudhiphan S, 127
Viyanant V, 257
Vongsakul M, 57
Vongsheree S, 29
Vudhivai N, 23
- Wacharasindhu S, 155
Walker JG, 7
Wang CR, 223
Wanichanon C, 257
Wanu T, 167
Warachit P, 93
Wasi C, 99, 241
Weverling GJ, 105
Wongprompitak P, 161
Wongsaroj T, 247
- Yamazaki S, 93
Yang YH, 147
Yenchitsomanus P, 37

SUBJECT INDEX TO VOLUME 20

- Acute bronchiolitis, 229
AIDS, 175
Air pollution, 77
Allergic rhinitis, 43, 77, 139, 203, 217
Allergy, 141
Amino acid sequences, 93
Anaphylactic shock, 197
Angiostrongylasis, 235
Angiostrongylus cantonesis, 235
Anti-HAV, 53
Anti-HIV antibodies, 99
Anti-IgA antibody, 203
Anti-nuclear antibody, 279
Antiretroviral therapy, 105
Apoptosis, 167
Asthma, 1, 43, 77, 139, 209, 217
Asthma-like symptoms, 209
Atherosclerosis, 23
Autoimmune disorder, 203
- Blomia tropicalis*, 217
Breast cancer, 13
- C1q, 223
C3 complement, 23
Castleman's disease, 127
Cause of death, 85
CD69, 37
Celiac disease, 203
Ceruloplasmin, 23
Children, 217
Cholangiocarcinoma cell line, 57
Cholangiocarcinoma, 167
Cigarette smoking, 23
Conjunctivitis, 77
CSF, 267
Cyclins D1, E, A, 57
Cytotoxicity, 57, 167
- Dermatophagoides*, 217
Diagnosis, 161
DNA sequences, 61
DNA, 267
Drug allergy, 197
- Endothelin-1, 229
Enzyme immunoassay, 13, 267
Eosinophilia, 121
Eosinophilic meningitis, 235
- Erythema nodosum, 175
Estrogen receptor mRNA, 13
Estrogen receptor protein, 13
- Fasciola gigantica*, 257
Flow cytometry, 37, 147
Free insulin-like growth factor-I, 155
- Glutamic acid decarboxylase, 37
Glutathione S-transferase, 257
Growth hormone deficiency, 155
- Hands, 7
HBeAg, 135
HBsAg, 135
Heiner's syndrome, 203
Hepatitis B virus infection, 135
Hepatitis C virus, 161
Herpesvirus-8, 127
HIV-1 infection, 99, 175
HIV-1 RNA, 105
HIV-1 subtype B, 29
HIV-1 subtype E, 29, 105
HIV-1 V3 loop, 93
Hypereosinophilic syndrome, 121
- IgA deficiency, 203
IgE-mediated reaction, 197
IGF-1 binding protein-3, 155
IgG subclass deficiency, 203
IgG subclasses, 235
Immunoblotting, 161
Immunodeficiency, 203
Immunogenicity, 113, 241
Immunophenotyping, 147
Infants, 99, 147, 209
Insulin-like growth factors-I (IGF-1), 155
Intravenous drug users, 29
- Kaposi's sarcoma, 127
- Lupus nephritis, 203, 223
lymphocyte subsets, 147
Lymphoma, 127
- Measles, 113
Medical students, 53
Mite allergens, 217
Monoclonal antibodies, 257
- Multiple myeloma, 187
Mumps, 113
Mycobacteria, 267
- Nasal polyps, 141
Nasal spray, 141
Nervous system, 179
Nonstructural 3 protein, 161
- Panniculitis, 175
Paraproteins, 187
PCR, 267
Penicillin, 197
PHA, 57
Pneumonia, 229
Polymyositis, 175
Prognostic factors, 85
Psychosis, 179
Pulmonary function, 77
- Reverse passive hemagglutination, 135
RSV, 229
RT-PCR, 13
Rubella, 113
- Scleroderma, 7
Seizures, 179
Seroreactivity, 93
Skin test, 141
SLE, 85, 179, 203, 223, 229
Stromal cell derived factor, 61
Students, 1
- T cells, 37
Telangiectasia, 7
Thailand, 53, 93, 105
TNF- α , 57, 167
Treatment, 43, 139
Triptolide, 167
Turkey, 1, 209
Type 1 diabetes mellitus, 37
- Vaccine, 113, 241
Varicella, 113, 241
Vasculitis lesions, 279
Vertical transmission, 99
Viral load, 105
- Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, 187