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Probe-based confocal laser endomicroscopy in the diagnosis of diffuse cystic lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome

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Abstract

Sjögren's syndrome is a systemic autoimmune disease characterized by lymphocytic infiltration of various organs with a wide frequency of pulmonary involvement. Diffuse cystic lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome is a rare condition and requires differential diagnosis with other cystic pathologies such as lymphangioleyomiomatosis or Langerhans cell histiocytosis. Probe-based confocal laser endomicroscopy (pCLE) is a method of *in vivo* investigation of airways and lung tissue at a microscopic level during bronchoscopy. We used this method in diffuse cystic lung disease caused by Sjögren's syndrome. The pCLE image showed a large number of fluorescent cells, presumably lymphocytes, in bronchioles, dilated alveolar spaces with fluid, and thin alveolar walls. We think that the presence of the bronchiolar cell pattern can be used to differentiate between the pulmonary manifestations of Sjögren's disease and other cystic lung diseases.

Introduction

Sjögren's syndrome is a systemic autoimmune disease characterized by lymphocytic infiltration of the exocrine glands, particularly the salivary and lacrimal glands, and characterized by a triad of keratoconjuctivitis sicca, xerostomia, and a generalized connective tissue disorder [1,2]. It can occur in isolation (primary Sjögren) or be associated with other rheumatologic conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus, or systemic sclerosis (secondary Sjögren) [3]. Pulmonary involvement in patients with Sjögren syndrome has a wide frequency of 9% to 90%, but it is clinically significant in 10-20% [1,4]. The most common pulmonary manifestations are nonspecific interstitial pneumonia, usual interstitial pneumonia, organizing pneumonia, lymphocytic interstitial pneumonia, bronchiolitis, bronchiectasis, pulmonary amyloidosis, pulmonary lymphoma, and cystic lung disease [1,5]. Cystic lung disease occurs in 7-46% of patients and is usually associated with lymphocytic interstitial pneumonia, amyloidosis, or lymphoproliferative disorders [4]. The cyst-only disease is less frequent (2.5-9%) and requires differential diagnosis with other cystic pathologies such as lymphangioleyomiomatosis or Langerhans cell histiocytosis [1,3,4].

Probe-based confocal laser endomicroscopy (pCLE) is a method of *in vivo* investigation of airways and lung tissue on a microscopic level during bronchoscopy [6]. This tool is used in differential diagnosis of interstitial lung disease [7,8], but we did not find a description of the use of this method in Sjögren's disease in the scientific literature.

We report a case of using pCLE in the diagnosis of diffuse cystic lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome.

Case Report

A 34-year-old nonsmoking female was admitted to St. Petersburg State Research Institute of Phtisiopulmonology with complaints of weakness and fatigue. In August 2022, after having a COVID-19 infection, the patient underwent a high-resolution computed tomography (HRCT), which revealed multiple thin-walled cysts 3-20 mm in diameter in intact lung tissue. Based on these findings, a presumptive diagnosis of lymphangioleiomyomatosis was made, and she was sent to the St. Petersburg State Research Institute of Phthisiopulmonology to verify the diagnosis. From the anamnesis, it is known that the patient has chronic primary Sjögren syndrome with symptomatic keratoconjuctivitis sicca, xerostomia, connective tissue disorder, and also pituitary microadenoma and hyperprolactinoma. A chest HRCT was repeated at the hospital. The presence of multiple cysts of varying sizes, some of which had internal septations and were associated with eccentric vessels, was noted (Figure 1). Laboratory tests show hemoglobin of 112 g/L, and a leukocyte count of $5.4*10^9$/L. Pulmonary function tests were normal. To clarify the diagnosis, it was decided to perform a bronchoscopy with pCLE and bronchoalveolar lavage. Bronchoscopy was made under local anesthesia with a 2% solution of lidocaine and showed mild endoscopic signs of bronchitis. pCLE was performed by the Cellvizio system and 1.4-mm semiflexible probe Alveoflex (Mauna Kea Technologies, Paris, France).

The miniprobe was inserted through the instrumental channel of the endoscope and passed into the distal parts of the bronchial tree until a dynamic image of the alveoli was obtained. In alveolar areas with normal lung tissue by HRCT data (right segment 2,3), the pCLE image showed normal round alveolar structures without pathological patterns (Figure 2A). When inserting the probe in subsegmental bronchi to most affected zones by HRCT data (right segment 4,5), before the appearance of alveoli, the level of bronchioles pCLE image showed a large number of small (average diameter 20 μm) highly fluorescent cells, presumably lymphocytes (Figure 2B). After penetration of the bronchiole, pCLE showed dilated alveolar spaces (corresponding to pulmonary cysts) with thin alveolar walls and vessels (Figure 2 C,D). In lung tissue, we did not find any highly fluorescent cells. Bronchoalveolar lavage was performed from right segment 5. The results of the analysis of bronchoalveolar lavage were not specific: 75% of macrophages and 11% of lymphocytes, single erythrocytes. Due to the fact that the data obtained were nonspecific and lymphangioleiomyomatosis could not be excluded, it was decided to perform a thoracoscopic lung biopsy. Histological examination of the surgical biopsy sample showed thinning of the most intralveolar septa, dilatation of individual bronchioles (the wall of some bronchioles is partially destroyed with focal and diffuse lymphoid infiltration, located peribronchially and subepithelially), and focal hypertrophy and hyperplasia of smooth muscle elements of bronchioles (Figure 3A). Also a large cyst is determined, the wall of which is represented by the wall of the bronchiole, partly lined with a typical epithelium, partly the epithelium flattened or absent (Figure 3B). Immunohistochemical staining was negative for HBM-45, and D2-40, excluding the diagnosis of lymphangioleiomyomatosis. The patient was referred to a rheumatologist with a diagnosis of diffuse cystic lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome.

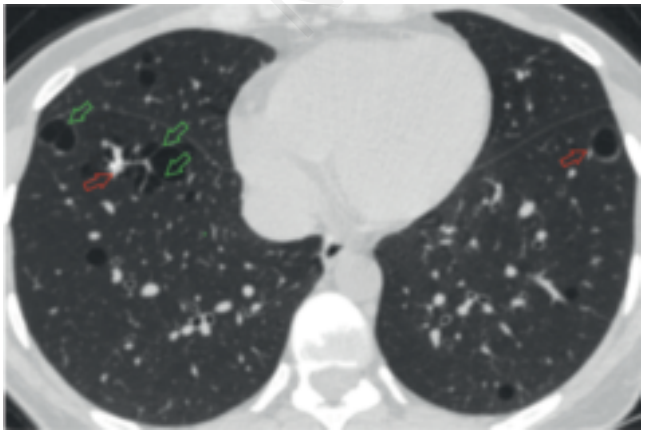

Figure 1. High-resolution computed tomography images showing multiple thin-walled and variable-sized cysts in lung tissue often bordered by an eccentric vessel (red arrows), some of cyst contains internal septations (green arrows).

Discussion

Diffuse cystic lung disease is a rare pulmonary manifestation of Sjögren's syndrome, and it requires differential diagnosis with lymphangioleiomyomatosis and pulmonary Langerhans cell histiocytosis as the most frequent in clinical practice. For the diagnosis in that case, we used the pCLE method of *in vivo* investigation of airways and alveoli based on the phenomenon of autofluorescence, which is also called "alveoloscopy". This technology is used in a limited number of thoracic centers in the world. The role of pCLE in the diagnosis of lung disorders is not well understood, but it is expected that this method may provide additional information for the differential diagnosis of various interstitial lung diseases [7,8]. We used pCLE to investigate airways and lung tissue in patients with diffuse cystic lung disease and Sjögren's syndrome and found a large number of fluorescent cells corresponding in size to lymphocytes in bronchioles, dilated alveolar spaces with fluid, and thin alveolar walls corresponding to pulmonary cysts. These findings correlated with the changes revealed in the histological examination. Thus, the presence of autofluorescent bronchiolar cells in pCLE is the main feature of diffuse cystic transformation in Sjögren's disease. Some scientific reports proved that in primary Sjögren's syndrome, small airways are the main target for lymphocytic infiltration [2,9]. It was also suggested that lymphocytic cell infiltration of the bronchiolar wall, leading to airway narrowing, postobstructive bronchiolar ectasia, and distal air-trapping (a check-valve mechanism), is the main cause of cyst formation in Sjögren's syndrome [10]. Salaün *et al*. earlier performed pCLE in patients with connective tissue disease-associated interstitial lung diseases and noted a high frequency (up to 29.5%) of bronchiolar fluorescent cells. At the same time, no changes in the level of bronchioles have been described in patients with lymphangioleyomyomatosis [11]. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first case of pCLE investigation of a patient with cyst-only lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome. We think that the pCLE finding of fluorescent bronchiolar cells with specific HRCT signs (such as eccentric vessels and internal septations) may confirm cystic lung disease as pulmonary manifestations of Sjögren's syndrome in the corresponding group of patients and avoid thoracoscopic lung biopsy in further cases.

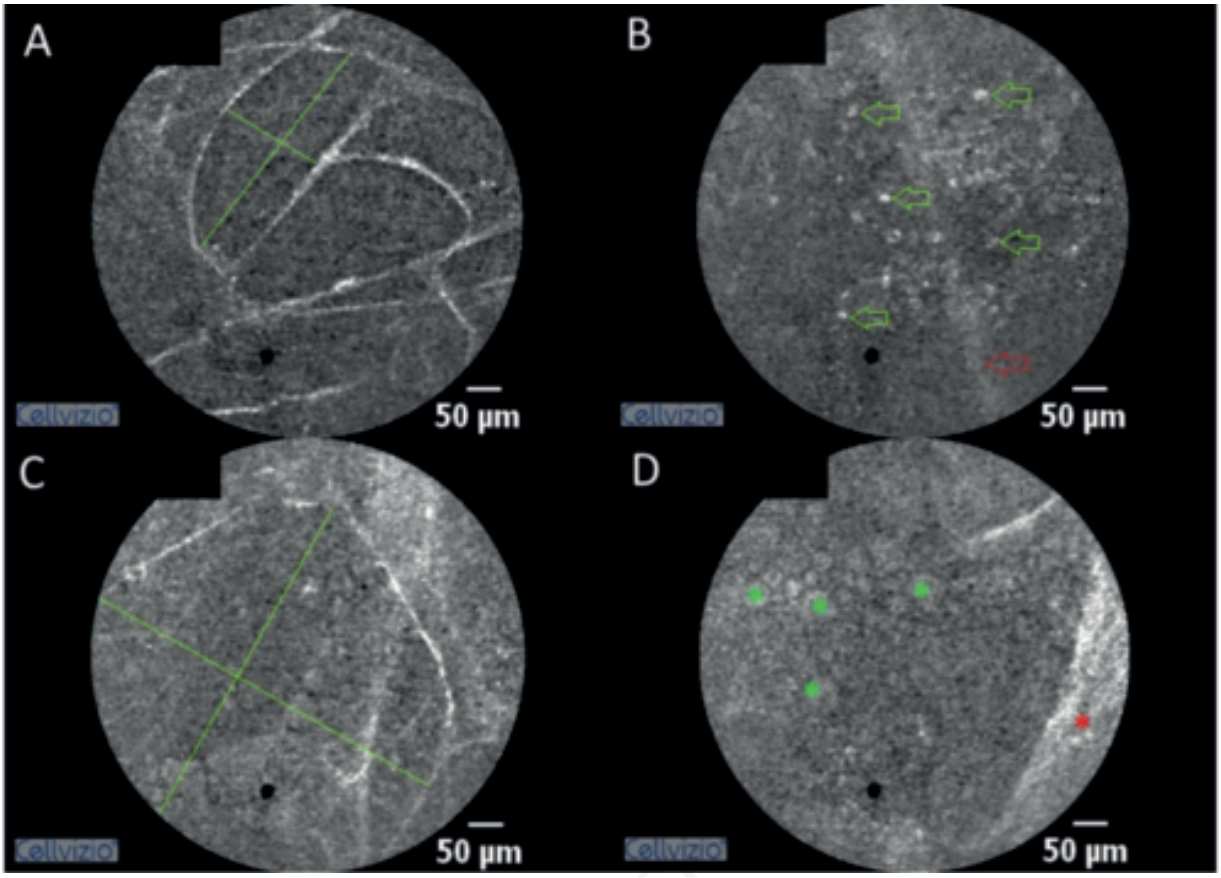

Figure 2. Probe-based confocal laser endomicroscopy examination of airways and alveoli. A) Normal alveolar structures; B) highly fluorescent cells (green arrow) in the bronchiolar area (bronchiolar wall – red arrow); C) dilated alveoli and thinned alveolar walls; D) dilated alveolar space filled with secretion (green *) and adjacent microvessel (red *).

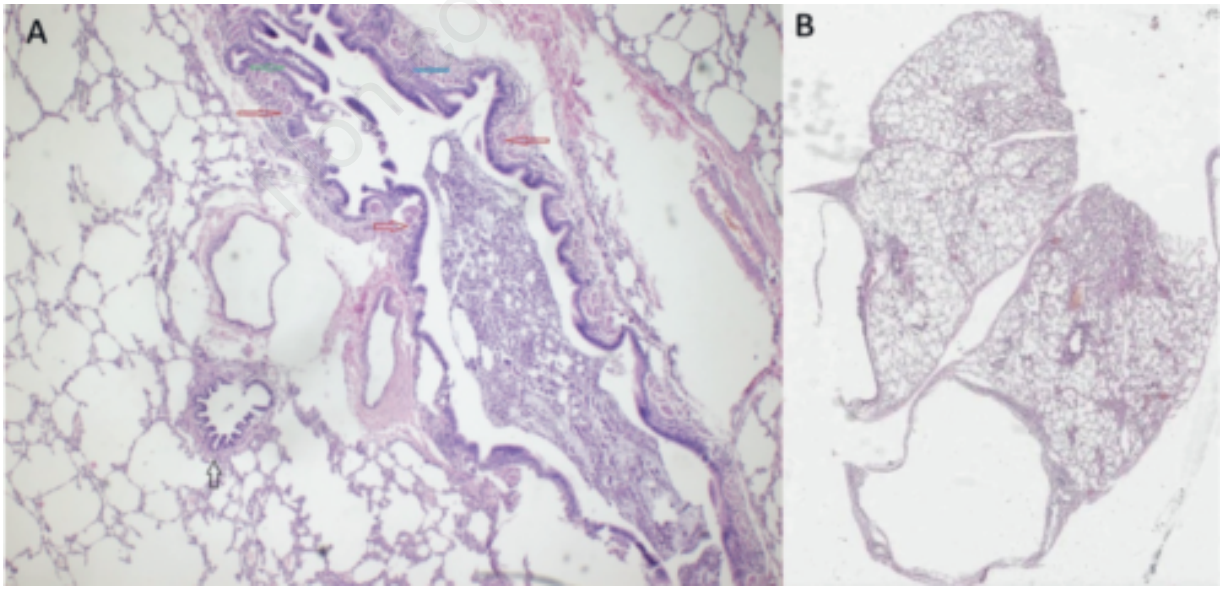

Figure 3. Histological examination of lung tissue. A) The lumen of the bronchiole is dilated, the respiratory epithelium is preserved (green arrow), there is focal hypertrophy of smooth muscles in the wall of the bronchiole (red arrows), and a mild lymphoid infiltration is detected subepithelially (blue arrow); in the lumen of the bronchioles there is mucus, desquamated cells of the bronchial epithelium, lymphocytes and leukocytes. Normal bronchiole (black arrow) [haematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining, ×100]; B) lung tissue with areas of acinar emphysema and thin-walled cyst (H&E staining, ×40).

Conclusions

pCLE is useful in the diagnosis of diffuse cystic lung disease in Sjögren's syndrome. The presence of the bronchiolar cells pattern can be used to differentiate between the pulmonary manifestations of Sjögren's disease and other cystic lung diseases.

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