Vitamin B₁₂ and Folate Status in Sudanese Psychiatric Patients

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ABSTRACT

Background: The contribution of B₁₂ and folate deficiencies to pathophysiology of psychiatric illnesses is well known worldwide, however it was not evaluated in Sudanese psychiatric patients.

Aim: To assess the association between the neuropsychiatric syndromes and the levels of both vitamin B₁₂ and folic acid in Sudanese psychiatric patients.

Materials and Methods: The study involved a test group of 100 psychiatric patients and an age/gender matched control group of 100 subjects with no past history of psychiatric illness. Laboratory investigations, including complete blood count (CBC), serum vitamin B₁₂ and folate concentrations were done to all studied subjects. Significance of the difference in the means of the studied variables and the association between psychiatric illnesses and both B₁₂ or folic acid deficiencies were assessed using appropriate statistical tests.

Results: Most of hematological indices were significantly less in psychiatric patients, although their means were within normal range. The serum concentrations of vitamin B₁₂ in the psychiatric patients (M±SD = 527.9 ± 305.8 pg/ml) were significantly lower compared with the control group (M±SD = 590.5± 186.1 pg/ml, P = 0.001). There was significant association between B₁₂ deficiency and psychiatric illnesses (P = 0.014). Six percent of the psychiatric patients were suffering from B₁₂ deficiency while none the control group was suffering from the same deficiency. The serum concentrations of folic acid were comparable in both studied groups (M±SD = 7.2 ± 1.7 ng/ml, 7.2 ± 2.6 ng/ml in the control and test groups respectively, P > 0.05). There was no folic acid deficiency in both test and control groups.

Conclusion: There was association between vitamin B₁₂, but not folic acid, deficiency and psychiatric diseases in studied Sudanese subjects. Most of the hematological indices were significantly less in psychiatric patients, although their means were within normal range. The significantly lower levels of vitamin B₁₂ deficiency were not associated with megaloblastic changes.

Key words: folic acid, megaloblastic, psychiatric, vitamin B₁₂, Sudanese.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vitamin B₁₂ and folate are essential for proper central methionine/homocysteine metabolism [3, 4] and hence nervous system function [1, 2]. Both vitamins are involved in synthesis of nucleic acids and certain

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neurotransmitters\cite{5-9}. An important consequence of the deficiency of these vitamins is hyperhomocysteinemia, which causes several neuropsychiatric disorders\cite{10,11}, and megaloblastic anemia. Interestingly, there is a significant inverse relationship between the degree of B\textsubscript{12} deficiency anemia and the severity of neurological manifestations. Patients without anaemia or macrocytosis tend to have the most severe nervous system involvement\cite{12,13}. The neuropsychiatric effects of folate deficiency are remarkably similar to vitamin B\textsubscript{12} deficiency. Neuropsychological studies attributed schizophrenia\cite{14}, impairments of intellectual function including attention and abstract reasoning to folate deficiency\cite{15}. Up to one third of psychiatric admissions have low serum folate concentrations, mostly without anaemia or macrocytosis\cite{15}.

In Sudan, there are no previous studies evaluating these two vitamins in Sudanese psychiatric patients. The contribution of B\textsubscript{12} and folate deficiencies to pathophysiology of psychiatric illnesses in Sudan is still uncertain. This study aimed to assess the association between the neuropsychiatric syndromes in Sudanese psychiatric patients and the levels of both vitamin B\textsubscript{12} and folic acid.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted during the period December 2009 - November 2011 in the three major psychiatric hospitals in Khartoum state – Sudan, namely, Altigani Almahi psychiatric hospital, Taha Bashr psychiatric hospital and the psychiatry unit of Khartoum teaching hospital. The ethical approvals were received from the institutional review board of the hospitals of concern. The study involved two groups: a test group of one hundred psychiatric patients selected randomly from above-mentioned hospitals and age/gender matched control group of one hundred subjects with no past history of psychiatric illness. The medical history and clinical status of the patients were assessed by well trained psychiatric physician. Laboratory investigations, including complete blood count (CBC), serum vitamin B\textsubscript{12} and serum folate were performed to all studied subjects. The CBC was measured using Sysmex KX-21N-TOA – Medical Electronics Company - Japan. Serum vitamin B\textsubscript{12} and serum folate levels were measured using the Electrochemiluminescence (ECL) technology (ELECSYS 2010 - Rhoce diagnostic- Germany). Based on the kit manufacturer (Rhoce diagnostic- Germany), the normal range for cobalamin was 197–866 pg/ml in both males and females. Regarding folic acid, the normal ranges were 2–15 ng/ml in the males and 2–9.1 ng/ml in in the females. Statistical evaluation was performed using the Microsoft Office Excel (Microsoft Office Excel for windows; 2007), SPSS (SPSS for windows version 19) and OpenEpi version.

2.3.1. Normal distribution of studied variables was examined using Kolmogorov-Smirnova and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Unpaired T-test and Mann-Whitney U test were used to assess significant difference in the means of the studied variables in the different groups. The association between either B\textsubscript{12} or folic acid deficiencies and psychiatric illnesses were assessed using fisher extract test. P < 0.05 was considered significant.

## 3. RESULTS

As shown in figure 1, the control group is well matched for age ($P = 0.794$) and gender ($P = 0.565$) with the test group. Most of the hematological indices were significantly higher in the control group compared to patients with psychiatric illnesses (table 1). In contrast, mean corpuscular volume (MCV) and the white cells other than neutrophils and lymphocytes (Mix %) were not significantly different in the studied groups.

The serum concentration of vitamin B\textsubscript{12} in the psychiatric patients (M±SD = 527.9 ± 305. 8 pg/ml) was significantly lower compared to the control group (M±SD = 590.5±186.1 pg/ml, $P = 0.001$) (figure 1). There was significant association between B\textsubscript{12} deficiency and psychiatric illnesses ($P = 0.014$) (table 2). Six percent of the psychiatric patients were suffering from B\textsubscript{12} deficiency while none the control group was suffering from the same deficiency. Alternatively, the serum concentration of folic acid was comparable in both studied groups (M±SD = 7.2 ± 1.7 ng/ml, 7.2 ± 2.6 ng/ml in the control and test group respectively, $P > 0.05$) (Figure 3). There was no folic acid deficiency in both test and control groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group (N = 100)</th>
<th>Psychiatric patients (N = 100)</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WBC ($\times 10^3$/µl)</td>
<td>5.5 ± 1.6</td>
<td>5.1 ± 1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBC ($\times 10^6$/µl)</td>
<td>5.0 ± 0.4</td>
<td>4.8 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hb (g/dl)</td>
<td>14.1 ± 1.4</td>
<td>13.2 ± 1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hct (%)</td>
<td>42.2 ± 3.9</td>
<td>40.5 ± 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCV (fl)</td>
<td>83.5 ± 4.3</td>
<td>83.5 ± 5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCH (pg)</td>
<td>28.0 ±1.8</td>
<td>27.0 ±2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCHC (g/dl)</td>
<td>33.4 ± 1.6</td>
<td>32.7 ± 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLT ($\times 10^3$/l)</td>
<td>238 ± 69</td>
<td>209 ± 92.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrophils (%)</td>
<td>37.6 ± 7.5</td>
<td>42.3 ± 10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphocytes (%)</td>
<td>52.9 ± 8.3</td>
<td>48.8 ± 10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix (%)</td>
<td>9.7 ± 2.8</td>
<td>9.0 ± 3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The hematological findings in studied groups
A. B₁₂ Deficiency * Psychiatric Illness cross-tabulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Psychiatric Illness</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B₁₂ Deficiency</td>
<td>(+) 6 (3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>94 (47%)</td>
<td>100 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (50%)</td>
<td>100 (50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P (Fisher exact) = 0.014

B. Risk-based estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point Estimates</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>95% Confidence Intervals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk in patients with B₁₂ deficiency</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>55.72 - 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk in patients without B₁₂ deficiency</td>
<td>48.45%</td>
<td>41.52 - 55.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Risk</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43.14 - 56.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Ratio</td>
<td>2.064</td>
<td>1.785 - 2.386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Difference</td>
<td>51.55%</td>
<td>44.51 - 58.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etiologic fraction in population</td>
<td>3.093%</td>
<td>0.5848 - 5.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etiologic fraction in patients with B₁₂ deficiency</td>
<td>51.55%</td>
<td>43.98 - 58.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The association between B₁₂ deficiency and psychiatric illness

4. DISCUSSION

The current results have added further evidence for the association between vitamin B₁₂ deficiency and neuropsychiatric disorders [16-21]; though it is the first study that confirms this fact is Sudanese. The observed association between B₁₂ deficiency and psychiatric disorders was a reproducible finding in a variety of psychiatric illnesses including delirium, hallucinations, depression, dementia and catatonia [22, 23]. Internationally, the prevalence of vitamin B₁₂ deficiency in those suffering from neuropsychiatric disorders is uncertain [24]. In the present study 6% of psychiatric patients were suffering from below vitamin B₁₂ deficiency while none of them was suffering from folic acid deficiency. The prevalence of vitamin B₁₂ and folic acid deficiencies were relatively higher in elder Israeli subjects accounting for 12.6% and 16.4% respectively [20]. The high prevalence of vitamin B₁₂ and folic acid deficiencies among Israeli psychiatric patients were attributed to genetic and environmental factors. Other studies demonstrated vitamin B₁₂ deficiency in chronically ill psychotic patients with adequate nutrition thus excluding abnormal eating habits or dietary deficiencies as causative factor [25]. The underplaying etiology of vitamin B₁₂ and folic acid deficiencies among psychiatric patients seems to be mysterious and needs to be investigated more. Regarding folate level in psychiatric patients, previous reports showed mixed findings. Folate deficiency was demonstrated in elderly with declined cognitive function [26], patients with depression, dementia, schizophrenia [27] and other psychiatric disorders [28]. Interestingly, Skerritt reported that, although there is a trend for psychotic patients to have lower serum folate levels than controls, there is no statistically significant difference in folate levels as measured by red cell folate [29]. Other studies failed to demonstrate significant difference in folic acid concentrations between patients with different psychiatric disorders and healthy controls [30, 31]. In the current study the levels of serum folate in the patients and the control groups were comparable adding more evidence for the
variations in folic acid concentrations among psychiatric patients. Complete blood counts were within normal range in the control group as well as in psychiatric patients. However, the psychiatric patients showed slightly lower white cell and platelets counts which could be attributed to their significantly lower levels of B₁₂ [32]. In contrast, there was no evidence of megaloblastic changes in psychiatric patients as indicated by the comparable mean corpuscular volumes of psychiatric patients and the control group. The examination of peripheral blood smears showed no macrocytosis; neither in psychiatric patients nor in control group. Although the mean corpuscular hemoglobin and mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration were slightly more in the control group compared to psychiatric patients, the difference in the mean reached statistical significance. These findings are consistent with some previous studies [17, 18] but not others [12, 31]. Vladimir et al. data demonstrated significantly lower levels of vitamin B₁₂ and folate, yet there was no evidence of anemia or (mean hemoglobin concentration and mean corpuscular volume were 14.1 g/dl and 90.3 fl respectively) macrocytosis [17]. The findings of Vladimir et al. was further supported by the results of Engelborghs and his colleges [18]. 20% of the patients by Engelborghs were suffering from vitamin-B₁₂ deficiency and 25% of them were having folate responsive neuropsychiatric syndromes; however, there were no evidences of megaloblastic anaemia in both groups [18]. Absence of features of anemia and macrocytosis is difficult to explain, but theoretical speaking may indicate that psychiatric manifestations could appear at early stages of vitamin B₁₂ and/or folate deficiency compared to megaloblastic anemia. This hypothesis is partially supported by Berlinsky et al. who showed relatively low sensitivities of high MCV level as a diagnostic for folic acid and vitamin B₁₂ deficiencies (sensitivity were 42.9%, 23.1% for folic acid and vitamin B₁₂ deficiencies respectively) [33].

To date there is no universal agreement for the normal range of serum cobalamin levels. However, the high incidence of hematologic, neurologic and gastrointestinal abnormalities in patients with serum cobalamin levels below 300 pg/ml guide the researchers in this field to suggest 300-350 pg/ml as a lower limit for serum cobalamin [34]. Alternatively, maximum mental functions may be reached at a concentration of 1000 pg/ml [35]. In the current study, the mean of serum concentration of vitamin B₁₂ in the psychiatric patients (527.9 pg/ml) was not that far away the control group (590.5 pg/ml); however, there were much variations in the vitamin B₁₂ concentrations in the former group (standard deviations were 305.8 and 186.1 pg/ml in the test and the control groups respectively). Statistically, this suggest that the lower values of serum concentration of vitamin B₁₂ in psychiatric patients were around 200 pg/ml which could be the range were mental manifestations dominate over hematological finding. However, further studies are desirable to clarify this hypothesis. In conclusion, the present study provided additional prove for the considerable association between vitamin B₁₂, but not folic acid, deficiency and psychiatric diseases. In addition, most of the hematological indices were significantly less in psychiatric patients, although their means were within normal range. Interestingly, and as reported by other studies [12, 13], the significantly lower levels of vitamin B₁₂ deficiency was not associated with megaloblastic changes.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
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6. REFERENCES


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Conflict of Interest: None Declared

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