Editorial

Warfarin: a case history in pharmacogenetics

A M Hall, M R Wilkins

Both hereditary and environmental factors contribute to inter-individual variability in drug response. The considerable interest in the role of genes has to be balanced with the contribution of external influences. Warfarin provides a useful case study of the need to integrate both genetic and non-genetic information when selecting the right dose for a patient. This article discusses the latest data on genotype and warfarin sensitivity and the efforts to incorporate this information into normograms. Exploring the genetics of warfarin response will lead not only to safer prescribing but elucidate the mechanism of action of warfarin and enable the development of new anticoagulant drugs.

Pharmacogenetics—the use of genetic information to inform the prescribing of drugs—has caught the imagination of clinicians, scientists, and patients alike. It promises greater precision in prescribing, where treatment is tailored to the individual, improving the chances of therapeutic response and reducing the risk of harm. While this is highly desirable, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that environment and behaviour also influence the effect of a drug. At best, genotype will be only one of a number of factors that need to be considered when prescribing for a patient. Warfarin provides a good illustration of the complex interplay between genes and environment in determining patient response and the practical issues in delivering on personalised medicines.

Warfarin is currently the most widely used oral anticoagulant in the world. 1 Individual response to the drug is highly variable. In a given population, prescribed doses can vary from 1–40 mg or more daily. Importantly, the therapeutic index in any one patient is very narrow. Patients are monitored closely using the international normalised ratio (INR) for prothrombin time but this adds expense and the incidence of bleeding complications, estimated at 7.6 to 16.5 per 100 patient years, remains high. The period of highest risk of bleeding complications is around the start of warfarin treatment.2 3 In an ideal setting, the physician would like to predict the dose required for each patient without the need for trial and error.

Warfarin Resistance

At the other end of the spectrum, inherited resistance to warfarin is well recognised in rats, mice, and humans. 4 Warfarin acts by inhibiting the enzyme vitamin K epoxide reductase (VKOR). This enzyme recycles vitamin K epoxide to reduced vitamin K (fig 1). The latter is oxidised back to vitamin K epoxide in a coupled reaction that causes carboxylation and activation of the coagulation factors II, VII, IX, and X (the so called “vitamin K dependent clotting factors” which make up the intrinsic coagulation pathway). Until this year, little was known about VKOR as it had been only partially purified and its gene had not been identified. In an elegant series of experiments using family linkage studies and rodent genetics, two groups have identified a gene (termed vitamin K epoxide reductase complex subunit 1 or VCORC1) with a central role in determining VKOR activity. 5–16 VKOR was thought to be a large multicore protein, but expressing the product of VKORC1 alone bestowed VKOR activity in insect cells that did not have it while targeted inhibition of VKORC1 expression with small interfering RNAs notably reduced VKOR activity. Thus, this molecule alone may be responsible for recycling vitamin K. Missense mutations in this gene appear to explain inherited warfarin resistance in humans and rats. 17 18

Implications for Warfarin Prescribing

How might this genetic information influence our use of warfarin? In general terms, the value of genotyping a patient for a given variant...
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But there is more than one gain from pharmacogenetic studies of this sort. Pharmacology can inform disease genetics and genetic strategies can lead to the development of better drugs. In this case, VKORC1 allelic variants are not only responsible for warfarin resistance but can also give rise to hereditary deficiency of vitamin K dependent clotting factors. 13 Meanwhile, clarifying the molecular target for warfarin permits more detailed study of the structure and function of this enzyme and the possibility of new pharmacological inhibitors, ideally with different kinetics and less inter-individual variability.

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