

Prevalence of Antibody to *Trypanosoma cruzi* in women Delivering Infants at Parkland Health & Hospital System, Dallas, Texas, USA

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ABSTRACT

Recent increases in the immigration of persons from Latin America into North America, particularly from regions endemic for Chagas disease, suggest the possibility that pregnant women may be latently infected with *Trypanosoma cruzi*. This study was undertaken to assess the magnitude of seropositivity in parturient women in our institution.

Umbilical cord blood was collected from Hispanic surnamed women delivering infants at Parkland Health and Hospital System (PHHS), the public hospital serving Dallas County, Texas, and affiliated with UT Southwestern. When possible the specimens were collected from consecutive deliveries. Serum was tested for antibodies to *Trypanosoma cruzi* by commercial systems. Two hundred delivering women were tested as described. Of those tested, 4 were found to be positive for *T. cruzi* antibody (2%). This confirms a potential risk for transplacental transmission of *T. cruzi* in populations residing outside the traditional endemic zone, such as those seeking medical care at PHHS.

Key Words: Trypanosoma cruzi, Chagas disease, maternal transmission, Dallas, Texas

1. INTRODUCTION

Chagas disease, the condition caused by infection with *Trypanosoma cruzi*, is acquired via several routes: by transmission from infected triatomine bugs, by transfusion of blood products from infected donors, by the transplacental route, by transplantation of solid organs from infected donors, and by oral transmission via ingestion of products contaminated with infected triatomine bugs, or parts thereof [1-12]. Previous studies have documented that there are seropositive blood donors residing in North America, that a few cases of Chagas disease have been transmitted via transplanted organs, and that seropositive women have delivered infants in the United States [3-5,6-9,13,14]. Our data extend the latter group to include women residing in Dallas, Texas.

Chagas Disease due to infection by *Trypanosoma cruzi* is endemic in much of Latin America. Recent immigration patterns include translocation of persons from the endemic zones into

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various parts of North America and other endemic countries. [1,2,16-20] In Dallas, Texas the population is currently approximately 40% Hispanic, many of whom are relatively recent immigrants from Mexico, Central America and South America. According to the US Census Bureau, the population of Texas in 2012 was over 26 million, of which 38.1% were categorized as Hispanic. Figures for Dallas County (the population served by PHHS) revealed a population of nearly 2.5 million, of which 38.9% were Hispanic [U. S. Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, 2012]. Various studies have confirmed that many such immigrants are seropositive for *Trypanosoma cruzi* [1,2,5,15,20]. The patient population of Parkland Health and Hospital System is over 50% Hispanic. Parkland Health and Hospital System (PHHS) is a large county facility affiliated with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. Annually there are 12,000 to 16,000 obstetrical deliveries at Parkland, the majority of which are by Hispanic surnamed women. We wished to ascertain the degree to which the women delivering infants in that institution could potentially transmit the infection via the transplacental route. The study was not designed to include socioeconomic data. In fact, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study did not allow for that.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Umbilical cord blood was obtained at the time of delivery of 200 Hispanic surnamed women at Parkland. As nearly as possible (determined by availability of research staff) the collections were from consecutive deliveries. All specimens were obtained within a period of two weeks. Specimens were immediately de-identified, and could not be linked to any specific individual subject. The blood specimens were centrifuged and the serum separated from the cellular elements on the day of collection. Sera were then refrigerated (5° C) until antibody studies were performed (done within two weeks of collection). All sera were then subjected to assay for antibody to *T. cruzi* using the Hemagen Chagas Kit® EIA system as directed by the manufacturer. In addition, all sera giving a positive reaction to that test were retested using the Wiener Chagatest – ELISA – Recombinante v 3.0, and a random sample of 30 sera giving a negative reaction with the Hemagen Chagas Kit were retested with the Wiener Chagatest, as directed by the manufacturer. Both the Hemagen and Wiener tests were challenged with positive and negative control sera, supplied by the manufacturers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 200 specimens of cord blood tested, 4 reacted positively using the Hemagen Chagas Kit. Each of those specimens also tested positively with the Wiener Chagatest. Similarly, each of the 30 specimens giving negative reactions with the Hemagen Chagas Kit that were also tested with the Wiener Chagatest, gave negative reactions with that test. Therefore, of the 200 women tested, 2% gave reactions that indicated previous infection with *Trypanosoma cruzi*, and thus potentially could have transmitted the infection to their infants. It was beyond the scope of this project to follow and retest the infants whose cord bloods were seropositive. Given the large number of Hispanic surnamed women delivering babies at Parkland, a significant number of the offspring are potentially infected, if these data can be applied to the general population of similar women.

This study was undertaken primarily to assess the approximate proportion of the population of Hispanic women giving birth at PHHS who are latently infected with *Trypanosoma cruzi*. It

was intended to be a pilot study, and due to personnel and financial limitations could not be a large study. There are few published studies addressing the issue of the potential for maternal to fetal transmission of *T. cruzi* in the United States. Di Pentima and colleagues, more than a decade ago, found a seroprevalence of 0.3% in over 3,000 Hispanic women attending clinics in the city of Houston [10]. Since that time there has been increased immigration of persons from Latin America, especially in Texas. There are no other published studies regarding the seroprevalence of *T. cruzi* in the pregnant Hispanic population in Texas. Congenital transmission of Chagas disease to a boy in Virginia was documented in 2010 [4]. Other studies from the US suggest that there is suboptimal appreciation of the potential for other additional such events, but that it may be more than is appreciated [6-8, 11, 20]. Studies from Mexico are also limited [21-23]. Mar, et al, found that 3.5% and 5% of screened mothers were seropositive in Veracruz and Chiapas, respectively [21]. Jiménez-Cardoso, et al, studying pregnant women in Oaxaca, Jalisco and Mexico City, found a prevalence of infection in pregnant women of 4.4%, 12.02% and 4.12%, respectively [22]. Cruz-Reyes and Pickering-López, in a longitudinal study spanning 76 years, found a prevalence of Chagas disease, either from serological surveys, clinical manifestations, or blood bank reports, to range from 0.45% in Chihuahua, to 18.99% in Querétaro [23]. A significant percentage of the immigrants seen at PHHS are from the states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, Jalisco, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas, generally in that order (author's personal experience at PHHS for nearly 40 years). There are more data from Spain, doubtless reflecting immigration patterns. Immigrants to Spain tend to include more persons from Bolivia, much of which is a hyperendemic area [12, 20, 24-27]. Publications addressing the issues of congenital transmission of *T. cruzi*, and the mechanisms of that phenomenon, were from Latin American centers; none were from North America [28-30].

We believe our data suggest that there is a real potential for maternal transmission of *T. cruzi* to infants delivered in our institution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the technical assistance of Sujata Patel, MS, and Cedric Spak, MD. The study was funded in part by a grant from an anonymous donor. The author has no financial or other disclosures.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center approved this study. A waiver of informed consent of the subjects included in the study was granted by the IRB for purposes of this epidemiologic study.

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