Corticosteroid Biosynthesis and Metabolism in
Adrenal Tumors

Dissertation (PhD thesis)

Nikolette Szücs MD

Supervisor: Károly Rácz MD, DSc
Program Director: László Rosivall MD, DSc

2nd Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine,
Semmelweis University
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INTRODUCTION

The adrenal cortex is one of the earliest examined and fairly best studied endocrine organ, which plays important roles in the homeostasis of the organism. After discovery of the most important glucocorticoid (cortisol) and mineralocorticoid (aldosterone) hormones produced by the adrenals and the recognition of the most important physiological regulatory regulatory mechanisms, the knowledge about novel regulatory factors and mechanisms is still under progress. One of these new factors seems to be leptin, discovered only in the last decade, which plays a well-known role in energy homeostasis and in regulating the quantity of fat tissue. Based on these new data it seemed worthwhile to study the connection between leptin and corticosteroids, which have also a role in the same processes.

During the metabolism of cortisol, numerous active, partially active or inactive metabolites are produced. One of these compounds is $6\beta$-hydroxycortisol, whose importance, despite numerous studies, is still debated. The possibility arises that the quantitative determination of this compound may help in the diagnosis of various clinical diseases.

Hypertension occurs approximately 30 percent of the adult population, and the majority of secondary forms are in close connection with aldosterone overproduction of the adrenals. The recognition of these forms of hypertension is of great importance, because therapy differs substantially from that used in patients with essential hypertension. These observations prompted us to analyze the data of our large number of patients with primary aldosteronism, examined at the 2nd. Department of Medicine, Semmewes University.
AIMS OF THE STUDY

My aim in this work was to study those aspects of corticosteroid production and metabolism which may add some new aspects to the better understanding of the hormone secretion of adrenocortical adenomas, may help to establish a more accurate diagnosis, and may offer a chance for better therapy. The study was based in part on hormone determinations of blood and/or adenoma tissue samples of patients examined at the 2nd Department of Medicine, Semmelweis University. The other part of the study analyzed clinical and hormone laboratory findings of these patients.

In the study I tried to find answers to the following five issues:

1. I wanted to explore, whether the newly recognized neuroendocrine hormone, leptin, could have, in addition to its well-known role in energy homeostasis, a direct effect on the corticosteroid production of different types of human adrenocortical adenomas. Is it possible that leptine could produce different effects on cells isolated from various adrenocortical adenomas?

2. I wanted to study, whether commonly used dynamic tests for investigations of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis have any influence on plasma levels of the cortisol metabolite 6β-hydrocortisol, produced mainly in the liver. Does plasma concentrations of 6β-hydroxycortisol in healthy individuals, in patients with liver diseases or in those with Cushing’s syndrome differ under basal condition, after 1 mg dexamethasone administration, and/or after exogenous ACTH stimulation? Do measurements of cortisol and/or 6β-hydroxycortisol concentration in saliva, a good marker of
biologically active free hormone fraction, offer a better means for the detection of an occult overproduction of hormones present in the majority of patients with clinically non-hyperfunctioning adrenal adenomas.

3. Is it possible to prove the role of the adrenals, as a possible extrahepatic source of 6β-hydroxycortisol, with measurement of hormone secretion in isolated cell systems obtained from adrenocortical tissues? Does the 6β-hydroxycortisol production differ in different types of hormone producing adrenocortical adenomas, as compared to cells isolated from adrenocortical tissues surrounding the adenoma? Do hormone measurements in samples obtained from selective catheterization of the adrenal veins confirm the results of these in vitro studies?

4. What is the efficacy of the most frequently used diagnostic tests in differentiating the two common subtypes of primary aldosteronism when analyzing retrospectively the data of 187 patients with primary aldosteronism, examined at the 2nd Department of Medicine, Semmelweis University between 1958 and 2004? Do these data confirm recent observation on the changing proportion of the two most common subtypes of primary aldosteronism, and/or on the increasing number of normokalemic patients?
5. Is it possible to elaborate the most optimal method in localizing unilateral aldosterone producing adrenomas with a retrospective analysis of the data of the “gold standard” method, which detects hormones in blood samples obtained with adrenal vein samplings?

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Patients, blood- and tissue samples

The study included the results of clinical data and hormonal findings obtained from blood, salivary, and/or adrenal adenoma tissue samples of patients examined at 2nd Department of Medicine, Semmelweis University. Blood and salivary samples were used for hormone measurements and/or molecular biologic analysis. Adrenocortical adenoma tissue samples were obtained from patients treated with surgical intervention, and were used for in vitro analysis of hormone production of isolated adrenocortical cell systems.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

1. Using in vitro testings of isolated adenoma cells obtained from patients with aldosterone producing adenomas, adrenocortical adenomas causing Cushing’s syndrome and non-hyperfunctioning adrenocortical adenomas, I found that human recombinant leptin significantly inhibited basal and ACTH-stimulated cortisol and corticosterone secretion in all types of adenoma cells. Based on these results and previous observations from the literature one may hypothesize, that in patients with adrenal adenomas causing Cushing’s syndrome (and also in at least some patients with non-
hyperfunctioning adrenal adenomas), glucocorticoid oversecretion causes elevated plasma leptin concentration, and this increased plasma leptin concentration may inhibit glucocorticoid production in the adrenal adenoma cells. Therefore, it is possible, that the inhibitory effect of leptin on glucocorticoid secretion is part of a counterregulatory mechanism, which limits further increases of glucocorticoid production in glucocorticoid-producing adenoma cells. In addition, I showed that leptin, which exerts an inhibiting effect on cortisol and corticosterone secretion, does not influence basal and ACTH-stimulated aldosterone secretion in those adenoma cell types which exhibited measurable aldosterone production. One may postulate that the lack of inhibiting effect of leptin on aldosterone production may be associated with an increased ACTH sensitivity of aldosterone production.

2. I showed that in patients with chronic alcoholic liver disease after at least two weeks of alcohol abstinence, the plasma 6β-hydroxycortisol concentration after ACTH administration was significantly higher than in control subjects, while plasma 6β-hydroxycortisol concentration during midnight, in the morning and after administration of 1 mg dexamethasone did not differ in the two groups. These findings raise the possibility that after a two-week abstinence in patients with chronic alcoholic liver disease, plasma 6β-hydroxycortisol may be a sensitive indicator of hepatic 6β-hydroxylase (and perhaps of other drug metabolizing enzymes).

3. Using measurements of plasma and salivary cortisol and 6β-hydroxycortisol concentrations in the morning, after 1 mg dexamethasone administration, and after ACTH stimulation in
patients with adrenocortical adenomas causing Cushing’s syndrome, as well as in patients with non-hyperfunctioning adrenocortical adenomas, I showed that plasma and salivary 6β-hydroxycortisol concentrations are far more sensitive indicators of both occult and overt cortisol oversecretion compared to plasma and salivary cortisol concentrations. Based on these findings plasma and salivary 6β-hydroxycortisol values may become useful biochemical markers of occult or overt cortisol overproduction in patients with adrenocortical adenomas.

4. With the use of human adrenal and human adrenocortical adenoma cells, as well as venous blood samples obtained from selective adrenal vein catheterisation I showed that 6β-hydroxycortisol is not only a metabolite exclusively produced by the liver, but it is also a secretory product of the normal and adenomaous adrenocortical cells. It seems likely that 6β-hydroxycortisol is under the regulatory influence of cortisol (and ACTH, which regulates cortisol secretion), and that in adrenocortical adenomas causing cortisol overproduction, the increased secretion of 6β-hydroxycortisol of adrenocortical cells may contribute to the increase of plasma and salivary 6β-hydroxycortisol levels.

5. Analyzing the results of clinical and laboratory findings of 187 patients with primary aldosteronism examined at the 2nd Department of Medicine, Semmelweis University, between 1958 and 2004, I showed that the frequency of idiopathic hyperaldosteronism as compared to aldosterone-producing adenomas and the number of normokalemic patients considerably differed from the results of the published international clinical
studies. The reason for this difference may be the consequence of the fact, that the plasma aldosterone/plasma renin ratio suitable for screening of primary aldosteronism is rarely used in Hungarian hypertensive patients, Moreover, I showed that among the diagnostic methods of primary aldosteronism, the postural test combined with furosemide administration has a specificity of 92% and a sensitivity of 69% when patients who show an increase of plasma cortisol level during the test are excluded. For the first time in Hungary, a DNA-based screening method was introduced for the detection of the chimeric aldosterone-synthase/11β-hydroxylase gene present in patients with familial hyperaldosteronism type I, but no such a case was found among the 30 patients examined.

6. Analyzing the results of hormone determinations in selective adrenal vein samples I showed that the adrenal vein aldosterone/cortisol ratio, frequently used in the international literature, produced a false negative result in the adenomatous (dominant) side in 5 of the 43 surgically treated patients with aldosterone-producing adenomas. I found that these the false negative results can be avoided by calculating the aldosterone/cortisol ratio in suprarenal vein followed by a correction with the same ratios in vena cava inferior. This new method of calculation proved to be useful for the localization of unilateral adenomas when adrenal vein sampling was successful only in the nonadenomatous side.
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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS
PUBLICATIONS INCLUDED IN THE THESIS


OTHER PUBLICATIONS


Majnik J.,Szücs N., Patócs A., Tóth M., Balogh K., Varga I., Gláz E., Rácz K.: Effect of single doses of dexamethasone and adrenocorticotrop hormone


