Clinical Study of Fuchs Corneal Endothelial Dystrophy Leading to Penetrating Keratoplasty

A 30-Year Experience

Natalie A. Afshari, MD; Aaron B. Pittard, MD; Adnan Siddiqui, BS; Gordon K. Klintworth, MD, PhD

Objective: To review 30 years' clinical experience with Fuchs corneal endothelial dystrophy leading to penetrating keratoplasty (PK).

Methods: We reviewed the clinical records of patients diagnosed histopathologically as having Fuchs corneal endothelial dystrophy who underwent PK at Duke University Medical Center between January 1, 1972, and December 31, 2001. This observational case series included 424 patients (546 eyes).

Results: Women represented 77.6% of patients. Mean age at the time of PK for all patients was 69.2 years. Bilateral PK was required in 28.8% of patients, and the mean interval between the 2 PKs was 3.2 years. There was no difference with regard to sex in the likelihood of requiring bilateral PK (P=.59). Among 376 documented family histories, 13.6% were known to be positive for Fuchs dystrophy. Patients with a positive family history underwent PK a mean of 5 years earlier (P<.002) and were more likely to require bilateral PK (P<.003). Patients who underwent bilateral PK were twice as likely to have a positive family history compared with those undergoing unilateral PK (P<.001). Mean visual acuities at corneal thicknesses of 539 to 650 µm, 651 to 750 µm, and greater than 750 µm were 20/60, 20/60, and 20/80, respectively. Patients who underwent bilateral PK and had a preceding cataract extraction on 1 eye required PK of the pseudophakic eye on average 3.2 years earlier than the fellow eye. The mean time from cataract extraction to PK was 2.2 years.

Conclusions: This large study affirms that Fuchs dystrophy is a disorder of aging that predominantly affects women (3.5:1) and is often familial. Pachymetry-determined corneal thickness was a poor predictor of visual acuity until extreme levels of corneal edema were reached. Cataract extraction in an eye with Fuchs dystrophy leads to earlier PK.

Arch Ophthalmol. 2006;124:777-780

FUCHS CORNEAL ENDOTHELIAL DYSTROPHY is a common disorder of aging characterized by central corneal guttate followed by stromal edema that may result in decreased visual acuity (VA) and pain.1-3 Although the basic cause has yet to be determined, the principal defect is a decline in the number of functional endothelial cells.2,4 Other histopathologic findings may include subepithelial bullae and thickening of the Descemet membrane.2,5 The disorder is slowly progressive and bilateral but frequently asymmetric. Women are predominantly affected and familial clustering is common, suggesting an autosomal dominant inheritance and incomplete penetrance.6,4 The age distribution is wide, although the typical symptomatic onset is in the fifth or sixth decade of life, preceded several years earlier by clinical evidence of the disease.3 Medical management may be attempted; however, most patients ultimately require penetrating keratoplasty (PK).1 Fuchs dystrophy accounts for a tenth to a quarter of all corneal transplantations.9,16

Because few studies of Fuchs dystrophy exist, we reviewed the clinical records on 546 eyes from 424 patients with Fuchs dystrophy who underwent PK at our institution during the past 3 decades.

METHODS

During the 30 years between January 1, 1972, and December 31, 2001, 710 patients with the histopathologic diagnosis of Fuchs dystrophy had undergone PK at Duke University Eye Center. All histopathologic diagnoses were confirmed by one ophthalmic pathologist (G.K.K.). The same criteria were used to diagnose each specimen: scant endothelial cells, corneal guttate, and thickening of the Descemet membrane. The medical records of 424 patients were available for review with institutional review board approval. This equated to reports on 546
Table. Findings in Patients With Fuchs Dystrophy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>All Patients</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Positive Family History</th>
<th>Bilateral PK</th>
<th>Unilateral PK</th>
<th>Previous Cataract Extraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients, No.</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes, No.</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, No.</td>
<td>77.6*</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, No.</td>
<td>22.4*</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at first PK, mean, y</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCVA &lt;20/40, %</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCVA &lt;20/100, %</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive family history, %</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral PK, %</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Group</th>
<th>Sex Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Comparison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our findings are summarized in the Table. A single ophthalmic pathologist (G.K.K.) confirmed the diagnosis of Fuchs dystrophy in all 546 eyes using the same pathologic criteria. In 64 (11.7%) of the 546 eyes studied, the patient was clinically diagnosed as having pseudophakic or aphakic bullous keratopathy.

**SEX COMPARISON**

Of the 424 patients studied, 329 (77.6%) were women, which equated to a female-male ratio of 3.5:1. At the time of PK, the mean ages for men and women were 66.3 and 70.2 years, respectively, which was a statistically significant difference of 4 years ($P = .002$). There was no difference with regard to sex in the likelihood of requiring bilateral PK ($P < .59$) or having a family history of Fuchs dystrophy ($P < .72$). The mean preoperative corneal thickness was greater in men by 23 µm.

**FAMILY HISTORY**

Family histories of 376 patients (88.7%) were documented in the medical records for review. Among those documented, 51 (13.6%) were positive for 1 (33 patients [65%]) or more (18 patients [35%]) blood relatives who had known Fuchs dystrophy or had undergone PK. Within this group with a positive family history, 51 (80%) were women and 10 (20%) were men. In addition, 21 patients in this group (41%) required bilateral PK, and the total number of eyes in this group was 72 (56 eyes in women and 16 eyes in men). The mean age at first PK was 64.8 years. Visual acuity was less than 20/40 in 74.5% and less than 20/100 in 18.8%. Pachymetry of the cornea indicated a corneal thickness of 679 µm in the operated-on eye and 652 µm in the fellow eye. These 51 patients underwent bilateral PK a mean of 5 years earlier (at 64.8 vs 69.8 years; $P < .002$) and were more likely to require bilateral PK (21 patients [41.2%] vs 71 [21.8%]; $P < .003$) than were patients with no family history of Fuchs dystrophy. Patients who underwent bilateral PK were twice as likely as those who underwent unilaterial PK to have a positive family history (21.1% vs 9.2% of patients; $P < .001$) (Table).

**BILATERAL VS UNILATERAL PK**

Of the 424 patients studied, the mean age at the time of the first PK was 69.2 years. One hundred twenty-two patients (28.8%) required bilateral PK, 97 (79.5%) of them were women. Their mean age was 65.6 years at the time of the first PK and 68.7 years at the time of PK in the second eye. The mean interval between the 2 procedures was 3.2 years. Of the remaining patients who underwent an unilateral PK, 76.8% were female and the mean age at PK was 70.8 years.
CATARACT EXTRACTION

We identified 17 patients who had undergone bilateral PK and unilateral CE. In 13 (76%) of these patients, the eye that underwent CE required PK earlier than the fellow eye by an mean of 3.2 years. The mean interval between CE and PK was 2.2 years. One hundred seventy patients underwent unilateral PK and an earlier unilateral CE. In 152 (89.4%) of these patients, the CE was performed in the eye that later required PK. Overall, of the 424 clinical charts reviewed, 187 (34.2%) of the 546 eyes had undergone a previous CE (Figure 1).

VISUAL ACUITY

Best-corrected VA was measured at the last visit before corneal transplantation, and Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of VAs among these patients. The mean VA overall was 20/64.

PACHYMETRY

Pachymetry measurements were available in 259 eyes (47.4%) (Figure 3). Corneal thickness ranged from 539 to 940 µm, with a mean of 681 µm at the time of PK and 618 µm in the fellow eye. Corneal thicknesses and corresponding mean VAs were: 539 to 650 µm, 20/60; 651 to 750 µm, 20/60; and greater than 750 µm, 20/80. In the overall analysis of pachymetry data and VA, we found no linear decline in VA, as one might expect with increasing corneal thickness. However, at corneal thicknesses of approximately 775 µm and greater, the mean VA was 20/100, compared with 20/60 below that level ($P<.004$).

COMMENT

Fuchs dystrophy is a disorder predominantly affecting women, as demonstrated in studies beginning with Ernst Fuchs’ original description of the disease. Our finding of a female-male ratio of 3.5:1 confirms that observation. The reasons behind this sex-based discrepancy have not been established, although a few theories have been postulated, including embryological and hormonal mechanisms. To draw conclusions about sex and disease severity, we analyzed age at first PK and mean preoperative VA. Although men were an average of 4 years younger than women at the time of PK, and although the preoperative corneal thickness was slightly greater in men (by 23 µm), the mean preoperative VA was somewhat better in men. It is possible that the PKs were performed at...
an earlier stage of this disease in men. However, there was no difference with regard to sex in the likelihood of requiring bilateral PK or of having a family history of Fuchs dystrophy.

Although corneal thickness is commonly used as a measurement of disease progression, pachymetry findings are highly variable and do not seem to be a reliable indicator of VA. A linear correlation between VA and pachymetry values was not found. However, there was a statistically significant decline in VA at extreme levels of corneal edema (ie, at ≥775 μm). There may be a critical level of corneal edema beyond which VA drops off precipitously.

Familial clustering of Fuchs dystrophy continues to suggest a genetic predisposition for this disorder. One study found mutations in a gene encoding a portion of type VIII collagen, a component of endothelial basement membranes. Genetic and perhaps environmental factors may play a role in the relatively large number of individuals with Fuchs dystrophy at our institution. Further studies are needed to elucidate the cause of the disease as a possible guide for therapy or prevention.

Submitted for Publication: November 23, 2004; final revision received February 15, 2005; accepted February 15, 2005.

Correspondence: Natalie A. Afshari, MD, Department of Ophthalmology, Duke University Eye Center, Duke University Medical Center, DUMC Box 3802, Durham, NC 27710 (afsha003@mc.duke.edu).

Financial Disclosure: None.

Funding/Support: Dr Afshari has received a Career Development Award from Research to Prevent Blindness.

REFERENCES


©2006 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.