The risk of endometriosis and exposure to dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls: a case–control study of infertile women

A.Pauwels1,7, P.J.C.Schepens1, T.D’Hooghe2, L.Delbeke3, M.Dhont4, A.Brouwer5 and J.Weyler6

1Antwerp University, Toxicological Centre, Universiteitsplein 1, B-2610 Wilrijk, 2University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Leuven University Fertility Centre, Herestraat 49, B-3000 Leuven, 3University Hospital of Antwerp, Centre for Reproductive Medicine, Wilrijkstraat 10, B-2650 Edegem, 4University Hospital of Ghent, Centre for Infertility, De Pintelaan 185, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium; 5Institute for Environmental Studies, Free University of Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1115, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands and 6Antwerp University, Epidemiology/Community Medicine, Universiteitsplein 1, B-2610 Wilrijk, Belgium

7To whom correspondence should be addressed.

BACKGROUND: A case–control study was designed to determine the possible association between chronic exposure to dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and the occurrence of endometriosis. The study group consisted of 42 infertile endometriosis cases and 27 mechanical infertile controls, both groups attending one of the collaborating Centres for Reproductive Medicine, enrolled between 1996–1998. METHODS: Exposure assessment to dioxin-like compounds was determined through CALUX (chemical-activated luciferase gene expression)-bioassay to measure dioxin-like total toxic equivalents (dioxins and co-planar PCBs), whereas non-co-planar PCBs were determined through chemical analysis. RESULTS: No association was found between median dioxin-like total toxic equivalents (TEQ) and the occurrence of endometriosis in infertile women [cases (n = 34): 29; controls (n = 27): 24; NS]. When patients were subdivided based on an arbitrary cut-off value of 100 pg TEQ/g serum lipids, no statistically significant association between very high exposure to dioxin-like compounds and endometriosis was found [crude odds ratio (OR) = 4.33; confidence interval (CI) 0.49–38.19; NS]. After adjusting for body mass index, and alcohol consumption, the risk increased slightly to OR = 4.6 (CI 0.48–43.62; NS). There was no confounding by age, ovulatory dysfunction, caffeine intake, smoking or exposure to non-co-planar PCBs. CONCLUSIONS: The study results showed no statistically significant association between exposure to dioxin-like compounds and the occurrence of endometriosis in infertile women.

Key words: CALUX-bioassay/dioxin-like compounds/endometriosis/infertility/polychlorinated biphenyls

Introduction

Endometriosis is an enigmatic gynaecological disorder that is characterized by the ectopic presence of both endometrial glands and stroma (Olive and Schwartz, 1993). The disease is thought to occur through the transtubal spreading and implantation of menstrual endometrium, and is associated with pelvic pain, dyspareunia and infertility. Among the environmental pollutants that have been suggested as being linked to endometriosis are the polyhalogenated aromatic hydrocarbons (PHAH), a class of widespread environmental contaminants which includes polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins (PCDDs), dibenzofurans (PCDFs) and biphenyls (PCBs) (Rier et al., 1993; Lebel et al., 1998). Because the aetiology of endometriosis seems to be multifactorial, it has been suggested that dioxin exposure may contribute to an imbalance of sex hormones or alter growth factors and the immune response (Mayani et al., 1997; Osteen and Sierra-Rivera, 1997). Dioxins alter tissue-specific responses to hormones via modulation of steroid receptor expression (Safe et al., 1991). Along with inhibition of T-lymphocyte function (Neubert et al., 1991) and decreasing natural killer cell activity in plasma and peritoneal fluid, dioxins may stimulate peritoneal fluid macrophages and thus affect angiogenesis and local concentrations of cytokines (e.g. interleukin-1) and growth factors (Clark et al., 1991; Koninckx, 1999). Alternatively, cellular changes or genetic background may predispose an individual to the immunological modulation caused by dioxin exposure, leading to infiltration and adhesion of endometrial cells in the peritoneum (Koninckx, 1999).

Extensive experimental studies have pointed out that most toxic actions induced by 2,3,7,8-tetrachloro-p-dibenzodioxin (TCDD) are mediated via the arylhydrocarbon receptor (AhR) (Safe, 1990). Six other PCDDs, 10 PCDFs, and 12 PCB congeners (non-ortho, and to a lesser extent some...
non-ortho substituted congeners) can also assume a co-planar configuration. Hence, they also interact with the AhR, and they produce the same spectrum of responses in animal and cell models as TCDD, depending on their binding affinity to the AhR (Van den Berg et al., 1998).

PCB congeners possessing two or more chloride substituents at the ortho positions of the biphenyl rings are non-co-planar, and do not bind with high affinity to the AhR (Battershill, 1994). Exposure to these non-co-planar PCB congeners reportedly results in a variety of toxic effects in experimental animals, including neurochemical, neurotoxic, carcinogenic, and endocrine changes (Safe, 1990; Brouwer et al., 1995). However, the spectrum of activity produced by the latter congeners has not been fully explored and the mechanisms of action remain to be fully elucidated (Fischer et al., 1998).

It has been reported recently that in Belgium the incidence and severity of endometriosis in women, as well as the degree of dioxin pollution, is among the highest in the world (Konincx et al., 1994). In view of the accumulating data, we carried out a case-control study aimed to assess whether dioxin-like toxic equivalents in serum are related to endometriosis within a female infertile population.

**Materials and methods**

**Patients**

This prospective case-control study recruited patients undergoing infertility treatment at one of the collaborating Centres for Reproductive Medicine spread over Belgium (University Hospitals of Antwerp, Ghent, and Leuven), enrolled between 1996 and 1998. All women underwent a laparoscopy as part of their infertility work-up. A couple was defined as ‘infertile’ when pregnancy had not been achieved after one year of unprotected sexual intercourse.

The case group consisted of 42 patients with laparoscopy-confirmed endometriosis. Endometriosis was staged as minimal (AFS I) in 21, mild (AFS II) in 7, moderate (AFS III) in 10, and severe (AFS IV) in 4 patients, according to the revised classification of the American Fertility Society (rAFS) (American Fertility Society, 1985).

The control group comprised 27 women without endometriosis and with infertility related to tubal disease, tuboperitoneal factors, cervical factors, or uterine factors. In these women no evidence of endometriosis was found at laparoscopy. An association between these causes of female infertility and exposure to PHAHs has not been established.

This study had been accepted by all Ethical Committees (Protocol nos. 96/44/107, 97/100, and ML 536, for UZA, UZG, and UZL respectively). All patients acknowledged their participation by signing an Informed Consent Form.

**Medical records and interviews**

Medical records of the subjects were reviewed to obtain information on diagnosis (tubal, tuboperitoneal, cervical, uterine factor, endometriosis, ovulatory dysfunction) and anthropometric variables (age, body mass index). A 20-minute telephone interview was conducted, eliciting detailed personal data and documenting factors potentially associated with endometriosis and with PHAH exposure. The enrolment questionnaire was designed primarily to obtain information on the patient’s eating, drinking and smoking pattern.

During the interview all subjects were asked ‘what is your average weekly consumption of glasses of alcohol (including wine, beer, liquors)’. Women consuming ≥6 glasses/week were considered to be alcohol drinkers.

We estimated each person’s total daily caffeine intake by assuming that there was 107 mg/cup in coffee of unknown preparation method, 34 mg/cup in tea (Pastore and Savitz, 1995), and 26 mg/glass (200 ml) in regular or light cola. Furthermore, the patient’s current and former smoking pattern was expressed in cumulative dose of exposure, in terms of packages of cigarettes per year.

**Peripheral blood analysis**

During the preoperative interview, 25 ml of blood per patient was collected in a vacuum system tube, transported in a cooling pail, and centrifuged (15 min, 2000 × g) within 24 h after collection. All serum samples were stored at −20°C until analysed.

**Lipid determination**

Serum cholesterol (free and cholesterol esters), triglycerides, and phospholipids were determined in duplicate as a measurement of lipid content, using enzymatic spectrophotometric determination with commercially available reagents from Elitech Diagnostics (Sées, Normandie, France).

**Rationale for the analytical methods used to quantify dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls**

**Dioxins and co-planar polychlorinated biphenyls**

The TCDD toxic equivalency factor (TEF) concept (Safe, 1990), allows conversion of a PHAH chemical data set into the AhR-related toxic potency of a mixture of PHAHs. Concentrations of individual PHAHs are multiplied by their respective TEF-values and added together to give the total TCDD toxicity equivalent (TEQ) value. In recent years, bioassays have been developed that can measure the total TEQ-value of complex mixtures directly without the need for extensive clean-up and chemical analysis procedures. One of the novel in-vitro reporter gene assays, the CALUX (chemical-activated luciferase gene expression)-bioassay is based on AhR-mediated firefly (Photinus pyralis) luciferase expression in genetically modified cell lines (Aarts et al., 1995).

Based on the CALUX-derived TEQ-levels, the impact of co-planar PCBs on endometriosis can be interpreted, since it has been shown recently that the contribution of dioxin-like PCBs to the total TEQ-value is almost equal in human matrices to the contribution of dioxins and furans (Brouwer et al., 1995). The most recently updated TEF-values of dioxin-like PCBs are compiled in Table I (Van den Berg et al., 1998).

**Non-co-planar polychlorinated biphenyls**

Combining the a priori environmental exposure to a mixture of (non)-dioxin like PCBs, and the correlation between CALUX-based TEQ-values and the sum of non-co-planar PCBs (Pauwels et al., 2000), the association between TEQ-levels and endometriosis may be feasibly confounded by the effects of non-co-planar PCB congeners. Therefore, four non-co-planar PCB congeners (IUPAC Nos. 118, 138, 153, 180) were determined by chemical analysis through gas chromatography using electron-capture detection (GC-ECD).

**CALUX-bioassay**

The CALUX-bioassay analysis was performed as described in detail (Murk et al., 1997). The extraction and clean-up method involves essentially n-hexane extraction of blood serum aliquots (1–1.5 ml)
and removal of acid-labile matrix components by passage through a silica column containing 33% (w/w) concentrated H2SO4. This extract was diluted in dimethylsulphoxide (DMSO) for CALUX measurement using rat H4IIE hepatoma (H4L1.1c4) cells. These cells stably transfected with an AhR-controlled luciferase reporter gene construct (pGudLuc.1) and were grown confluent in 96-well view plates and exposed in triplicate to the PAH samples and TCDD standards for 24 h, using DMSO (0.5% v/v) as a vehicle.

After removal of the medium, cells were washed twice with phosphate-buffered saline (Oxoid, Hampshire, UK). The cells were harvested in 75 µl cell lysis reagent (Luciferase Assay System; Promega, Leiden, The Netherlands), and centrifuged at 2000 g for 1 min. For measurements of luciferase activity, 20-µl aliquots of the supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl phosphate-buffered saline (Oxoid, Hampshire, UK). The cells were centrifuged at 2000 g for 1 min. For measurements of luciferase activity, 20-µl aliquots of the supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, 100 µl supernatants were pipetted into a 96-well microtitre plate, and centrifuged at 2000 g. After thorough mixing, the light production was measured in a Luminoskan RS luminometer (Labsystems, Helsinki, Finland)

The lipid-corrected CALUX-based TEQs were calculated by comparison of the luciferase activity induced by the sample (three replicates) against a dose-response curve generated from TCDD concentration standards simultaneously analysed. The standard curve was fitted (one-site ligand fit) using SlideWrite 6.00 (Advanced Graphics Software Inc., Encinitas, CA, USA), and the CALUX TEQ-value of an unknown sample was interpolated on this curve.

Chemical analysis of non-co-planar PCBs
All solvents used were purchased pesticide grade from E.Merck (Darmstadt, Germany). The four non-co-planar PCBs were a standard mixture from J.T.Baker at a concentration of 10 ng/µl in iso-octane (J.T.Baker, Deventer, The Netherlands). The 13C12-labelled CB-149 (internal standard) was obtained from Cambridge Isotope Laboratories (Woburn, MA, USA).

Complete details of the extraction were described and evaluated previously (Pauwels et al., 1999). A brief description of the method is given below. The sample preparation involved addition of 13C12 CB-149, suspension of protein-binding in an ultrasonication bath using formic acid (1:1, v/v), extraction and concentration of analytes using Empore™ C18 SPE disk cartridges (3M, St Paul, MN, USA). A mixture of ethyl acetate and hexane was used for elution. Further clean-up of lipid interferences was accomplished using a sulfonated acid wash of the eluate. Two µl per extract were injected in splitless mode on a GC-µECD system (HP 6890, Palo Alto, CA, USA) by an autosampler (HP 7673). A fused silica DB-XLB capillary column (J&W Scientific, Folsom, CA, USA) of 60 m × 0.25 mm i.d. × 0.25 µm film thickness was used. Details of the analytical conditions receives ample treatment elsewhere (Pauwels et al., 1999).

Data analysis
A normal distribution could not be assumed for any of the variables (Shapiro-Wilk's W-test). Therefore, characteristics of cases and controls were compared using the Mann-Whitney U-test for continuous data, and by χ² or Fisher’s exact test (when appropriate) for categorical data. Crude associations between exposure to dioxins (after dichotomization), PCB congeners (on a continuous scale), and endometriosis were estimated by logistic regression analysis. The initial selection of potential confounders was guided by the literature on known and suspected determinants of endometriosis (Eskenazi and Warner, 1997; Zeyneloglu et al., 1997). Those factors included age, body mass index, ovulatory dysfunction, smoking pattern, alcohol and caffeine consumption (Table II). Multiple logistic regression correcting for selected confounders was performed in order to assess the adjusted association between exposure to dioxins, PCBs and endometriosis (STATISTICA version 5, 1997 (StatSoft, Groningen, The Netherlands); EGRET version 0.03, 1991 (Cytel Software Corp., Cambridge, MA, USA]). Significant associations are indicated by P < 0.05.

Results
Table II represents relevant characteristics of the study population. As can be observed, the cases (n = 42) and the controls (n = 27) were similar with respect to age, ovulatory dysfunction, alcohol and caffeine intake, and smoking pattern. A summary of TEQ-values and non-co-planar PCB congener levels is presented in Table III. Although these figures suggest a trend toward slightly higher exposure for endometriosis patients (median 29 pg TEQ/g lipid) compared with their mechanical infertility counterparts (median 27 pg TEQ/g lipid), none of these differences were statistically significant. For two cases and two controls, no serum was available for PCB-analysis. Consequently, non-co-planar PCB congeners are determined in 40 cases and 25 controls. Endometriosis and mechanical infertility patients are exposed to non-co-planar PCBs in the same range.

The distribution of TEQ-levels in cases and controls is presented in Figure 1. These data show clearly a group in the endometriosis-cases with high TEQ-levels. Consequently, statistical analyses on CALUX-based TEQ-values were executed using only two exposure categories. We thereby chose one cut-off point (100 pg TEQ/g serum lipids) to divide the groups into a non-exposed and an exposed group. After dichotomization, the association between exposure to dioxin-toxic equivalents and occurrence of endometriosis in infertile women was non-significant (OR = 4.33; CI = 0.49–38.19; NS). After adjustment for body mass index, and alcohol consumption, the risk increased slightly (OR = 4.56; CI = 0.48–43.62; NS). Statistical analyses for PCB congeners were executed on a continuous scale. The regression coefficients and corresponding odds ratios did not reveal a significant association between exposure to the four individual congeners and the occurrence of endometriosis. In multiple logistic regression, the association
Table II. Relevant characteristics of the endometriosis cases and mechanical infertile controls, 1996–1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Cases (n = 42)</th>
<th>Controls (n = 27)</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age in years (range)</td>
<td>31.0 (25–42)</td>
<td>32 (24–41)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median body mass index (kg/m²) (range)</td>
<td>21.2 (17.2–30.7)</td>
<td>22.9 (18.4–36.4)</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. (% with ovulatory dysfunction</td>
<td>9 (21.4)</td>
<td>8 (29.6)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. (% of caffeine drinkers</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>2 (7.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. (%) who drank &gt;6 glasses of alcohol/week</td>
<td>7 (18.5)</td>
<td>5 (18.5)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. (%) who were non-smokers</td>
<td>26 (61.9)</td>
<td>12 (44.4)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median (range) of pack-years per smoker</td>
<td>7.0 (2–17.0)</td>
<td>6.5 (1.1–23.8)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. CALUX-based TEQ-values and non-co-planar PCB-concentrations in serum of women with endometriosis (cases) and mechanical infertility (controls)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEQs/PCBs</th>
<th>Cases (n = 42) Median (range)</th>
<th>Controls (n = 27) Median (range)</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEQs¹</td>
<td>34²</td>
<td>29 (0–160)</td>
<td>24²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCB-118</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26 (8–117)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCB-138</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>69 (13–137)</td>
<td>24⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCB-153</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>89 (21–181)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCB-180</td>
<td>39⁴</td>
<td>68 (12–138)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹CALUX-based TEQ-values for 42 cases and 27 controls (pg TEQ/g lipid).
²Positive samples: values above detection limit (32 fg TEQ/well).
³PCB-levels for 40 cases and 25 controls (ng/g lipid).
⁴Lower numbers indicate missing data due to interferences in the GC-chromatogram.

For the different associations, confounding was hardly present. For PCB-118 for instance, the (logistic) regression coefficient changed from 0.027 (crude) to 0.029 in the best fitting model, adjusting for body mass index and caffeine intake (P = not significant).

Discussion

The association between endometriosis and exposure to dioxins is a highly controversial issue. In non-human primates, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) has been reported to induce a dose-dependent increase in severity of endometriosis (Rier et al., 1993), to facilitate the survival of endometrial implants, and to exert a bimodal effect on endometrial implant growth (Yang et al., 2000). A series of human case–control studies have been conducted on the association between endometriosis and PHAH exposure with important differences in study design, patient selection and assay methods, and therefore provide inconsistent results. An association between endometriosis and organochlorine pollutants was confirmed in two reports (Gerhard and Runnebaum, 1992; Mayani et al., 1997), but refuted in one other publication (Lebel et al., 1998).

In several ways, the well designed protocol of our study overcame several shortcomings of the previous publications. Firstly, in our study, the patient population was very well defined: both cases and controls were infertile women undergoing a laparoscopic investigation. In only one other publication (Mayani et al., 1997; 44 cases and 35 controls), the control group consisted strictly of patients with mechanical infertility, whereby the absence of endometriosis was confirmed by laparoscopy. Another report evaluated fertile and infertile women undergoing laparoscopy for pain, infertility or tubal sterilization whereby the controls were indication-matched (Lebel et al., 1998; 68 cases and 70 controls). In one study (Gerhard and Runnebaum, 1992; 24 cases and 484 controls), hormonal disorders were present in both cases and controls, and it was not mentioned whether endometriosis was laparoscopically and histologically confirmed.

Secondly, our study offers a unique combination of measurement of exposure of dioxin-like compounds (dioxins and coplanar PCBs) and non-co-planar PCBs. Dioxin-like compounds were determined using CALUX-bioassay, which has recently been adapted and validated in blood plasma (Murk et al.,...
endometriosis patients and 100 mechanically infertile controls is acquired. Therefore, future epidemiological surveys on PHAHs should enrol larger patient samples and biomonitor a well-defined range of potential culprit PHAHs (dioxins, furans, and selected PCB congeners) by chemical analysis, or by bioassays (toxic biological responses), followed by chemical analysis to identify the culprit compounds.

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References


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