Fibromyalgia syndrome, a problem of tautology

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The Lancet; Oct 9, 1993; 342, 8876; ProQuest pg. 906

Summary

Fibromyalgia syndrome is generally taken to denote a clinical state of widespread musculoskeletal pain, stiffness, and fatigue but its pathophysiology, physical and psychological, is unknown, and the nature of the diagnostically mandatory “tender points” remains obscure. Diagnostic criteria convey no pathophysiological insight and they have been “validated” via a circular argument in which the evidence on which the construct is based is taken as proof of its veracity. The concept of fibromyalgia syndrome is valid only in the sense that it includes all possibilities. An alternative approach to this very real clinical presentation is via secondary hyperalgiesia.

Lancet 1993; 342: 906–909

Introduction

According to the “Copenhagen declaration”, fibromyalgia syndrome (FS) is now established as a distinctive diagnosis, defined as a “painful, non-articular condition predominantly involving muscles” and as the “commonest cause of chronic, widespread musculoskeletal pain”.1 Thus a pain syndrome is said to define itself. The characteristic features of fibromyalgia are “tender points”, the nature of which remains elusive. No distinctive tissue pathology, pathophysiology, or psychopathology has been found.2,3 The declaration recommends criteria put forward by the American College of Rheumatology in 1990.4 These criteria are the latest in a series, all suffering from the problem of syndromic diagnosis where variable combinations of features are put forward as an entity, which then implies pathogenetic homogeneity (table I).4,5 All rely on tender points, in the absence of their clinicophysiological explanation, a situation which invites circular argument.

The existence of the clinical problem labelled FS is not in dispute but it has become a tautological concept, one that can be shown to be true because it includes all possibilities. We seek a more rational approach to diffuse musculoskeletal pain, concentrating on establishing a clinicopathological basis as a way out of the circularity that characterises this syndrome.

Tender points

Although tender points are the hallmark of this diagnosis, their number, location, and how to measure the tenderness are contentious. Tenderness (more correctly, hyperalgiesia*) has been measured by direct digital palpation or by pressure dolorimetry. Both pain threshold (discrimination of noxious perception quality) and pain tolerance, reflecting unwillingness to receive more stimuli, have been used as indices but their underlying mechanisms are very different.10,11 Pressure algometry is a psychophysical technique in which a varying stimulus is applied until a predetermined pain response by the subject occurs. It is very difficult to offer this mechanical stimulus randomly or to include supramaximal stimuli and a degree of expectancy cannot be avoided. Both the length of the scale and the size of the footplate of the dolorimeter affect threshold responses.12 Pressure algometry has nonetheless been the major investigative tool used in attempting to validate the construct of FS:

(1) Only one study has found reduced threshold and tolerance for pressure-induced pain in “fibrositis” patients over “tender points” but not over control (non-tender) points.13
(2) Lower pain threshold and pain tolerance over one non-tender point at the elbow was found in fibrositis patients compared with controls.14
(3) A third study, looking at pain threshold only, found that patients were more sensitive than controls at both tender and non-tender points and that the difference between patients and controls over non-tender points was the more impressive.15
(4) Lower pain tolerance (only) was found in 19 of 75 arbitrary anatomical sites in fibromyalgia patients, which included tender and non-tender points.16
(5) Using pressure algometry in patients fulfilling older criteria for FS* and in control groups with “articular” (rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis) and “generalised non-articular” rheumatism, Quinby et al found that pain tolerance at tender points correlated with tolerance at non-tender points but that the presence of tender points did not correlate with any symptoms.18 Furthermore about half of the individual variability in pain tolerance at tender points could be accounted for by the patients’ general tolerance level for pressure-induced pain.

Dolorimetry thus suggests that fibromyalgia patients are more sensitive than controls, not only at tender points but also at non-tender points, which calls into question the discriminative validity of those points. The tender points seem to reflect either a state of more general somatic awareness or one of hyperalgiesia rather than a distinct pathological entity.

American College of Rheumatology study

Semantic issues

The 1990 report of the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) study is the basis for current diagnostic criteria for FS*—namely, a history of widespread pain and pain in 11...
Table 1: Comparison of criteria sets for FS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sympt and Mdlbdy*</th>
<th>Yunus et al*</th>
<th>Wolfe et al*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Widespread aching and stiffness of more than 3 mo duration</td>
<td>Generalised aches and pain (or prominent stiffness) in at least three anatomical sites for more than 3 mo duration</td>
<td>Widespread pain of at least 3 mo duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tender points 12 out of 14</td>
<td>Tender points 5 or more</td>
<td>Tender points 11 out of 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin red tenderness over upper scapular region</td>
<td>Absence of traumatic injury, structural bony disease, Infectious arthritis, inflammatory arthritis or other disorders</td>
<td>Poor sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal investigations</td>
<td>Endocrine-related arthritis, and abnormal laboratory test</td>
<td>General fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor sleep</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Headache; irritable bowel; subjective swelling; non-radicular numbness; influence of activity, weather, and anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic fatigue</td>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td>Morning stiffness</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Conclusions from ACR study

The four main qualitative conclusions were that palpation was more discriminating than dolorimetry in identifying tender points; that tender points were the most powerful discriminators between fibromyalgia patients and controls; that the greatest discriminating power lay in tenderness scores of "mild or greater"; and that the "best separation between patients and controls occurred at about the thirteenth point for mild tenderness and at about the sixth point for moderate or greater tenderness".

The first conclusion is a blow for all who attempt to quantify hyperalgesia by measurement. The second and third simply reiterate the basis on which the FS patients were chosen—indeed any other result would have refuted the basis for selection. The fourth conclusion simply means that the more tender you are the more likely you are to be distinguished from those not so tender.

One quantitative conclusion concerned the number of tender points required for diagnosis (whilst not stating which ones were important): the ACR committee "reduced the number of tender points required for examination from 24 to 18" before determining that any 11 of these 18 provided the best diagnostic criterion for FS.* This conclusion recalls the point made by Quimby et al" that if the degree of tenderness itself fails to be a criterion, the only distinction of FS from non-FS is the number of tender points.

Sensitivity and specificity figures were also generated. Table 2 adds to table 6 in the ACR study the false positive rate and the likelihood ratio (the odds that, given the stated feature, the patient has the disease), both calculated from data in the paper. Widespread pain, as defined, generated a likelihood ratio of only 1.4; 22% of those considered not to have FS had the number of tender points required for that diagnosis; sensitivity for tender points in FS was less than 100%, despite the fact that these were the basis for the diagnosis; the ACR criteria themselves had 90% sensitivity

Table 2: In search of gold standard for FS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenderness</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>False positive</th>
<th>Likelihood ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 or 5 of 18 tender points (a)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 of 14 tender points*</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolorimetry (6 sites)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pain</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>False positive</th>
<th>Likelihood ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Widespread (a)</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;All over&quot;</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neck</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post thorax</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low back</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combination ACR criteria (a) + (b)* | 88 | 81 | 19 | 4.6 |

Sensitivity and specificity values (%), taken from table 6 of ACR report, false positive rates (%) and likelihood ratios calculated from these values.
and 20% false positivity rates; and the best likelihood ratio still depends on the number of tender points, in which context previous criteria perform better. What condition did the 19% false positives have? And what is the diagnosis in the "variable proportion of otherwise typical patients" who have less than 11 tender points? Quinby et al. found that no symptoms or combination of symptoms correlated with the presence, frequency, or sensitivity of tender points.

What then is the "gold standard" for the diagnosis of FS? It cannot be "widespread pain"; "pain all over" is more likely but is not well defined. The only possibility is a number of tender points, the major contributor to the combination criteria. However, it is a fallacy to have a gold standard which incorporates the diagnostic feature of interest.

**FS as tautology**

"Tender points are inherently more tender than non-tender points, whether one is dealing with normal or fibromyalgia patients." Selecting on the basis of pain and hyperalgesia must generate a high degree of accuracy if those criteria are then used to justify the selection. It is therefore a major concern if the sensitivity and specificity figures thereby generated fail to reflect that accuracy. The evidence which leads one to a proposition cannot then be used to justify the validity of that proposition.

Thus FS is a tautology as the proposed criterion of a specified number of "tender points" can be violated too easily, thus blurring any distinction between it and "non-fibromyalgia". Furthermore, how can 20% of subjects satisfy the criteria and not be said to have fibromyalgia, especially when it is claimed that fibromyalgia can coexist with "any other condition"? The argument remains hopelessly circular.

**Resolution**

We suggest that there has been a conceptual jump from "tender points" to "FS" without pathophysiological explanation. The central problem of the pain itself is ignored and attention is focused away from understanding the hyperalgesia towards "making a diagnosis".

The key to resolving the problem of the external validity of FS may be found in the phenomenon of secondary hyperalgesia. Whilst primary hyperalgesia is localised to the site of injury and persists until the injury is healed, secondary hyperalgesia occurs in undamaged tissues, the innervation of which is in the same or adjacent segments to that of the noxious stimulus. Cutaneous secondary hyperalgesia may be associated with noxious stimulation of either deep or superficial tissues. Furthermore whilst primary hyperalgesia is characterised by lowering of both threshold and tolerance to thermal and mechanical stimulation, in secondary hyperalgesia these thresholds are normal whilst tolerance is again lowered.

FS can thus be appreciated clinically as a syndrome featuring secondary hyperalgesia.

A recent study using non-noxious electrotactaneous stimulation in patients fulfilling criteria for FS found little change in perception threshold but marked reduction in pain tolerance in comparison with controls. These findings were considered to be a psychophysical demonstration of secondary hyperalgesia.

The physiology of secondary hyperalgesia itself may be approached as a perturbation of nociception, as a problem of somatic preoccupation ("hypervigilance"), or as a combination of the two. These processes may well converge on the central pathways involved in nociception. Pursuit of the proposal that secondary hyperalgesia is the relevant mechanism underlying FS will need to focus on nociceptive mechanisms and on the identification of the initiating factors, to which the observed phenomena are secondary. Recent work has suggested that the altered central processing considered to be responsible for secondary hyperalgesia depends on continuing peripheral input, especially from nociceptors.

Medical classifications are not meant to establish absolute truths, being attempts to provide practical ways of grouping phenomena to allow comparisons and to promote understanding. However, the construct of FS is tautologous and lacks both explanatory power and therapeutic implications. The clinical challenge of musculoskeletal pain and tenderness in the absence of defined disease can be better addressed through the pathophysiological perspective of secondary hyperalgesia.

We thank Dr G D Champion, Dr R O Day, and Dr A Gamaa for comments.

**References**

Non-compliance—or how many aunts has Matilda?

E C Wright

Summary
The compliance of patients with medication prescribed for them is a challenge. It seems that one-third of patients comply adequately, one-third more-or-less, and one-third are non-compliant, so that compliance rates hover around 50%. This can be improved upon, but not by treating failure to comply as a deplorably aberrant behaviour. First we need to know more about compliance and non-compliance, and that means standardising methods of study and measuring, by questioning the patient, counting tablets, or looking at drug metabolites or markers in faeces, blood or urine. Doctors' prejudices and patients' perceptions alike have to be taken into account since strategies for improvement must include both educating the prescriber and counselling the patient.

Lancet 1993; 342: 909–13

Introduction
The seriousness of non-compliance is well recognised in the USA, where it has been designated "America's other drug problem". It is equally important in the UK. In 1957 The Lancet published an article that began with one of Hilaire Belloc's Cautionary Tales:

Matilda told such Dreadful Lies,
It made one Gasp and Stretch one's Eyes;
Her Aunt, who, from her Earliest Youth
Had kept a Strict Regard for Truth,
Attempted to Believe Matilda:  
The effort very nearly killed her.

The article then demonstrated that only 50% of outpatients given drug treatment for tuberculosis had positive urine tests. Investigations into non-compliance multiplied and by 1988 the Index Medicus had included more than 4000 articles on the subject, confirming that of patients on long-term medication about half take it in ways that differ from what the doctor prescribed.

For the biblically minded, the story begins, as an excellent book on compliance shows, in Genesis with Eve taking more "medicine" than she was prescribed in the Garden of Eden. For the historically minded, the story begins with an aphorism of Hippocrates: "keep watch also on the faults of the patients, which often make them lie about the taking of things prescribed".

Definitions of compliance
Compliance with what? Medication taking, alterations in diet, advice on exercise or smoking, keeping appointments, and attendance for further investigations are some of the aspects that have been studied. The definition can become elaborated to the point of absurdity, as in an early paper striving for an index of the potential threat of the disease as "the square root of the product of the susceptibility score for each respondent times the severity score for each respondent". Attempts to classify non-compliance may likewise fog the issue. One classification suggested five groups—namely errors of omission, of purpose (taking medication for the wrong reason), of dosage (more, less), of timing or sequence, and of taking potentially interactive medications not prescribed by the doctor. This is all negative, yet can be considered positively, as in another early paper on "patient acceptance of recommended health behaviors".

Studying compliance
It is because compliance involves such a complex set of behaviours that many doctors ignore it completely. Research workers who have taken up the challenge do not get full marks either. In 1979 Sackett and Snow reviewed 537 investigations and found no more than 40 that satisfied their criteria: design, sample selection and specification, description of illness, description of therapeutic requirements, definitions of compliance, and measures for assessing non-compliance. The anticipated length of the treatment and duration of follow-up must also be spelled out.