

Paraquat Poisoning: A Case Series in South India

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Abstract: *The present study is done on paraquat poisoning, its modes of presentation, complications and outcome. The study is conducted over a period of 2 years and 8 cases of paraquat poisoning were documented at our tertiary care centre. Paraquat is a bipyridium herbicide used for agricultural purpose with good safety record. All cases were of intentional ingestion i.e. suicidal attempt and the survival rate was two out of eight patients, which clearly indicates that high survival chances are there in patients who present early (6-8 hours) and with lesser amount of ingestion in our study. The most common mode of presentations was with oral ulcerations, esophagitis & acute kidney injury. The most common complications leading to death are pulmonary fibrosis, circulatory failure, myocarditis and eventually multi-organ failure in our study.*

Keywords: Paraquat, pulmonary fibrosis, immunosuppression, multi-organ failure

1. Introduction

Poisoning is a major public health problem worldwide especially in the developing countries like India. India is a predominantly agro-based country, where agricultural chemicals are often used as poisons, suicidal or homicidal. The chemical paraquat is (1,1' - dimethyl-4, 4'-bipyridinium) is a widely used contact herbicide (Conning et al. 1969). However, several studies have been done on paraquat poisoning globally. Jones et al. (1999) reported that out of 375 patients, 49 had renal toxicity and median time from ingestion to death in the 241 deaths reported was 270 hours. Proudfoot et al. (1979) also examined 79 cases of paraquat poisoning and related outcome to plasma paraquat concentrations on admission and the ingestion. Gunnell et al. (2007) also reported the global distribution of fatal pesticide self-poisoning. However, very limited studies on paraquat poisoning are done in India. Khosya and Gothwal, (2012) studied the Paraquat Poisoning from Kota, Rajasthan with ingestion of 20 mL paraquat dichloride and they reported that patients became haemodynamically unstable with features of adult respiratory distress syndrome. Two cases of paraquat poisoning from Himachal Pradesh was studied by Raina et al. (2008) and reported that the patient who consumed 5 ml of paraquat dichloride caused oral erosions and icterus. Pavan (2013) also reported that 35% to 50% of mortality due to acute kidney injury following paraquat poisoning in Karnataka. However, Paraquat poisoning cases are very rare in southern India. Raghu et al (2013) reported that there is no specific antidote to paraquat poisoning, hence the need to focus on prevention. Although uncommon, paraquat ingestion can lead to severe and often fatal toxicity. However, despite widespread availability of herbicides, reports of herbicide poisoning in southern India are uncommon^{1,2}.

It is associated with respiratory failure, pulmonary fibrosis and multi-organ failure. Paraquat, a widely used non-selective contact herbicide that is used, primarily in agriculture and by government agencies and industries for control of weeds. In the Indian market it is available as a liquid concentrate (29.1%) for agricultural use. It remains a major cause of death in developing countries such as

Pakistan and Sri Lanka also. Paraquat poisoning can be classified into three categories¹.

Mild poisoning (20 mg/kg) in which the patients generally have minor gastrointestinal symptoms.

- **Severe poisoning** (20-40 mg/kg) in which the patients develop acute kidney injury, acute lung injury and progressive pulmonary fibrosis.

- **Fulminant poisoning** (40 mg/ kg) in which the patients develop multiple organ failure.

In patients with “fulminant poisoning”, death occurs due to circulatory failure in one to four days. Ingestion of smaller amounts primarily results in progressive pulmonary damage secondary to diffuse alveolar damage with resultant acute respiratory distress syndrome. Paraquat causes damage to the lungs, liver and kidneys². The LD50 in humans is approximately 3-5 mg/kg, which transforms into as little as 10-15 mL of a 20% solution. Use of immunosuppressive therapy (combination of glucocorticoids and cyclophosphamide) has been shown to be beneficial in improving survival in those patients with moderate to severe poisoning and progressive pulmonary fibrosis^{3,4}. We report our experience of treating eight patients of paraquat poisoning with immunosuppressive therapy and other supportive measures at our institute SSIMS&RC Davangere.

2. Methodology

The present study includes the data of eight patients of paraquat poisoning over 2 years. Analysis of data was performed and presented in a descriptive pattern. Patients with the history of paraquat poisoning were selected. At admission to the MICU, diagnosis of paraquat poisoning was established on the basis of the clinical history and documentation of the poisoning bottle. Patients were classified to have renal dysfunction if the serum creatinine was between 1.2-3.4 mg/dL. Renal failure if the creatinine was ≥ 3.5 mg/dL or if the urine output was less than 500 ml/day. Renal replacement therapy was initiated if the patient had complications such as oliguria, metabolic acidosis (pH <7.1) and fluid overload. Hepatic dysfunction or hepatic failure was classified if the bilirubin was <6 mg/dL or ≥ 6 mg/dL, respectively. Patients with PaO₂/FiO₂

ratio of 200-300 or <200 as classified as having acute lung injury or acute respiratory distress syndrome, respectively. Circulatory failure was said to be present if the patient had dopamine requirements <math><5 \mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{minute}</math> and cardiovascular failure if the dopamine requirements was $\geq 5 \mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{minute}</math>. All patients with severe and fulminant paraquat poisoning were started on the same day of hospital admission with following medications.$

Intravenous Methylprednisolone 30 mg/kg/day for three consecutive days, Intravenous Cyclophosphamide 15 mg/kg/day for two consecutive days followed by Intravenous Dexamethasone 8mg thrice a day until recovery or death.

The patients were clinically screened for any evidence of infection and routine blood & urine investigations were performed in all patients. All patients were subjected to ABG, RFT, LFT & Chest x-ray. Informed consent was taken from all patients or their relatives as per protocol. All patients had ingested paraquat orally and the intent was suicidal in all cases.

3. Additional Treatment

IV N-Acetyl cysteine 2g/day for 3days.

Vit C (500mg/tab) 2 tabs thrice daily.

Vit E (400 IU/ tab) 2tabs thrice daily.

Triamcenolone paste, sucralphate and lignocaine viscous for oral ulcerations.

All patients had local corrosive symptoms, dyspnoea and one patient had jaundice. None of the patients were febrile at admission or showed any clinical evidence of focus of infection. Routine blood cultures done in all patients were sterile. Chest radiographs revealed diffuse alveolar opacities in all the patients

Repeated pulse therapy with Methylprednisolone (1 g/day for 3 days) and Cyclophosphamide (15 mg/kg/day for 1 day), which was repeated if PaO₂ was <math><8.64 \text{ kPa}</math> (60 mm Hg).

It is probable that N-acetylcysteine protects against paraquat toxicity by helping to maintain intracellular glutathione levels.

On Admission



Management

Early recognition and removal of compound is the main cornerstone of treatment.

- 1) Gastric lavage and decontamination by activated charcoal
- 2) Skin and eye decontamination
- 3) Airway and breathing
- 4) Circulation-- IV fluids NS/RL 75ml/hour to correct dehydration and prevent renal damage
- 5) Enhance elimination - forced diuresis and haemoperfusion
- 6) Pulse therapy- To reduce inflammation and pulmonary fibrosis by immunosuppressant and anti inflammatory agents
Iv Cyclophosphamide 15mg/kg/day for 3 days
Iv Methylprednisolone 1gm/day for 2 days
Iv Dexamethasone 24mg/day for 5-7 days
- 7) IV antibiotics-- Augmentin 1.2gm twice daily to prevent infection
- 8) IV analgesics-- Tramadol/Morphine.

At the time of discharge



- 9) Oral lozenges for mouth ulcers.
- 10) Antioxidants- Vitamin A and E to reduce free radical generation.

Complications of paraquat poisoning

- 1) Pulmonary haemorrhage and fibrosis.
- 2) Acute renal failure.
- 3) Hepatocellular damage.
- 4) Myocarditis.
- 5) GI bleeding, ulceration and perforations.
- 6) Multi organ failure.

4. Discussion

Paraquat is a quaternary nitrogen herbicide that is sprayed on unwanted weeds and other vegetations before planting crops. It is a fast-acting, nonselective compound, which destroys tissues of green plants on contact and by translocation within the plant. Paraquat exerts its herbicidal activity by inhibiting reduction of NADP to NADPH during photosynthesis. This disruption leads to the formation of superoxide anion, singlet oxygen, hydroxyl and peroxy radicals. These reactive oxygen species (ROS) interact with the unsaturated lipids of membranes, resulting in the destruction of plant organelles, inevitably leading to cell death⁵. It is produced commercially as a brownish concentrated liquid of the dichloride salt in 10–30% strength under the trade name of “Gramoxone” and for horticultural use as brown granules called “Weedol” at about 5% concentration . Paraquat poisoning has been widely reported worldwide, but only a few case reports are described in literature from India. When consumed orally, Paraquat is sequestered in the lungs and causes a release of hydrogen and superoxide anions which cause lipid damage in the cell membranes, causing oxidant free radical damage that

results in hepato/nephrotoxicity and pulmonary fibrosis. In fatal cases of paraquat poisoning, histopathological findings range from pulmonary congestion, edema, and hemorrhage to extensive pulmonary fibrosis⁶. Paraquat toxicity produces local as well as systemic effects. As seen in the present case, paraquat ingestion results in an inflammation of the tongue, oral mucosa and throat, corrosive injury to the gastrointestinal tract, renal tubular necrosis, hepatic necrosis and pulmonary fibrosis. The patient complains of burning and ulceration of the throat, tongue and esophagus. The pulmonary manifestations of paraquat poisoning begin with diffuse consolidation, which evolves several days later into cystic lesions followed by focal fibrotic lesions with very high mortality. Ingestion of large amounts is considered to be uniformly fatal from multi-organ failure and cardiogenic shock. Identification of paraquat in urine has not only been used to confirm the diagnosis, but also investigated for the prognostication. It has been found that plasma concentration of >1.6 pg/ml 12 hours after ingestion is universally fatal⁷.

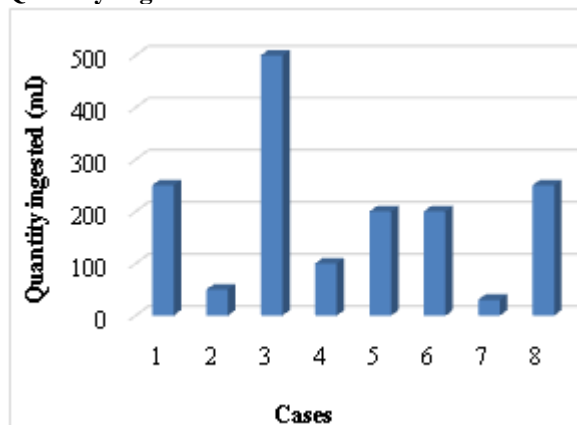
As there is no specific clinically proven antidote for paraquat poisoning, supportive treatment is given to avoid free radical injury to lungs (vitamins C and E), with pulse therapy using steroids (methylprednisolone or dexamethasone) and cyclophosphamide to prevent pulmonary fibrosis, elimination of paraquat from circulation (hemodialysis) and gastric decontamination. In contrast, the use of oxygen can enhance the toxicity of paraquat by providing more electron acceptors and should be given in lower concentrations to the hypoxic patients. In spite of advances in medical care, prompt treatment and supportive care, mortality is high (mainly due to multi-organ system and respiratory failure) in patients with paraquat poisoning⁸. Although there have been isolated case reports of survivors (mainly due to the smallness of the dose or effective and early treatment), an ingestion of a high dose or severe paraquat poisoning has a poor prognosis. At present, there is no specific antidote to paraquat poisoning. Therefore, it is recommended that the crucial focus should be on preventive measures and in case of exposure, when it has been ingested, the institution of aggressive decontamination to prevent further absorption.

5. Results and Analysis

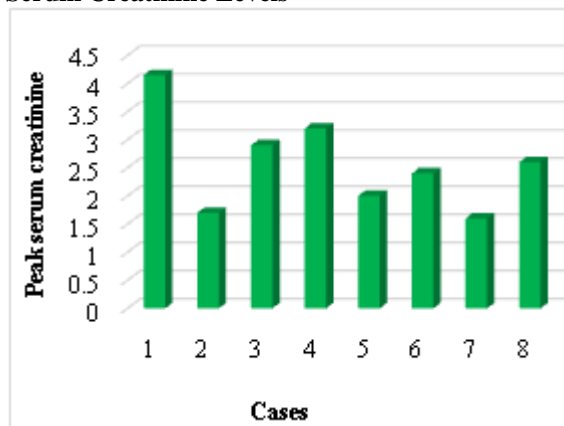
Patient characteristics are depicted in Table 1. Most of the patients were young males (5) around the age 25-40 years and remaining (3) females in the age group of 25-35 years. Six patients had moderate to severe poisoning. The degree of poisoning was assessed by number of mouthful (20 ml) of paraquat concentrate ingested i.e. < 1 mouthful as mild, 1 mouthful as moderate and 2 or more as severe. Due to lack of facility, plasma paraquat levels were not done. Seven patients were admitted within 6 hours of paraquat ingestion. The commonest symptoms were vomiting (100%) followed by altered sensorium (69%), oral ulceration or dysphagia (60%), dyspnoea (51%) or loose stools (34%). Five patients developed acute renal failure with a peak serum creatinine of 4.15 mg/dl. Five patients needed dialytic support. The indications for dialysis was serum creatinine > 2.5 mg/dL and impending hyperkalemia and severe metabolic acidosis (pH 6.98, HCO₃ 10 mEq/L, serum creatinine 6.8 mg/dL).

The other organ systems involvement included respiratory failure (53%), digestive tract ulceration (53%), hepatic involvement (47%) and shock (30%). The overall mortality was 50% with additional 25% who left against medical advice (LAMA). On comparing the data of survivors versus non survivors, late referral to hospital, hepatic involvement and the occurrence of respiratory, circulatory or multi organ failures were significantly correlated to mortality. There was no significant difference in the data of the non-survivors and the patients who left against medical advise.

Quantity Ingested



Serum Creatinine Levels



Time Of Presentation

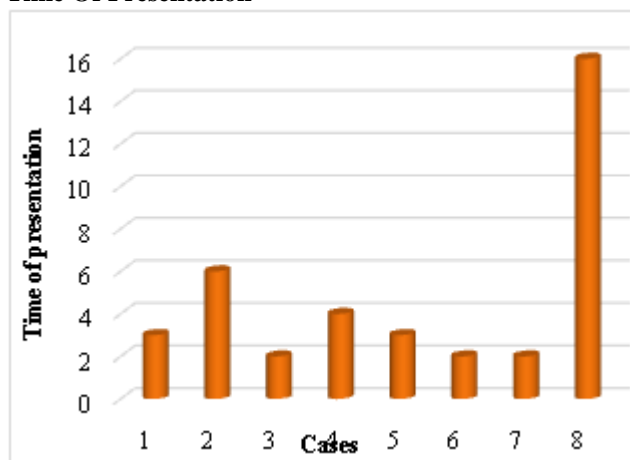


Table 1: Tabulation of Cases

| PARTICULARS | CASE 1 | CASE 2 | CASE 3 | CASE 4 | CASE 5 | CASE 6 | CASE 7 | CASE 8 |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| AGE/SEX | 23yrs/ M | 34yrs/ F | 38yrs/ M | 27yrs/ M | 30yrs/ F | 38yrs/ M | 28yrs/M | 28yrs/F |
| Quantity Ingested(ML) | 250 | 50 | 500 | 100 | 200 | 200 | 30 | 250 |
| Intent | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal | Suicidal |
| Time Of Presentation | 3 hours | 6 hours | 2 hours | 4 hours | 3 hours | 2 hours | 2 hours | 16 hours |
| Complications | Oropharyngeal excoriations, ARF, Respiratory failure | Oropharyngeal excoriations | Oral ulcers, ARF, Respi. Failure, Hepatic failure, MODS | Oral ulcers, ARF, Respi. failure, | Oral ulcers, Respi. failure | Oral ulcers, ARF, Respi. failure | Oesophagitis | Oral ulcers, ARF, Hepatitis, MODS |
| Peak Serum Creatinine | 4.15 | 1.7 | 2.9 | 3.2 | 2.0 | 2.4 | 1.6 | 2.6 |
| Peak Serum Bilirubin | 1.1 | 1.4 | 8.5 | 1.2 | 1.4 | 1.0 | 1.2 | 1.4 |
| Lowest PAO2/FIO2 Value | 82 | 350 | 180 | 150 | 130 | 190 | 230 | 100 |
| Renal Replacement Therapy | 4 cycles HD | Nil | 5 cycles HD | 3 cycles HD | Nil | 4 cycles HD | Nil | 6 cycles HD |
| Mechanical Ventilation | 6 days | Nil | 5 days | 5 days | 4 days | 5 days | Nil | 8 days |
| ICU Stay | 12 days | 7 days | 7 days | 10 days | 5 days | 9 days | 6 days | 10 days |
| Survival | Death | Survival | Death | Death | Death | Death | Survival | Death |

6. Conclusions from our Case Series Study

- 1) Patients presenting early to the emergency department within 6-8 hours of paraquat poisoning have high rates of survival.
- 2) Lesser the quantity of ingestion (20mg/kg) of paraquat, better is the survival rates.
- 3) No specific antidote available.
- 4) Combination of immunosuppression and antioxidant medication is the key to the management of paraquat poisoning patients apart from other supportive measures.
- 5) The common complications noted in paraquat poisoning are oropharyngeal ulcerations, oesophagitis, respiratory failure, acute kidney injury, hepatitis and in fulminant cases circulatory failure, multi organ failure and eventually death.

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