INVESTIGATION OF THE ALLERGIC PATIENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DIAGNOSIS

If specific diagnosis and intervention are instituted early, the ‘allergic march’ can be attenuated and even prevented.

Allergic diseases have dramatically increased worldwide during the past 20 years. This increase has led to a prevalence in allergic symptoms in children which has increased by 200% when compared with the mid 1970s. In most developed countries 1 in 4 children are affected by allergies and in underdeveloped countries the prevalence is also increasing rapidly. The main allergic diseases in infancy are atopic eczema and food allergies.

In young children, asthma, rhinitis and urticaria are increasingly diagnosed. This progression of allergic diseases, referred to as the ‘allergic march’, can be attenuated and even prevented either by new pharmacological medications or by using immunotherapy, if specific diagnosis and intervention are instituted early. The identification of specific allergen sensitivity in young infants has very specific diagnostic implications, not only in relation to allergen avoidance, but also as direct implications for preventive intervention.

New concepts in allergy diagnosis now focus on quantitative interpretation of the results of skin prick and Immunocap RAST tests. Food challenges and new tests for non-IgE-mediated sensitivity have improved diagnostic accuracy. New understanding and appreciation of immunological cross-reactivity has implications for selection of further allergy testing and prevention of inadvertent exposure to potentially dangerous allergens.

WHY EARLY DIAGNOSIS?

In the past, investigation of infants and very young children was discouraged, because it was considered that conducting and reading skin tests in infants was unreliable. Until fairly recently there were no available validated guidelines for the clinical significance of a specific IgE value for the common allergens to which young children develop positive test results. All of this has now changed.

- **Cut-off values are now known**
  Early diagnosis is now possible because the 95% predictive values for clinical sensitivity have been determined in children with atopic eczema, for most of the common allergens. This applies both to skin prick tests and for Immunocap RASTs. The predictive values for tests are defined in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I. Definitions of sensitivity, specificity and predictive values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive predictive value</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sensitivity</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Negative predictive value</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Specificity</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Efficiency</strong></td>
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Professor Paul Potter graduated from the University of Cape Town and has a special interest in allergy diagnosis and immunotherapy. He is founder and director of the Allergy Unit at Groote Schuur Hospital and Director of the new Allergy Diagnostic and Clinical Research Unit of the UCT Lung Institute. He has authorized or co-authored over 250 publications in the field of basic and applied allergy and serves on several international committees and on editorial boards of 3 international journals.

PC POTTER
MD, FCP (SA), DCH (SA), FAAAAI, FACAAI
Director
Allergy Diagnostic & Clinical Research Unit (ADCRU)
UCT Lung Institute and Groote Schuur Hospital
Cape Town

INVESTIGATION
To avoid clinical type I reactions
The second reason to make an early diagnosis of allergy in infants is to avoid clinical reactions to the food allergen (e.g. egg, peanut, milk, soya) which can be life-threatening for some infants.

To prevent eczema flare-ups
In infants with eczema allergy testing must be performed to identify those who have atopic eczema. Between 30% and 60% of infants with eczema are found to have food allergy and food exposure plays a significant role in the exacerbation of eczematous flare-ups. These intermediate reactions to food may manifest with early erythematous flaring of the skin with accompanying pruritus, which quickly progresses to eczematous flare-ups when the infants scratch.

To identify children who will develop asthma
A fourth reason to diagnose allergies early is to identify the subgroup of eczema infants who will develop asthma and in whom prevention of asthma is possible using pharmacological treatment with cetirizine or ketotifen. The ETAC study found that it was the subgroup of eczematous infants who had early house dust mite and grass pollen allergy in whom intervention produced a significant reduction in the development of asthma.

To select the subgroup who will benefit from immunotherapy
A fifth reason for the early diagnosis of allergies, particularly house dust mite and grass pollen allergies in young children, is to select these children for allergen immunotherapy, either via the injection route or via the sublingual route. In young children with rhinitic symptoms who have confirmed grass pollen allergy, specific immunotherapy will also reduce the expected development of asthma in this subgroup by 50%.

To identify children in whom further allergic evaluation will be required
Confirmation of specific food allergy in infants identifies the infant in whom specific allergy testing for inhalant allergens should be conducted as the child grows older. New allergies may develop and clinical sensitivity to the food allergens will go away for most food allergens by the time the child goes to school. This would be confirmed by specific follow-up testing of the pre-school child.

KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR ALLERGY TESTING

Foods
A sound knowledge of the specific foods that are responsible for the majority of adverse reactions in infants, makes allergy testing both inexpensive and rewarding. Over 90% of allergies in infants. The E5e is a useful screening RAST for food allergies in infants and young children.

In older children testing for fish and other allergens suggested by the history is important. In older children and adults crustaceans, molluscs, tree nuts and fruits (especially tropical fruits) are important food allergens. It is important to bear in mind that although peanuts are legumes and not true nuts, about 50% of peanut-sensitive patients will have concordant tree nut sensitivity. Nut sensitivity should be explored in peanut-sensitive children.

Inhalants
For inhalant allergens a knowledge of the environment in which the patient lives is essential. Important indoor environmental allergens include house dust mites (Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus, Dermatophagoides farinae and Blomia tropicalis), cockroaches, cats, dogs and fungal spores. Animal handlers or laboratory workers may also be exposed to latex, horse, cow, rat, guinea pig and even locusts in an indoor environment. These are important inhalant allergens.

Outdoors environmental fungal spores include cladosporium, alternaria, epidermum and aspergillus. The grass pollens in southern Africa fall into 3 major groups (Fig. 1). The major sub-families to test for inhalant pollen allergens are the Pooidae, of which Lolium perenne...
(rye) is a good representative and the Chloridoideae represented by Bermuda grass.

Important indigenous grasses, such as Eragrostis, also belong to the Chloridoideae sub-family. A group of grasses of great regional significance are in the Panicoideae sub-family. These include buffalo (Stenotaphrum), maize (Zea mays) and cane sugar (Saccharum officinarum) (Figs 2 - 4).

Pollen allergies are acquired by the age of 3 - 5 years in 50% of children and by the age of 9 - 13 years in 90% of children attending an allergy clinic in Gauteng (M Groenewald (2000): personal communication). In the Cape and KwaZulu-Natal about 40% of allergic children and young adults are allergic to pollen, but allergies to house dust mite and cockroach allergy is also more common in KwaZulu-Natal and in the Eastern Cape.

Tree allergies are found in Gauteng and also in the Cape. Important pollens include oak and plane trees. Eucalyptus, pine, Port Jackson and jacaranda pollens are often believed to be responsible for patient symptoms, but true allergy to these tree pollens is uncommonly confirmed. Allergy to weed and floral pollens is also less common but immune responses to cosmos, chrysanthemums and English plantain is also found, but is rather uncommon.

It is clear from the above discussion that an intelligent selection of relevant inhalant allergens for CAP RAST or skin prick tests depends on the geographical location of the patient within southern Africa.

HOW RELIABLE IS ALLERGY TESTING?

Labile versus stable allergens

The reliability of the specific test depends on the quality of the testing extract and the performance of the test.

For skin prick tests stable allergens are reliable skin prick testing solutions. Examples of these include egg, peanut, codfish, latex, house dust mite and grass pollens. A wheal of greater than 3 mm accompanied by a flare, is a positive result. A positive test result does not always correlate with clinical sensitivity to that allergen, although in general the larger the reaction the greater its clinical significance.

For drug allergies (e.g. penicillin) and certain occupational allergens (e.g. latex), a wheal of 3 mm is clinically significant.

For heat-labile allergens and for fruit allergens in which proteolytic activity may denature the allergens, skin prick testing with fresh extracts is more reliable (e.g. melon, kiwi, peach, apple). This is particularly relevant in the diagnosis of the oral allergy syndrome.

Cut-off values

Cut-off values for the predictive value of skin prick tests for clinical sensitivity to common food allergens have been determined by Sporik et al. and are listed in Table II. Skin tests are the most reliable tests for the diagnosis of penicillin and cephalosporin allergy. For laboratory tests there is a wide range in the sensitivity, specificity and positive predictive value of the test depending on the allergen and the *in vitro* system.

The Pharmacia ImmunoCap system remains the gold standard for specific IgE determination and is the most widely used in South Africa. Using the Pharmacia ImmunoCap system, cut-off values for the 95% predictive value for the induction of a measurable clinical reaction when exposed to a given food have been determined (Table II). There is a 95% risk of a clinical reaction to that food where values are greater than those listed in Table II. Predictive values for skin prick tests are listed in Table III.

Thus when investigating eczema patients, who often have many positive results, one can use the possible clinical significance of a test.

In young children allergies to foods wane with age and they may acquire inhalant allergies, as illustrated in a case.

### Table II. Predictive values for Immuno CAP RASTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allergen</th>
<th>95% Predictive Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egg</td>
<td>6 Ku/l</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>32 Ku/l</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peanuts</td>
<td>15 Ku/l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>20 Ku/l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soy</td>
<td>65 Ku/l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>80 Ku/l</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Predictive Value = 95%</td>
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### Table III. Predictive values for skin prick tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allergen</th>
<th>Over 2 years</th>
<th>Under 2 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cow’s milk</td>
<td>&gt; 8 mm</td>
<td>&gt; 6 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg</td>
<td>&gt; 7 mm</td>
<td>&gt; 6 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peanut</td>
<td>&gt; 8 mm</td>
<td>&gt; 4 mm</td>
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who will react to a food challenge at levels below the cut-off values and thus food challenges should not be conducted at home, but under medical supervision.

**Western blots**

Western blots can be used to identify specific IgE responses to allergens which are not commercially available. This applies to many of the indigenous seafood allergens and may be useful for fine-tuning of the immune responses in a patient with allergy to indigenous inhalant allergens.

These are available through the UCT Allergy Diagnostic and Clinical Research Unit (ADCRU) in Cape Town which has been involved in pioneering work identifying the major allergens responsible for adverse reactions to indigenous species (Table IV). A Western blot showing IgE immune responses to latex allergies in 5 patients is shown in Fig. 6.

**Tryptase levels**

A rise in mast cell tryptase levels following a severe adverse reaction (e.g. during anaesthetic) suggests that the reaction was indeed allergic and justifies specific IgE testing for the anaesthetic agents used.

Tryptase levels characteristically peak 30 minutes to 3 hours after a reaction and return to normal values 24 - 48 hours after a reaction. It is a stable test and can also be useful for forensic purposes if elevated following a fatal reaction (e.g. cot deaths, anaesthetic deaths).
TESTING FOR NON-IgE-MEDIATED REACTIONS

A number of adverse reactions mimic allergic reactions in their clinical manifestations, but an IgE-mediated mechanism does not appear to mediate the reaction. Some of these reactions involve basophils and mast cells that are triggered via non-IgE-mediated pathways. These are sometimes referred to as pseudo-allergic reactions. ‘Intolerance’ reactions may be examples of such reactions.

Characteristic clinical features of intolerance reactions to proteins (e.g. wheat, milk) or food additives (e.g. sulphites and benzoates) is that they are dose-responsive, somewhat variable and often delayed (a few hours after exposure). The best test for food intolerance is an elimination challenge test with the suspected food but the period of observation post challenge should not be less than 8 - 10 hours.

The CAST2000 ELISA may be regarded as an in vitro allergy provocation test. Leukocytes are isolated, the basophils are stimulated and leukotriene release is determined using an ELISA assay. Although CAST assays are available for inhalants, venom, foods, antibiotics, occupational allergens and anti-inflammatory drugs, their most useful application in our experience is for the confirmation of food additive sensitivities. Leukotriene release is measured and new technical cut-off values for some of the CAST tests are listed in Table V. Values above these levels often correlate with clinical sensitivity. This has recently been validated at the UCT Allergy Diagnostic and Clinical Research Unit for Sulphites. A fresh sample of EDTA blood is required for the test.

ELIMINATION/CHALLENGE DIETS

It is not always possible to select appropriate IgE or non-IgE tests from the patient’s history. The clinical relevance of different foods in a mixed diet can be explored using elimination/challenge diets.

Western blots and in-house ELISAs are important tools for the identification of specific IgE responses to indigenous allergens and ‘now’ allergens which are not yet commercially available.