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Short communication

Placental histopathology after *Coxiella burnetii* infection during pregnancy


**1. Introduction**

Several European countries notified increasing numbers of human Q fever since 2007 [1,2]. Q fever is a zoonosis caused by the intracellular bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*. It primarily infects ruminants and rodents, in which the infection is mainly associated with miscarriage and stillbirth [3]. Humans are predominantly infected by inhalation of contaminated aerosols [4].

Up to 90% of pregnant women with antibodies suggesting recent infection with *C. burnetii* remain asymptomatic [5]. However, symptomatic and asymptomatic *C. burnetii* infection during pregnancy have been associated with obstetric complications, including miscarriage, preterm delivery and fetal death [6,7]. Placental infection assessed by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or culture has been strongly related to these complications [6]. However, information about placental histopathology, in particular in asymptomatic cases, is lacking. Therefore, we described placental histopathology from women with asymptomatic *C. burnetii* infection during pregnancy. Subsequently, we compared our results with symptomatic cases described in the literature.

**2. Patients and methods**

**2.1. Setting and participants**

This study was embedded in a clustered randomised controlled trial about the effectiveness of a screening program for *C. burnetii* infection during pregnancy. In that study pregnant women living in Q fever high-risk areas in The Netherlands were serologically screened for *C. burnetii* infection. Details about the screening study are described elsewhere [8]. The study protocol was approved by the Medical Ethical Review Board of the University Medical Centre Groningen (UMCG). All participants included in this study gave written informed consent to collect and analyse placental tissue and clinical outcome data.

**2.2. Design**

From women who participated in the intervention group of the screening trial and who had serological evidence for an acute infection, placentas were collected. An acute infection was defined as the presence (cut-off titre ≥ 1:32) of immunoglobulin (Ig)M accompanied with (rising) IgG during follow-up. Serology was performed with indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA, Focus Diagnostics, Cypress, CA, USA). Placentas were histopathologically analysed by one pathologist (AT) from the UMCG. Furthermore, *C. burnetii* specific real-time PCR was performed. Primers and probes used have been described earlier [9], other technical details are available on request.

**2.3. Systematic review**

A systematic review of the literature was done by searching PubMed and the references of the included papers following the PRISMA-guidelines. Our search was limited to human studies in English or Dutch. The search strategy was: "Q fever OR *Coxiella burnetii* OR".
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (y)</th>
<th>Parity</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
<th>Initial serological values</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Gestational age at delivery (wks + days)</th>
<th>Birth weight (g/percentile)</th>
<th>Clinical outcome</th>
<th>C. burnetii present in placenta tissue?</th>
<th>Placental weight (g/percentile)</th>
<th>Summery of placenta histology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Erythromycin</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4030/50–80th</td>
<td>Arrest of second stage of labour; uncomplicated caesarean section at term</td>
<td>PCR negative</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>No significant pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Erythromycin</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2930/50–80th</td>
<td>Suspicion of solution placenta at term; emergency caesarean section</td>
<td>PCR negative</td>
<td>540/75–90th</td>
<td>No significant pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Erythromycin</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2170/50–80th</td>
<td>PPROM, retained placenta, postpartum haemorrhage</td>
<td>PCR negative</td>
<td>337/10–25th</td>
<td>Maternal vascular underperfusion; fibromuscular hyperplasia of stem villus vessels; scattered fibrotic villi, low grade chronic villitis (Fig. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3535/50–80th</td>
<td>Uncomplicated, at term</td>
<td>PCR negative</td>
<td>425/10–10th</td>
<td>Low grade chronic villitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3535/20–50th</td>
<td>Congenital hydronephrosis, meconium stained amniotic fluid at term</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>528/25–50th</td>
<td>Low grade chronic villitis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asymptomatic patients

Symptomatic cases from the literature

1 Reich-man et al., 1988
2 Raoult et al., 1994
3 Friedland et al., 1994
4 Bental et al., 1995

y, years Ig, immunoglobulin wks, weeks g, grams PCR, polymerase chain reaction NA, not applicable due to PCR inhibition PPROM, preterm premature rupture of membranes.

Serology of the asymptomatic cases was performed with indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA, Focus Diagnostics, Cypress, CA, USA), measuring both IgM and IgG against phase I and II antigens. Serology of the symptomatic cases was performed with in-house assays.
C. burnetii AND “placenta”. First we pre-screened the titles and the abstracts; afterwards the eligibility of the studies was judged by reading the full-texts. Only studies describing human placental histopathology were included.

3. Results

Seven of the 536 women in the intervention group of the screening trial had serological profiles suggesting an acute C. burnetii infection and were treated with antibiotics. Overall, five placentas were stored and send for re-evaluation to the UMCG, including two placentas from women with follow-up serology suggesting a previous infection. All cases were asymptomatic at the moment of screening. Clinical outcome and placental histopathology are summarised in the first part of Table 1.

The PubMed search resulted in 30 hits. Only 2 papers included data on human placental histopathology and were included. Two other reports were included based on the references. All included papers concerned case-reports of symptomatic acute or chronic Q fever cases [10–13]. Clinical outcome and placental histopathology of these cases are summarised in the second part of Table 1.

4. Discussion

We showed that asymptomatic and symptomatic C. burnetii infection during pregnancy are different entities with respect to placental pathology and the risk of obstetric complications. Placental histology in the asymptomatic cases showed, in contrast with the symptomatic cases, no foci of necrosis or active inflammation. We only observed a few scattered fibrotic villi, which could be a result of interruption of fetal blood flow or destruction of capillaries due to previous villitis [14]. The presence of low grade chronic villitis is a frequent finding in third trimester placentas and probably related to a maternal immune response directed against fetal antigens inherited from the father. Until present no microbiological pathogens have been linked to chronic villitis [15]. Whether placenta hypoplasia and pathology consistent with maternal vascular underperfusion are linked to C. burnetii infection is to our knowledge unknown.

In none of the placentas from asymptomatic cases C. burnetii could be detected with PCR. Previously this also has been shown for a larger cohort of 153 asymptomatic seropositive women [7], suggesting that the rate of placental infection during asymptomatic C. burnetii infection is very low.

Our findings are in line with animal studies. In cows, where Q fever is usually not clinically apparent, positive PCR on bulk tank milk is only rarely associated with histopathological inflammation of placentas [16]. On the other hand, in goats and sheep, in which C. burnetii infection is often associated with miscarriage and stillbirth, necrotising inflammation of placental tissue is a common finding [17,18].

Various factors, including host immune response, cytokines and different strains of C. burnetii, have been suggested to play a role in the clinical manifestation and outcome of C. burnetii infection in both animals and humans, but further research is needed to find target points for prevention and treatment [18–20].

In conclusion, after asymptomatic C. burnetii infection during pregnancy placental examination reveals no major pathology related to previous villitis, which is associated with a favourable clinical outcome. Symptomatic infection is a different entity. Obstetric complications in these cases can very well be explained by colonisation with C. burnetii and massive necrosis of the placenta.

Authors’ contributions

JMM: I declare that I participated in the design of the study, performed the study, analysed and interpreted the data and drafted the manuscript; ACAPL: I declare that I participated in the study as an expert in laboratory testing and performed the serology; CJCMH: I declare that I participated in the study as an expert on obstetric care; EH: I declare that I initiated and designed the screening trial, wrote the grant application, and supervised the data collection, analysis and report; JGA: I declare that I participated in the study as an expert on obstetric care and supervised the analysis and report; AT: I declare that I performed the histopathological re-evaluation of the placentas, and supervised the analysis and report. All authors commented on the manuscript and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The clustered randomised controlled trial about the effectiveness of a screening program for C. burnetii infection during pregnancy was approved by the Medical Ethical Review Board of the University Medical Centre Groningen (number 2009.323). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before placentas were collected and analysed.

Conflict of interests

JGA and EH are members of the Health Council of the Netherlands on a non-profit base.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted according to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol of the randomised controlled trial about the effectiveness of a screening program for C. burnetii infection during pregnancy was approved by the Medical Ethical Review Board of the University Medical Centre Groningen (number 2009.323). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before placentas were collected and analysed.
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References