Acetylator phenotypes in Papua New Guinea

R J A PENKETH*, S F A GIBNEY†, G T NURSE†, AND D A HOPKINSON‡

From *University College Hospital Medical School, London; †Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research; and ‡MRC Human Biochemical Genetics Unit, London.

Summary Acetylator phenotypes have been determined in 139 unrelated subjects from the hitherto untested populations of Papua New Guinea, and their relevance to current antituberculous isoniazid chemotherapy is discussed.

Several drugs, including isonicotinyl hydrazide (isoniazid), diamino diphenyl sulphone (dapsone), hydralazine, and some sulphonamides, are metabolised by the liver enzyme acetyl transferase. There is individual variation in the rate at which acetylation occurs and two phenotypes, rapid and slow, are usually recognised, which show an autosomal dominant mode of inheritance. The rapid phenotype includes subjects homozygous and heterozygous for an allele which determines a rapid rate of acetylation. The slow phenotype comprises subjects homozygous for an allele which determines slow acetylation of these drugs. Populations vary in the frequency of rapid and slow acetylators; for instance, the incidence of the slow type may be as low as 5 to 10% in Japanese and Eskimos but up to about 60% in some European, African, and Asiatic Indian populations.1-3

This paper describes the investigation of the acetylator status of 139 Papua New Guineans carried out during a 10-week period of laboratory and field work. Our objective was to assess the population incidence of the acetylator phenotypes in a hitherto untested population, and to evaluate the relevance of the phenotypes in the control of tuberculosis. The acetylator polymorphism is relevant in as much as isoniazid, in combination with other drugs, is the mainstay of antituberculous therapy in Papua New Guinea, as in other parts of the world.

Slow acetylators are more likely to develop peripheral neuropathy on prolonged treatment with isoniazid,4 though this is preventable by pyridoxine supplementation, and rapid acetylators respond less well to a once weekly antituberculous regimen of isoniazid and companion drugs.5-7

Materials and methods

Subjects were drawn from hospital wards and from various educational institutions where exact conformity with the protocol of the test could be guaranteed. The largest single geographical sample came from the Southern Highlands Province and consisted of 33 subjects tested in the provincial capital Mendi. There were 47 subjects from the other Highland provinces, Enga, Western Highlands, Chimbu, and Eastern Highlands, collected mainly in Goroka, and 32 from the coastal provinces, East and West Sepik, Madang, Morobe, Central, Gulf, and Western. Of those from the island provinces three came from Manus, two from New Ireland, nine from East and West New Britain, and 11 from the North Solomons. These regions are shown in fig. 1.

Tests were carried out as recommended by Evans8 using blood and urine samples. Subjects took standard doses of sulphadimidine 500 mg if they weighed less than 50 kg, and 750 mg if their weight exceeded 50 kg, after an overnight fast. Drinking was not restricted, but to ensure rapid absorption the subjects were asked not to eat for 2 hours following the dose.

Results

The results are shown in the table and are plotted graphically in fig 2 to show the clear separation between the slow and rapid acetylators. There is a striking contrast in the incidence of acetylator phenotypes between the mainland of Papua New Guinea and the North Solomon Islands.

The slow acetylator allele was identified with a frequency of 0.798 ± SE 0.121 in the North Solomons and 0.353 ± SE 0.168 in East New Britain and not at all in the mainland population.

Received for publication 12 May 1982.
TABLE Acetylator phenotypes of 139 Papua New Guineans from six different geographical areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>No of subjects</th>
<th>Rapid acetylators</th>
<th>Slow acetylators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Plasma</td>
<td>Urine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland Provinces</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>72.7 (80)</td>
<td>88.9 (81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal Provinces</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>70.4 (29)</td>
<td>87.9 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manus Island</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75.1 (3)</td>
<td>89.0 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>74.2 (2)</td>
<td>83.6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Britain</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>67.4 (8)</td>
<td>86.6 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Solomons</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61.3 (4)</td>
<td>83.2 (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results expressed as mean percentage sulphadimidine acetylated in plasma or urine. Number of samples tested given in parentheses. Not all subjects were able to provide both a plasma and a urine sample and such cases were characterised on the basis of one result.

FIG 1 Geographical regions of Papua New Guinea from which specimens were collected.

However these estimates are based on relatively small population sample sizes, particularly in East New Britain.

Discussion

Failure of antituberculous chemotherapy during the maintenance phase of treatment may be attributed to lack of supervision and patient motivation. In principle, the problems may be overcome by supervised intermittent therapy with isoniazid and combinations of other antituberculous drugs. Such regimens have been evaluated in several centres and it has been demonstrated that a good cure rate can be obtained in subjects of the rapid acetylator phenotype receiving twice weekly isoniazid and companion drugs. However, subjects of the slow acetylator phenotype could be maintained on once weekly dosage regimens to obtain a similar cure rate. Thus, in the communities where the health care system is favourable and both phenotypes are common, the acetylator status of each patient could be evaluated before the start of a supervised intermittent treatment regimen, as has been pioneered in urban communities in Czechoslovakia.7

Papua New Guinea is fortunate to have a health
Acetylator phenotypes in Papua New Guinea

![Graphs showing urine and plasma values for % acetylated sulphanilamide](image)

**FIG 2** (a) Urine and plasma values for % acetylated sulphanilamide in 139 subjects from Papua New Guinea. Open circles indicate values in five subjects from whom only urine was tested and open triangles indicate subjects from whom only plasma was tested. (b) Histogram of plasma values of % acetylated sulphanilamide in the 139 subjects.

The striking difference in the slow acetylator gene frequency between the people of the mainland of Papua New Guinea and the North Solomon Islanders (coupled with the unique physical appearance and colour of the latter) can be seen as further evidence of the individuality of the North Solomonese when compared with people from other provinces of Papua New Guinea. This is supported by the finding of an extremely high frequency (0.413) of the phosphoglucomutase allele *PGM*1 in Buka, the northernmost of the North Solomons, which is the highest frequency of this allele yet found in Melanesia. The discovery of the presence of the slow acetylator gene in the island of East New Britain provides evidence of genetic contact with the North Solomonese. There is little other evidence of this, though it is possible that the transferrin *Tf*<sup>D1</sup> allele could have come via East New Britain to the North Solomons.

Our investigation of the frequency of acetylator phenotypes in Papua New Guinea and the neighbouring island provinces was based on considerations of the antituberculosis therapy practised in this area and in particular the efficacy of isoniazid in subjects of rapid phenotype. However, the recent reports of associations between acetylator status and other genetic markers such as the HLA type, and the development of a lupus-like syndrome after medication with drugs such as procainamide, hydralazine, and isoniazid suggests that the acetylator polymorphism may have wider pharmacological significance. The genetic factors involved in the manifestation of such side effects are complex and accurate identification of subjects at risk is likely to be a difficult practical problem. For example, the occurrence of the lupus-like syndrome seen in hypertensive patients treated with hydralazine...
appears to be associated with sex (female) and HLA type (DR4), as well as the acetylator type (slow).  

It will be noted that the distribution of the plasma values from the rapid acetylators (fig 2) is bimodal. Subjects showing the relatively higher proportions of acetylated sulphadimidine may represent homozygotes for the 'rapid' gene and the others with slightly lower values may be heterozygotes for 'rapid' and 'slow' genes.

Further testing using other drugs known to be acetylated by this system would perhaps establish the validity of this subdivision and lead to more accurate assessment of the genotype. We have assumed that the 'rapid' and 'slow' genes identified in this Papua New Guinea population are the same as those found in other populations throughout the world. However, it is conceivable that the acetylator polymorphism is, like many other genetic polymorphisms, rather heterogeneous and similar phenotypes may represent a wide range of diverse genotypic combinations owing to multiple allelism. Direct analysis of the structural gene or its gene product, acetyl transferase, will probably be necessary to resolve this question.

We are grateful to staff and students of the Mendi High School in the Southern Highlands Province, the Malaguna Technical College in East New Britain, the University of Papua New Guinea Medical School at Port Moresby, the Goroka Teachers College (UPNG) in the Eastern Highlands, and also the Health Extension Officers Training College at Madang for their co-operation in obtaining subjects for testing. We are also grateful to Dr G A Ellard for his advice, constructive criticism, and encouragement throughout this project. Mr Penketh received financial support from the Rodgers fund administered by the Medical Research Council, London, and also from the Trustees of the Bennington Memorial Studentship, University College London. He is also extremely grateful to a considerable number of people throughout Papua New Guinea for their help, advice, accommodation, transport, etc, without which this project would not have been possible.

References

7 Fox W. The chemotherapy of pulmonary tuberculosis: a review. Chest 1979;76:785S.