The role of psychogenic factors in the induction of pemphigus foliaceus was first reported by Perry and Brunsting in 1965 [1]. Brenner and Bar-Nathan in 1984 described their role in pemphigus vulgaris (PV) [2]. We present another case of PV triggered by emotional stress. A 68-year-old woman of Ashkenazi origin was admitted to the dermatology department with a 2-month history of erosive lesions on her face and buccal mucosa. She had immigrated from the Ukraine 6 months previously and developed skin and mucosal lesions 3 months after her arrival in Israel. The patient admitted to being extremely worried about her eldest daughter and grandchildren who had remained in the Ukraine where famine, anti-Semitism and chaos were rampant. She was highly emotional and had a tendency to cry.

Physical examination revealed multiple superficial erosions, some covered with a yellow crust, on the patient’s face and a few erosions on the buccal mucosa. The rest of the physical examination was noncontribu-tory. Histological examination of a biopsy specimen taken from a new lesion showed intraepidermal suprabasal vesicles with acan-tholysis. Direct immunofluorescence of peri-lesional skin disclosed intercellular deposition of IgG and C3. Indirect immunofluorescence confirmed the presence of anti-intercellular-substance antibodies. Routine laboratory tests were within normal limits. HLA typing was performed and found to be All, B-44, DR3 and DR4.

The patient was given oral prednisone 120 mg and azathioprine 100 mg daily. Skin lesions worsened despite 3 weeks of treatment, and the patient was referred for psychiatric evaluation which determined that she was in a severe state of anxiety. Anxiolytics were recommended, and oxazepam 10 mg daily was added to the steroid therapy. Within a few days the lesions began to clear, she became less agitated, and there was a noticeable improvement in her mental state. The steroid dosage was eventually tapered off while good control of the disease was maintained.

Psychogenic immunomodulation of PV continues to be a subject of debate. To the best of our knowledge only two reports of the association of pemphigus with stress have appeared: Perry and Brunsting’s [1] case of pemphigus foliaceus exacerbated by emotional upset and Brenner and Bar-Nathan’s [2] 2 patients who developed PV under severe emotional stress. The association of PV with certain HLA serotypes suggests a genetic predisposition to this disease. Indeed, HLA-DR4 haplotype was found in more than 90% of Ashkenazi Jewish PV patients [3]. It is speculated that severe anxiety triggered the PV in our patient who was already genetically susceptible to the disease. This supposition gained strong support from the patient’s good
physical and mental response to the addition of oxazepam to steroid treatment. These findings point up the importance of recognizing the possible modulatory role of psychogenic factors in the pathogenesis of PV in susceptible individuals.

References

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