

Retinopathy of Prematurity – Incidence and Risk Factors in Bulgaria

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Abstract

Purpose: To determine the incidence of retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) in preterm infants, screened at Pediatric Eye Unit, Eye Clinic, University Hospital "Alexandrovska", Sofia, Bulgaria for a period of five years; to identify risk and prognostic factors for the manifestation and progression of the disease.

Patients and Methods: In the present study we examined 1490 infants, screened for ROP at Pediatric Eye Unit, Eye Clinic, University Hospital "Alexandrovska" Sofia; for the period from June 2010 to January 2016. We used diagnostic (binocular indirect ophthalmoscopy - BIO; digital fundus camera - RetCam III) and statistical methods.

Results: Signs of retinopathy of prematurity occurred in 339 of surveyed 1490 children (22.8%). The disease progressed to type 1 pre-threshold ROP, requiring treatment, in 110 children. The remaining 229 children showed signs of spontaneous remission. We identified significant and independent risk factors in the child, for the development of ROP, as well as for the progression of already manifested disease to stages, requiring treatment. Such risk factors were not found in the mother.

Conclusion: Good early anatomical results of treatment of ROP can only be achieved with a good-functioning screening program, based on the major risk factors for onset and progression of ROP. There is a necessity of multidisciplinary approach at every stage of diagnosis and treatment of ROP.

Keywords: preterm infants, retinopathy of prematurity (ROP), risk and prognostic factors, screening program, treatment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) is a postnatal disorder of retinal vessels that develops in the incompletely vascularized retina of preterm infants [1]. Although this disorder regresses in most patients, it can lead to severe visual impairment. Developing countries, countries from Eastern Europe, South America, India and China are now victims of the third ROP epidemic. Thanks to the advances in neonatology and perinatal medicine in these countries, more and more premature infants born with very low and extremely low birth weight survive. This, in turn, leads to a significant increase in the number of children with vision – threatening ROP. ROP is the main cause of childhood blindness in Bulgaria, Eastern Europe, nevertheless our ROP screening and treatment guidelines [2]. The main efforts are directed at the prevention of ROP, due to the fact that the prognosis of the visual function is pessimistic. This prevention is done by screening the risk groups of premature babies and early and adequate treatment.

Purpose

To determine the incidence of retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) in preterm infants, screened at Pediatric Eye Unit, Eye Clinic, University Hospital "Alexandrovska", Sofia, Bulgaria for a period of five years; to identify risk and prognostic factors for the manifestation and progression of the disease.

II. PATIENTS AND METHODS

We examined all preterm infants, screened for ROP at Pediatric Eye Unit, Eye Clinic, University Hospital "Alexandrovska", Sofia, Bulgaria, for the period June 2010 – January 2016 – 1490 children. Most children were born prematurely with birth weight less than 1500 grams and gestational age below 32 weeks; and some patients were born with birth weight less than 2500 grams with a complicated postnatal period – instrument ventilation, blood transfusion and exchange, phototherapy, underlying disease, cerebral hemorrhage. Ophthalmologists from our clinic performed screening for ROP in neonatal intensive units in the capital of Bulgaria - Sofia and children referred to our clinic by various centers in the country. Examination of the retina was performed after pupil dilation with mydriatic combination of Phenylephrine 2,5% and Cyclopentolate 0,5%, the application of local anesthesia (0,5% Proxymetacaine Hydrochloride) and eye

speculum. Retinal changes were documented with RetCam imaging system (Clarity Medical systems Inc., Pleasanton, CA, USA). Examinations were continued until the retina was fully vascularized. If it was necessary, the children were treated with transpupillary diode laser photocoagulation (Iridex Oculight SLx Tri-Mode 810nm Diode Laser®); cryotherapy (cryoablation) or intravitreal administration of anti-VEGF medications. The indication for treatment was pre-threshold type 1 ROP.

For the purpose of the study, our patients (1490 children) were divided into the following groups:

- Group I - patients who did not develop ROP (N = 1151)
- Group II - patients who developed ROP (N = 339)
- Group IIA - patients who developed ROP and who had spontaneous regression (untreated) - (N = 229)
- Group IIB - patients with progressive ROP, treated (N = 110).

The SPSS version 13.0 (USA, Chicago, SPSS Inc., Version 13.0) has been used to process statistically the survey data. Chi-square test was used to analyze qualitative variables. Fisher's test were used for quantitative variables. The coefficient of confidence of this study was 0.95. A difference with $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

III. RESULTS

Signs of ROP were observed in 339 children (22.8%) of all 1490 children. In 110 children, the disease progressed to type 1 pre-threshold ROP, requiring treatment (7.4% of the total screened group). The remaining 229 children (15.4% of the whole group) showed signs of spontaneous regression (type 2 pre-threshold ROP). Regarding the severity of ROP, from all 339 children, who developed the disease, 135 children (39.8%) had ROP Stage I; 86 children (25.4%) - Stage II; 103 children (30.4%) - Stage III; 4 children (1.1%) - Stage IVA and 11 children (3.2%) - Stage V.

Our main goal in this study was to identify pre-, peri- and postnatal risk factors on the part of the child and the mother, which may help early detection of children at risk of developing ROP and children with clinically manifested disease, that may progress to treatment-requiring stages (type 1 pre-threshold ROP).

In the assumed risk factors, selection of the statistically significant ones were made - for the development of ROP and for the regression or progression of an already developed disease - a comparison between the Group I and the Group II; and respectively between Group IIA and Group IIB. In the next step, a multiple logistic regression analysis of the significant risk factors was performed to establish whether there were independent significant risk factors for both development / non-development of ROP, as well as for the regression / progression of an existing disease.

We examined 23 (twenty three) potential risk factors in the child in relation to treatment in a neonatal unit and developed diseases in pre-, peri- and neonatal period: birth weight (BW) and the degree of prematurity (Degree I - 2000 to 2499 g.; Degree II - 1500 to 1999 g.; Degree III - 1000 to 1499 g.; Degree IV - <999 g.), gestational age (GA), sex, singleton / multiple pregnancies, invasive mechanical ventilation (IMV), non-invasive mechanical ventilation (NIMV), oxygen supplementation, exogenous surfactant administration, phototherapy, number of blood transfusions (HT), respiratory distress syndrome (RDS) in partum asphyxia (IA), hyperbilirubinemia (HB), bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD), chronic lung disease (CLD), patent ductus arteriosus (PDA), intrauterine hypotrophy (IUH), anemia of prematurity, necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC), neonatal pneumonia, intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) - by grade, subependymal hemorrhage (SEH) posthaemorrhagic hydrocephalus (Table I).

Table I. Potential risk factors in the child for development of ROP.

Groups	Group I vs Group II	Group IIA vs Group IIB
Risk Factors		
Degree I of prematurity	$p < 0.001$	$p > 0.05$
Degree II of prematurity	$p < 0.001$	$p > 0.05$
Degree III of prematurity	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$
Degree IV of prematurity	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$
Gestational Age (GA)	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$
Sex	$p = 0.575$	$p = 0.632$
Singleton / multiple pregnancies	$p = 0.763$	$p > 0.05$
Invasive mechanical ventilation (IMV)	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.909$
Non-invasive mechanical ventilation (NIMV)	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.154$
Exogenous surfactant administration	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.532$
Number of blood transfusions (HT)	$p > 0.05$	$p > 0.05$
Phototherapy	$p = 0.042$	$p = 0.019$
Hyperbilirubinemia (HB)	$p = 0.057$	$p = 0.059$
Respiratory distress syndrome (RDS)	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.903$
Intrapartum asphyxia (IA)	$p = 0.340$	$p = 0.281$
Bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD)	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.169$
Chronic lung disease (CLD)	$p < 0.001$	$p = 0.391$

Neonatal pneumonia	p < 0.001	p = 0.517
Patent ductus arteriosus (PDA)	p < 0.001	p = 0.278
Anemia	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)	p = 0.525	p = 0.758
Intrauterine hypotrophy (IUH)	p = 0.008	p = 0.557
Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) – Grade I	p = 0.125	p = 0.247
Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) – Grade II	p = 0.684	p < 0.001
Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) – Grade III	p < 0.001	p = 0.643
Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) – Grade IV	p = 0.783	p = 0.661
Subependymal hemorrhage (SEH)	p < 0.001	p = 0.001
Posthaemorrhagic hydrocephalus	p = 0.475	p = 0.179

After a multiple logistic regression analysis, independent and significant risk factors for the onset of ROP were found to be (Table II) -Degree III and IV of prematurity; Gestational age (GA); IMV, NIMV; RDS, BPD, PDA, IUH, anemia of prematurity, IVH Grade III, SEH. While phototherapy used to treat Hyperbilirubinemia (HB), has been a protective factor for the development of ROP after logistic analysis. We believe that phototherapy acts as a significant protective factor for the onset of ROP, because when it is applied adequately to avoid complications from advanced clinical HB, and there is no need for haemotransfusion, which is a risk factor for the development of ROP.

Table II. Independent and significant fetal risk factors for the development of ROP (a comparison between Group I and Group II)

Risk Factor	OR	95% CI		p
Degree III of prematurity	2,339	1,131	4,838	0,022
Degree IV of prematurity	3,650	1,570	8,487	0,003
Gestational Age (GA)	-0,693	0,639	0,752	<0,001
IMV	1,515	1,063	2,159	0,022
NIMV	2,853	1,914	4,253	<0,001
RDS	2,813	1,915	4,131	<0,001
BPD	2,755	1,953	3,885	<0,001
PDS	1,628	1,064	2,490	0,025
IUH	1,567	0,333	0,964	0,036
Anemia	1,601	1,168	2,195	0,003
IVH – Grade III	2,263	1,530	3,349	<0,001
SEH	2,769	1,973	3,887	<0,001

OR – Odds Ratio; CL – Confidence Interval

After a multiple logistic regression analysis, independent and significant risk factors were established (by the fetus) to progression of already developed ROP to treatment - requiring stages of ROP (Table III) - Degree IV of prematurity; gestational age (GA); anemia, intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH) – Grade II, subependymal hemorrhage (SEH).

TABLE III. Independent and significant fetal risk factors for the progression of an existing ROP to stages, requiring treatment (a comparison between Group IIA and Group IIB).

Risk Factor	OR	95% CI		p
Anemia	1,601	1,168	2,195	0,003
IVH – Grade II	1,246	0,107	0,567	0,001
SEH	2,051	1,220	3,448	0,007
Degree IV of prematurity	8,260	1,019	66,946	0,048
Gestational Age (GA)	-0,752	0,680	0,832	<0,001

OR – Odds Ratio; CL – Confidence Interval

We also tested 10 (ten) potential maternal risk factors for both development / non-development of ROP (a comparison between Group I and Group II), and spontaneous regression / progression of the disease to type 1 pre-threshold ROP, requiring treatment (a comparison between Group IIA and Group IIB) (Table IV): maternal-fetal infections (MFI) and intra-amniotic infection (IAI); mechanism of conception; mechanism of birth (PVN – per vias naturalis; SC – Sectio Caesarea); premature rupture of membrane (PROM >24 h.); the presence of preeclampsia; placental detachment; interventions on the cervix of uterus; gestational diabetes and Hashimoto's thyroiditis.

TABLE IV. Potential maternal risk factors for development of ROP.

Groups	□ □ Group I vs Group II	Group IIA vs Group IIB
Risk Factors		
Maternal-fetal infections (MFI)	p = 0.029	p = 0.020
Intra-amniotic infection (IAI)	p = 0.129	p = 0.924
Mechanism of conception	p < 0.001	p = 0.006
Mechanism of birth (PVN, SC)	p = 0.739	p = 0.394
Preeclampsia	p = 0.205	p = 0.909
Placental detachment	p = 0.141	p = 0.797
Premature rupture of membrane (PROM >24 h.)	p = 0.444	p = 0.314
Interventions on the cervix of uterus	p = 0.182	p = 0.781
Gestational diabetes	p = 0.473	p = 0.309
Hashimoto's thyroiditis	p = 0.475	p = 0.179

On the mother's side, a statistically significant difference between patients who did not have and who had signs of ROP (a comparison between Group I and Group II), and between spontaneously regressing and progressing to treatment requiring stages (a comparison between Group IIA and Group IIB) showed: *Maternal-fetal infections (MFI) and Mechanism of birth (PVN, SC)*. After conducting a multiple logistic analysis, they did not prove as significant and independent risk factors for the onset and progression of ROP.

IV. DISCUSSION

Incidence of ROP in Bulgaria (22.8%) is comparable with other authors in developed and developing countries with similar demographic characteristics with our country –Brazil (25.5%) [3], 38.3% - 41.4% [4], 34% [5]; India (27%) [6], Norway (10%) [7], Oman (34%) [8], Finland (27.3%) [9], Australia (16%) [10] and Singapore (29.3%) [11]. In Bulgaria, there is a tendency to increase the incidence of ROP - reported data are 5.4%, 11.2%, 18.5%, 25.7% to 30.3% [12]. The main reason for this is the progress in both obstetrics and neonatal care, which ensures the survival of more immature infants. This leads to increase not only in the incidence of ROP, but also in increase of the severe aggressive-posterior form of the disease - AP-ROP [12].

The results in our study, regarding birth weight (BW) and gestational age (GA), are comparable to those of other Bulgarian and foreign authors. The low BW and the high degrees of prematurity (Degree III and IV of prematurity) as well as the low GA [13,14,15,6,17] are significant risk factors for development and progression of the disease to treatment-requiring stages [13, 14, 15]. BW and GA are key indicators in the screening programs for ROP, both in the world and in Bulgaria.

Prolonged IMV and NIMV in a significant number of publications are found by the authors that are associated with an increased risk of development of ROP [13,17,18,19]. In our study the results are the same.

There are opposite views in literature concerning the fetal diseases, which are risk factors for the development and progression of ROP. Some authors, like us, find that RDS is a significant risk factor for the development of ROP [13,17]; there are opposite opinions [15,20]. Some studies confirm our results that BPD is a significant risk factor for the development of ROP [21,22], while others reject them [23]. Our results confirm some publications, in which PDA is found to be significant risk factor for the onset of ROP [24, 25]. However, other publications deny the role of PDA [21, 26]. Some authors have reported, as in our study, that anemia of prematurity is a significant risk factor for the development of ROP [23,27]; while there are opposite views [28]. The IUH is considered to be a significant risk factor for the development of ROP in some studies [29, 30], while others deny this fact [31]. IVH – Grade III and SEH are identified significant risk factors for the development of ROP in some publications [17, 23], whereas according to other authors it is not the case [22, 26].

We believe that our established significant fetal risk factors for development of ROP and progression to stages, requiring treatment; should be considered by the screening ophthalmologist. Screening premature infants who developed signs of ROP that would progress to stages, needing treatment is a key point in fighting with this socially significant disease.

In the available literature, there were publications that confirmed the negative results we found about the maternal risk factors, that are not significant and independent risk factors for the onset and progression of ROP: maternal-fetal infections (MFI) and intra-amniotic infection (IAI) [12], mechanism of birth (PVN, SC) [12, 31], mechanism of conception [12, 32], preeclampsia [33,34], placental detachment [12, 33], premature rupture of membrane (PROM >24 h.) [12,17,33]; interventions on the cervix of uterus [12,31] and gestational diabetes [121, 35, 36]. Although in our study maternal risk factors are not significant and independent risk factors for the development and progression of ROP, we believe that MFI, mechanism of birth and conception, preeclampsia, placental detachment, PROM > 24 hours; interventions on the cervix of uterus and gestational diabetes; should be considered by screening ophthalmologists, because they may cause premature birth and the negative consequences of it, ROP in particular.

V. CONCLUSION

Advances in neonatal and perinatal medicine create conditions for increased survivability of a growing number of children born prematurely. This determines the increasing number of children who are at risk of developing ROP and related early and late visual impairment and blindness. The good structural and functional results after therapy for ROP are achieved thanks to a functioning screening program (based on the main risk factors for the development and progression of ROP) for early detection of risk premature infants and timely and adequate treatment of the disease. It is necessary a multidisciplinary approach at each stage of the diagnostics and treatment of ROP.

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