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OVAIRES MULTIFOLLICULAIRES : VARIANT DE LA NORMALE OU SYNDROME DES OVAIRES POLYKYSTIQUES SILENCIEUX ?

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Introduction

7 % des femmes dans le monde sont affectées par le syndrome des ovaires polykystiques (SOPK) (1). Ce syndrome représente la première cause d'anonulation, d'infécondité et d'hyperandrogénie chez la femme (2). C'est Irving Freiler Stein et Michael Leo Leventhal (3) qui le décrivent pour la première fois en 1935 chez des patientes présentant une aménorrhée et un aspect polykystique des ovaires.

Cette pathologie est désormais considérée comme primitivement ovarienne (4, 5) et peut être responsable de troubles du cycle, d'hyperandrogénie clinique quantifiable par le score de Ferriman et Gallwey (6) et d'hyperandrogénie biologique.

Les ovaires des patientes atteintes de ce syndrome ont deux à trois fois plus de follicules en croissance que les ovaires de patientes témoins (7). Mais tous les follicules ne sont pas en excès. Le nombre de follicules primordiaux est normal (7, 5, 8) tandis qu'il est constaté un excès des follicules primaires (7, 5), secondaires et antraux.

Les follicules antraux, visibles à l'échographie, mesurent de 2 à 9 mm et donnent l'aspect ultra-sonore caractéristique de ces ovaires pathologiques. Seuls les petits follicules de 2 à 5 mm sont en excès tandis que ceux de 6 à 9 mm sont en quantité normale (9).

Toutes ces constatations permettent d'écartier l'hypothèse d'une pathologie liée à l'acquisition initiale d'un stock trop élevé de follicules primordiaux.

Il n'y a pas non plus d'excès d'entrée en croissance des follicules primordiaux, ainsi les patientes présentant un SOPK ne seront pas ménopausées prématurément (10). L'excès folliculaire serait dû à un défaut d'apoptose des follicules en croissance (11, 12).

L'équipe de Webber a démontré sur des fragments de biopsies ovariennes qu'après une mise en culture de 15 jours, l'atrésie des follicules en croissance était de 53 % dans les ovaires de patientes atteintes de SOPK contre 80 % dans les ovaires de patientes témoins.

Une autre hypothèse serait celle d'un ralentissement de la croissance folliculaire chez les patientes atteintes de SOPK (8).

Quel est le facteur responsable du défaut d'apoptose ou du ralentissement de croissance de ces follicules de moins de 5 mm ?

L'hyperandrogénie intra-ovarienne semble être la cause de l'excès folliculaire dans le SOPK (13).

De nombreuses études ont permis de montrer que l'excès d'androgènes exogènes ou endogènes pouvait, dans un contexte différent de celui du SOPK, induire un aspect typiquement multifolliculaire à des ovaires ayant initialement des follicules en quantité normale. Dans une de leurs études, l'équipe de Vendola (14) a administré de la testostérone et de la dihydrotestostérone à des femelles macaques avant une analyse histologique de leurs ovaires. Ils ont constaté une augmentation significative du nombre de follicules primaires, pré-antraux et antraux contrairement aux résultats obtenus sur les biopsies d'ovaires des macaques traitées par placebo. Les auteurs ont ainsi montré que les androgènes n'étaient pas atrétogènes contrairement aux données antérieures de la littérature émanant d'études chez le rat (15, 16, 17).

Une équipe hollandaise a constaté des similitudes dans l'espèce humaine, en montrant l'effet des androgènes exogènes sur les ovaires de 17 femmes transsexuelles. Leurs ovaires devenant multifolliculaires après 2 ans de traitement androgénique (18).

Des effets identiques peuvent être causés par l'excès d'androgènes endogènes dans le cas de tumeur secrétant de la testostérone (19) ou d'adénome surrénalien (20).

A l'inverse, l'administration d'un anti-androgène de type Flutamine à de jeunes femmes anovulatoires atteintes de SOPK a permis aux ovaires de retrouver un aspect échographique normal et un retour des cycles réguliers (21).

L'hyperandrogénie intra-ovarienne du SOPK semble provenir d'un dysfonctionnement enzymatique des cellules thécales (22, 23) dont l'origine serait multigénique (24) mais la responsabilité d'une enzyme en particulier est difficile à mettre en évidence. L'expression de la 17 alpha-hydroxylase serait augmentée dans les cellules thécales des patientes atteintes de SOPK par rapport aux cellules thécales des patientes sans SOPK (22, 23, 24). Cette enzyme joue un rôle clé dans la stéroïdogénèse ovarienne en assurant notamment la conversion de la pregnenolone en 17 α -hydroxypregnenolone et de la progestérone en 17 α -hydroxyprogestérone.

Les androgènes en excès auraient un effet anti-apoptotique et prolifératif direct sur les cellules de la granulosa (11, 13). L'augmentation de l'expression des ARNm des récepteurs des androgènes chez des primates traités par testostérone serait corrélée négativement à l'apoptose des cellules de la granulosa (25).

Une équipe allemande a mis en évidence un nombre de récepteur aux androgènes quatre fois plus élevé à la surface des cellules de la granulosa des petits follicules en croissance qu'à la surface des follicules pré-ovulatoires (26). Ceci démontre une forte sensibilité de ces petits follicules aux androgènes.

La LH élevée est souvent présente parmi les anomalies constatées dans le SOPK et fut longtemps mise en cause dans la genèse de l'hyperandrogénie, mais il semblerait qu'elle en soit surtout une conséquence. En effet, l'administration d'un antagoniste de la GnRH pourra bloquer l'axe gonadotrope et donc supprimer la sécrétion de LH sans pour autant diminuer l'hyperandrogénie biologique et l'aspect polykystique des ovaires des patientes (27). Des constatations similaires sont faites lors de l'utilisation d'un agoniste de la GnRH sur une durée plus longue (28).

De plus, in vitro, en l'absence complète de LH, les cellules thécales des ovaires de patientes atteintes de SOPK synthétisent d'avantage d'androgènes que les cellules thécales de patientes témoins, malgré une même quantité de précurseurs (24).

Outre l'aspect échographique et l'inconstante hyperandrogénie clinique ou biologique, le SOPK est souvent responsable de troubles du cycle qui ne semblent pas être corrélés à l'hyperandrogénie (29) mais qui pourraient être attribuables à l'hormone anti-mullérienne (AMH). Ces troubles du cycle sont secondaires à un défaut de recrutement des follicules en excès bloqués au stade antral.

En physiologie, l'AMH joue un rôle capital dans la régulation de la folliculogénèse ovarienne. Elle agit de manière paracrine sur le recrutement des follicules primordiaux (30) et régule l'action de l'aromatase (31). En son absence, le nombre de follicules entrant en croissance dans les ovaires de souris mutées est plus élevé, entraînant une déplétion des follicules primordiaux (32). Sa production est essentiellement issue des follicules primaires, secondaires, pré-antraux et antraux de 2 à 5 mm, justement en excès dans le SOPK.

Le taux d'AMH sérique est trois fois plus élevé chez les patientes présentant un SOPK que chez les témoins (33). Il est logiquement corrélé en physiologie au nombre de follicules puisque ceux-ci en assurent sa synthèse.

Il a été montré que l'excès d'AMH était corrélé à la sévérité des troubles du cycle dans le SOPK (33). Cet excès d'AMH serait principalement dû à l'excès de follicules de 2 à 5 mm (34) clairement associés aux troubles du cycle dans le SOPK (35). Les follicules antraux de 2 à 5 mm auraient ainsi un rôle néfaste sur le recrutement des follicules de 6 à 9 mm vers la dominance.

Malgré un taux d'AMH très souvent élevé, toutes les patientes atteintes de SOPK n'ont pas de trouble du cycle. Certaines patientes ovuleront tous les mois (36, 37).

Pourquoi l'excès d'AMH n'entraîne-t-il pas de trouble du cycle chez toutes les patientes atteintes de SOPK ?

Le taux d'AMH synthétisé par follicule pourrait être variable et constituer un élément de réponse. En effet, le taux d'AMH par follicule, chez les patientes présentant un SOPK dysovulatoire, est nettement plus élevé que chez les patientes témoins (38). De plus, le taux d'AMH par follicule est cinq fois plus élevé chez les patientes SOPK dysovulatoires que chez les patientes SOPK ovulatoires (11). Dans le même sens, le taux d'AMH sérique est plus élevé chez les patientes SOPK dysovulatoires que chez les ovulatoires (39).

Le syndrome des ovaires polykystiques pourrait donc être causé en partie par un dysfonctionnement des cellules thécales responsable de l'hyperandrogénie ovarienne. Cette hyperandrogénie ovarienne pourra donner une hyperandrogénie clinique et/ou biologique, ainsi que l'aspect échographique caractéristique. Mais des anomalies des cellules de la granulosa produisant un taux d'AMH par follicule en excès pourraient être en cause, notamment dans la survenue de troubles du cycle.

Le SOPK est défini selon les critères de Rotterdam de 2003 par la présence de 2 des 3 critères suivants (40):

- Anovulation/Dysovulation
- Hyperandrogénie clinique et/ou biologique
- Ovaires micropolykystiques (≥ 12 follicules 2 à 9 mm/ovaire et/ou volume >10 ml)

Les anomalies métaboliques fréquentes dans le SOPK ne sont pas retenues dans les critères diagnostiques. L'origine de l'hyperinsulinisme, inconstant dans le SOPK, est débattue.

Cependant, ses conséquences sur l'aggravation du syndrome sont plus unanimes. L'hyperinsulinisme pourrait majorer l'hyperandrogénie par différents mécanismes.

En effet, l'hyperinsulinisme pourrait stimuler directement la stéroïdogénèse ovarienne puisque la réduction pharmacologique de la sécrétion d'insuline dans le SOPK a montré une réduction de l'activité des enzymes ovariennes responsables de la stéroïdogénèse (41).

De plus, l'hyperinsulinisme diminuerait la synthèse hépatique de SHBG (sex hormone binding protein) (42, 43) augmentant ainsi la fraction d'androgènes biodisponibles. Il diminuerait aussi la synthèse de IGFBP-1 (Insulin-like growth factor binding protein1) permettant une stimulation plus importante de la stéroïdogénèse ovarienne par l'IGFs (Insulin growth factors) (44).

Par ailleurs, l'hyperinsulinisme aurait une action directe sur l'hypophyse avec pour conséquence une augmentation de la production de LH (45). Pour Abbott, cette élévation de la LH serait secondaire à une reprogrammation in-utéro de l'axe hypothalamo-hypophysaire imputable à l'hyperandrogénie ovarienne (46).

Les traitements pharmacologiques de l'hyperinsulinisme pourraient restaurer l'ovulation chez les SOPK anovulatoires (42, 43, 44).

Pour être reconnues comme tel, les patientes atteintes de SOPK devront répondre aux critères diagnostiques de Rotterdam et pourront de manière inconstante présenter un hyperinsulinisme et/ou une sécrétion exagérée de LH.

Mais une population est exclue de la définition du syndrome des ovaires polykystiques, que ce soit la définition de la conférence de consensus de Rotterdam ou celle de la National Institutes of Health (NIH) qui ne retenait pas les critères échographiques. Ce sont les patientes présentant des ovaires micropolykystiques (\geq 12 follicules 2 à 9 mm/ovaire et/ou volume >10 ml) sans trouble du cycle ni hyperandrogénie clinique ou biologique. La prévalence de cette population n'est pas bien définie dans la littérature puisque peu d'études se sont intéressées spécifiquement à ces patientes.

Nous avons vu qu'un aspect micropolykystique des ovaires pouvait être secondaire à une hyperandrogénie ovarienne d'origine endogène ou exogène. Nous avons constaté dans le SOPK que l'hyperandrogénie ovarienne résultait d'une anomalie des cellules thécales.

Peut-on aussi attribuer l'aspect échographique d'ovaires micropolykystiques de ces patientes à un dysfonctionnement des cellules thécales comme pour le SOPK ?

Et dans ce cas, pourquoi ces patientes n'ont-elles pas d'hyperandrogénie ni de trouble du cycle ?

Ces patientes sont-elles atteintes d'anomalies moindres de la stéroïdogénèse ovarienne ?

Ont-elles des taux moyens d'androgènes sériques plus élevés que la population générale ?

L'aspect échographique de leurs ovaires est-il exactement le même que celui des patientes atteintes de SOPK ?

L'AMH sérique est-elle en excès comme dans le SOPK ?

Qu'en est-il du statut métabolique de ces patientes ?

Ont-elles un excès pondéral ou au contraire, l'absence de surpoids peut-il expliquer l'absence d'hyperandrogénie clinique ou biologique ?

Afin de mieux caractériser cette population, nous avons recruté, dans une étude observationnelle, 95 patientes présentant des ovaires micropolykystiques sans hyperandrogénie ni trouble du cycle. Ce recrutement s'est effectué entre 1998 et 2008 dans le service de médecine de reproduction et gynécologie endocrinienne du CHRU de Lille à l'hôpital Jeanne de Flandre. Cette population a été comparée à 95 témoins et à 95 patientes atteintes de SOPK. Ces trois groupes ont été appareillés par l'âge.

Nous avons étudié et comparé aux deux autres populations, les caractéristiques métaboliques, échographiques et hormonales de ces patientes.

Les ovaires multifolliculaires (micropolykystiques) sont-ils des variants d'ovaires normaux possédant juste une particularité échographique sans aucune autre conséquence ou partagent-ils la même étiopathogénie que les ovaires des patientes atteintes de SOPK ?

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Title page :

Polycystic ovaries at ultrasound : normal variant or silent Polycystic Ovary Syndrome?

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Capsule :

PCO is an abnormal condition that differs from controls in particular by AMH serum levels even after adjustment for follicle number, suggesting a granulosa cell abnormality as observed in PCOS

Abstract :

Objective : To study whether polycystic ovaries (PCO) without other criteria of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) are an ovarian appearance without pathological meaning or whether they share with PCOS the same ovarian follicle abnormality.

Design : Observational study.

Setting : Lille University Hospital.

Patient(s) : Three groups of 95 patients, matched for age : controls, patients with ultrasound PCO but no symptom (PCO group) and patients with PCOS, according to the Rotterdam definition.

Intervention(s) : A clinical examination, a fasting serum sampling and a pelvic ultrasound examination were performed between cycle days 2 and 5.

Main outcome measures : Comparative analysis of hormonal, metabolic, and ultrasound parameters.

Results : The differences of mean androgen serum levels between PCOS and PCO groups persisted after controlling for body mass index, waist circumference and insulin. Even after adjustment for follicle number, mean serum anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) level was intermediate in the PCO group between controls and PCOS group, and significantly different from both groups.

Conclusions : PCO is an abnormal condition that differs from controls in particular by AMH serum levels suggesting a granulosa cell abnormality in PCO, as observed in PCOS.

Key Words : Polycystic ovary syndrome, ultrasound, anti-Müllerian hormone, granulosa cells, polycystic ovaries.

Introduction

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the most common cause of anovulation, infertility and hyperandrogenism in women, affecting between 5 and 10 % of women of reproductive age worldwide (1). Since the ASRM/ESHRE-sponsored consensus conference in Rotterdam in 2003 (2), the ultrasound (U/S) criteria for polycystic ovaries (PCO) are now added to the items of the former so-called National Institutes of Health (NIH) definition (3), *i.e.* hyperandrogenism and oligoanovulation.

The inclusion of U/S is subject of controversies because of its apparent lack of specificity. Indeed, U/S features of PCO are observed in 21 to 63 % of apparently normal women (4-8). However, these numbers need some caution. In the study of Polson *et al.* (4) 23 % of the 257 volunteers had PCO and considered themselves to be normal. In fact, 76 % of them had irregular cycles and 6 of the 8 with regular cycle were hirsute. Therefore, women with genuine PCOS were probably present. In the other studies (5, 6, 8), the prevalence of PCO was 22 %, 21 % and 63 % respectively but a large proportion of women with PCO had irregular menstrual cycles or elevated testosterone levels and/or elevated Ferriman-Gallwey scores, thus meeting the Rotterdam criteria for PCOS. In other studies recruiting asymptomatic women with polycystic ovarian morphology, supranormal serum androgen level (9, 10) or clinical hyperandrogenism (7) was not an exclusion criterion. Moreover, in the recent studies (7, 8), advances in ultrasound technology allowing accurate detection of small antral follicles may have contributed to the increase in prevalence. Nevertheless, in all these reports, the distinction between PCO and PCOS was not clear and the criteria defining PCOS were heterogeneous and not consensual. Therefore, studies with a strict selection of women with PCO but without other PCOS criteria are still lacking. In particular, it is still not known whether PCO are an ovarian state without pathological meaning or reflect an abnormality in the ovarian folliculogenesis similar to PCOS.

To address these issues, we included in the present study 3 groups of women having either normal ovaries or PCO, but no symptom in both groups, or PCOS as defined by the Rotterdam criteria (2). The three groups were matched for age as we were keen eliminating the confounding effect of age, knowing that PCOS symptoms and follicle count at U/S decrease with years (7, 8). On the other hand, we did not match our populations for body mass index (BMI) and waist circumference (WC) since we intended to determine to what extent these parameters, along with other indices of insulin resistance (IR), could influence the data.

To avoid artificial increase in the prevalence of PCO when using new ultrasound equipment, patients were recruited before 2008, i.e., before the time when our new ultrasounds were available in our centre.

Patients and Methods :

① PATIENTS

This observational study included three age-matched groups of 95 patients that were recruited between 1998 and 2008 (before the change of our ultrasound equipment) by our Department in our institution. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Lille University Hospital. Informed consent was obtained from patients before their inclusion into the study.

- Women with normal ovaries (controls)

The control population consisted of 95 women without polycystic ovaries at ultrasound. They were referred for infertility because of unexplained (n=35), tubal (n=3) or male (n=57) infertility. Exclusion criteria were a history of menstrual disturbances (*i.e* cycle length either <25 days or >35 days), hirsutism (as assessed by a modified Ferriman and Gallwey score of ≥ 6), abnormal serum level of prolactin, testosterone and/or androstenedione (*i.e* ≥ 0.6 or ≥ 2.2 ng/ml respectively), PCO on U/S (ovarian area >5.5 cm² and/or more than 12 small-sized 2-9 mm subcapsular follicles per ovary). 31,5 % of these patients had a body mass index (BMI) higher than 25.

- Women with PCO

This population consisted of 95 asymptomatic women with PCO. These patients had more than 12 small-sized 2-9 mm subcapsular ovarian follicles per ovary, unilaterally or bilaterally, and/ or ovarian area $>5.5 \text{ cm}^2$. They were referred for infertility because of unexplained (n=33), tubal (n=6), male (n=55) infertility or endometriosis (n=1). Exclusion criteria were a history of menstrual disturbances (*i.e* cycle length either <25 days or >35 days), hirsutism (as assessed by a modified Ferriman and Gallwey score of ≥ 6), abnormal serum level of prolactin, testosterone and/or androstenedione (*i.e* ≥ 0.6 or $\geq 2.2 \text{ ng/ml}$ respectively). 36,6 % of theses patients had a body mass index (BMI) higher than 25.

- Women with PCOS

In this group of 95 patients, the diagnosis of PCOS was based on the association of at least two of three following criteria (2) : **1)** ovulatory disturbance, mainly oligomenorrhea or amenorrhea ; **2)** hyperandrogenism, as defined either clinically by hirsutism (modified Ferriman and Gallwey score ≥ 6), or severe acne/ seborrhea, and/or biologically by a testosterone serum level greater than 0.6 ng/ml and/or androstenedione greater than 2.2 ng/ml ; and **3)** more than 12 follicles in the 2-to 9-mm range in each ovary at ultrasound and/or an ovarian area $> 5.5 \text{ cm}^2$.

Thirteen (13.5 %), 70 (74 %) and 12 (12.5 %) patients presented with amenorrhea, oligomenorrhea or had regular cycles, respectively, as defined by no menses during >3 months, <8 menses in the preceding year or cycle length between 25 and 35 days, respectively. 56,8 % of theses patients had a body mass index (BMI) higher than 25.

58 % of PCOS had the 3 Rotterdam criteria, 32 % had ovulatory disturbance and PCO at ultrasound and 10 % had hyperandrogenism and PCO at ultrasound. No had ovulatory disturbance and hyperandrogenism without PCO.

② METHODS

For these 285 patients, a clinical examination, a fasting serum sampling and a pelvic ultrasound examination were performed between cycle days 2 and 5. In PCOS patients presenting with amenorrhea, menses were induced by the administration of didrogesterone (10 mg/day for 7 days).

- Clinical examination

This exam included an assessment of hirsutism by the method of Ferriman and Gallwey (11) and measurement of WC. The mean BMI (kg/m^2) was calculated and the systolic and diastolic blood pressure (mm Hg) was measured.

- Serum sampling

Estradiol, androstenedione, testosterone, 17-OH-progesterone, DHEAS, LH, FSH, Sex Hormone Binding Globulin (SHBG) and fasting serum insulin (I) levels were measured by immunoassays as described previously (12).

Serum anti-Mullerian hormone (AMH) levels were assessed using the second generation enzyme immunoassay AMH-EIA (ref A16507) provided by Beckman Coulter Immunotech (Villepinte, France) as described previously (13).

The Free Androgen Index (FAI) was expressed as a unit less number, using both total testosterone and SHBG molar concentrations according to the formula $\text{TTx100}/\text{SHBG}$. The quantitative insulin sensitivity check index (QUICKI) was also expressed as a unit less number according to the formula.

HDL-C and triglycerides were measured in our laboratory. The concentration of HDL-C was determined using the enzymatic assay of cholesterol oxidase (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Clinical Diagnostics, Finland). The determination of triglycerides concentration in serum was done using Konelab analyser with a calibrating probe (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Clinical Diagnostics, Finland).

- Pelvic ultrasound examination

U/S examination was performed between cycle days 2 and 5 with a 7 MHz transvaginal transducer (Sonoline Elegra, Siemens). The same machine was used for all the patients from the 3 groups all along the inclusion period but different ultrasonographers performed the examinations. Intra- and between-observer variations were less than 10 %. U/S measurements were taken in real time, according to a standardized protocol, as previously reported (14). All follicles of <9 mm, but >2 mm were counted. Patients with at least one follicle >9 mm in diameter at U/S, or a serum estradiol level > 80pg/mL, were also excluded from the study so as not to confound the data with the presence of a dominant follicle.

3 STATISTICAL METHODS

For the ovarian area and the follicle number, the data used for statistical analysis were the mean of recorded values for the left and right ovaries. Since values from any parameter were not normally distributed, all comparisons between the 3 groups were performed on log values using the Anova test with Bonferoni correction. Covariance analysis was performed with the Pearson test on log values, through the General Linear Model. All statistical procedures were run on SPSS 15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). P<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results :

The clinical, hormonal and U/S data in controls and in patients with PCO and PCOS are presented in Table 1 and 2.

No difference for any metabolic markers (BMI, blood pressure, WC, SHBG, insulin, HDL, LDL, triglycerides, glycaemia/insulin, QUICKI) was found between the control and the PCO groups (Table 1).

In contrast, BMI, WC, I, LDL-C and triglycerides levels were significantly increased in women with PCOS ($p<0.05$) whereas SHBG and HDL-C levels were significantly decreased ($p<0.05$), compared to either normal or PCO group (Table 1). No difference was observed for blood pressure between the 3 groups.

Serum androgen data were not different between controls and patients with PCO (Table 2). All mean values except the one of DHEAS were significantly higher in PCOS compared to PCO and control groups (Table 2). These results did not change after adjustment for BMI, WC and I by covariance analysis (Table 2).

Mean 2-9 mm follicles number and ovarian area were found intermediate in the PCO group, being significantly higher and lower than in controls and in PCOS group, respectively (Table 2, Figure 1A and 1B, respectively). The same pattern was observed with the mean AMH serum level (Table 2, Figure 1C). This last result remained significant after adjustment for the 2-9 follicles number (Table 2).

To study AMH potential role on cycle regularity, we split the PCOS group in 3 sub-groups according to the patients' menstrual cycle abnormality (i.e., either regular cycles, oligomenorrhea or amenorrhea) (n=12, 70 and 13, respectively). After controlling for the 2-9 mm follicles number, the mean AMH serum level appeared similar between women with PCO and eumenorrheic women with PCOS. In both groups, it was significantly higher than in controls and significantly lower than in oligo- or amenorrheic women with PCOS (Figure 2).

Lastly, FSH serum level was significantly higher in controls than in PCO and PCOS groups (Table 2, Figure 1D). However, the significance of the difference between controls and PCO was lost after adjustment for the 2-9 follicles number (Table 2).

Discussion :

Due to our rigorous selection of patient, no trend to clinical or biological hyperandrogenism was observed in our women with PCO, in agreement with the study of Clayton *et al.* (6). However, this data obtained at basal state does not eliminate the possibility of a hidden theca cell dysregulation. Indeed, Chang *et al.* (15) have shown that their women with PCO had an abnormal androgen response to a GnRH agonist test, whereas their baseline androgen levels were similar to controls. Moreover, we have shown after principal component analysis that the ovarian follicle number and serum AMH concentrations are in fact signs of ovarian hyperandrogenism (16).

We hypothesized that this theca cell dysregulation is not expressed in PCO patients because of the absence of overweight and/or the less pronounced hyperinsulinism, knowing their positive effect on the hyperandrogenism of PCOS (17). Indeed, compared to PCOS, our PCO patients had significantly lower mean BMI, waist circumference and fasting serum insulin level, while these parameters were similar than in control group. However, controlling for these parameters did not abolish the difference in mean androgen levels between PCOS and PCO. This indicates no major role of hyperinsulinism in the development of PCOS rather than PCOS, as suggested by Van Hooff *et al.* (18), but this hypothesis needs further support.

Despite the absence of hyperandrogenism in the basal state, we think that PCO should not be considered as a variant of normal ovarian morphology. From the present data, we hypothesized that, in addition to a putative hidden theca cell dysregulation, these women have also a granulosa cell (GC) abnormality. Indeed, we report here that their mean AMH serum level was intermediate between controls and patients with PCOS. This excess seems not only due to a higher number of follicles, since the difference with controls persisted after adjustment for the 2-9 follicles number.

This suggests an excessive secretion of AMH per follicle. This excess could reflect an increased number of GC within each follicle or an over expression of AMH by each GC. Indeed, we and others have previously reported in PCOS an over expression of AMH in either cultured GC (19) or fresh GC obtained at puncture of stimulated follicles (20). Likewise, AMH levels in follicular fluid from unstimulated (21) or stimulated (22) patients with PCOS are higher than normal, suggesting an increased capacity of GC to produce AMH. In the absence of such data in women with PCO, we must admit that our hypothesis remains speculative.

Presumably, this GC abnormality in patients with PCO is too mild to disturb the ovulatory process. Interestingly, in our study, the AMH serum level was similar between the PCO and ovulatory PCOS groups, even after adjustment for 2-9 follicles number. Conversely, both groups had significantly lower mean AMH serum levels than PCOS patients with amenorrhea or oligomenorrhea. Such a gradation of AMH level according to the cycle disturbance has been previously reported by ourselves in PCOS (23). In agreement, Piouka *et al.* (24) found a gradation of AMH serum levels with the degree of severity of PCOS. This result strengthens our previous hypothesis that the AMH excess may inhibit the emergence of a dominant follicle (13). The present data introduces the concept that this phenomenon likely occurs beyond a given threshold that is not reached in women with PCO or ovulatory PCOS.

In agreement, Clayton *et al.* (6) and Hassan *et al.* (25) did not reported deleterious effects of PCO on fertility due probably to the absence of dysovulation in this group. Nevertheless, in the context of assisted reproduction, Sahu *et al.* (26) reported that women with PCO had similar characteristics than women with PCOS in terms of ovarian response to hMG stimulation, oocyte and embryo quality and pregnancy rate. The clinically silent GC abnormality in women with PCO may be involved in such findings.

Lastly, we found no metabolic abnormality in women with PCO, contrary to those with PCOS. This data confirms those obtained in most of the previous studies including series of women with PCO (7, 9, 10, 15, 27, 28).

In conclusion, PCO seems not to be a normal variant. It differs from controls by AMH serum level, suggesting an abnormality of GC as in PCOS. Nevertheless this dysfunction seems too weak to lead to ovulation disturbance, in contrast to PCOS. It is tempting to speculate that PCO and PCOS share some common genetic background but it remains to determine which genetic and/or environmental influence(s) contribute(s) to the phenotypic evolution toward either PCO or PCOS.

TABLE 1

Clinical and metabolic data in controls and in patients with PCO and PCOS.

| | Controls (n=95) | PCO (n=95) | PCOS (n=95) | p* |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| Age (yr) | 29.0 (22.7-35.2) | 29.0 (22.4-35.3) | 29.0 (21.8-35.2) | NS |
| BMI (kg /m²) | 22.9 (18.5-35.4) | 23.0 (118.5-35.9) | 26.5 (18.0-41.0) | b,c |
| Systolic blood pressure (mm/hg) | 110.0 (99.0-126.0) | 110.0 (100.0-130.0) | 110.0 (95.0-130.0) | NS |
| Diastolic blood pressure (mm/hg) | 70.0 (59.0-86.0) | 70.0 (60.0-80.0) | 70.0 (60.0-85.0) | NS |
| WC (cm) | 75.0 (63.5-104.3) | 76.0 (63.0-110.4) | 88.0 (65.7-122.3) | b,c |
| SHBG (nmol/L) | 53.6 (25.3-90.6) | 43.9 (20.6-100.3) | 33.8 (13.2-82.8) | b,c |
| Glycemia (g/L) | 0.86 (0.75-0.95) | 0.84 (0.7-1.04) | 0.81 (0.69-0.99) | c |
| Insulin (mIU/L) | 3.6 (1-10.8) | 4.5 (0.9-13.6) | 6 (1.9-17) | b,c |
| QUICKI | 0.69 (0.51-1.11) | 0.63 (0.47-1.17) | 0.61 (0.46-0.84) | b,c |
| G/I | 0.242 (0.076-0.922) | 0.183 (0.57-0.781) | 0.143 (0.05-0.406) | b,c |
| HDL cholesterol (g/L) | 0.60 (0.38-0.85) | 0.60 (0.39-0.91) | 0.52 (0.32-0.77) | b,c |
| LDL cholesterol (g/L) | 0.99 (0.6-1.62) | 0.99 (0.54-1.5) | 1,09 (0.63-1.61) | b |
| Triglycerides (g/L) | 0.57 (0.26-1.07) | 0.58 (0.31-1.25) | 0.72 (0.42-2.21) | b,c |

Values are expressed as median with 5-95th percentiles in parentheses.

PCO : polycystic ovary ; PCOS : polycystic ovary syndrome ; BMI : body mass index ; SHBG : sex hormone- binding globulin ; G/I : glycemia/insulin ; QUICKI : quantitative insulin sensitivity check index ; WC : waist circumference.

*: by Anova on log values with Bonferroni correction:

a : PCO compared with Controls, p<0.05

b : PCO compared with PCOS, p<0.05

c : Controls compared with PCOS, p<0.05

TABLE 2

Androgens, gonadotropins, AMH and ovarians data in controls and in patients with PCO and PCOS.

| | Controls (n=95) | PCO (n=95) | PCOS (n=95) | p* | p* after adjustment for BMI, WC or I | p* after adjustment for the 2-9 mm follicle number |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|---|---|
| Testosterone (ng/mL) | 0.23 (0.09- 0.46) | 0.26 (0.08- 0.46) | 0.40 (0.13-0.73) | b,c | b,c | NC |
| FAI | 1.56 (0.41- 3.70) | 1.73 (0.51- 5.27) | 3.84 (0.88-13.7) | b,c | b,c | NC |
| Androstenedione e (ng/mL) | 1.25 (0.73- 1.98) | 1.50 (0.6-2.12) | 1.74 (0.9-3.47) | b,c | b,c | NC |
| 17-OH-P (ng/mL) | 0.48 (0.24- 1.13) | 0.52 (0.27- 0.94) | 0.64 (0.3-1.24) | b,c | b,c | NC |
| DHEAS (mmol/L) | 4.0 (2.38-8.24) | 4.6 (1.7-9.74) | 5.1 (1.76-10.62) | NS | NS | NC |
| LH (IU/L) | 3.8 (1.8-7.9) | 4.3 (2.0-8.4) | 5.7 (2.3-13.7) | b,c | b,c | NC |
| FSH (IU/L) | 6.5 (4.3-9.9) | 5.9 (4.4-8.1) | 5.5 (4.0-8.8) | a,c | NC | c |
| E2 (pg/mL) | 33 (20-62) | 34 (20-60) | 35 (19-59) | NS | NC | NS |
| AMH (pmol/L) | 19.8 (8.5-50.8) | 33.6 (16.6- 71.4) | 63.3 (26.6- 127.7) | a,b, c | NC | a,b,c |
| Ovarian area (cm²) | 3.7 (2.6-5.2) | 4.8 (3.2-6.4) | 5.4 (3.9-8.5) | a,b, c | NC | a,b,c |
| 2-9 FN | 7.5 (4.0-10.1) | 17.5 (11.4- 29.6) | 22.5 (13.9-43.1) | a,b, c | NC | NA |

Values are expressed as median with 5-95th percentiles in parentheses.

PCO : polycystic ovary ; PCOS : polycystic ovary syndrome ; 17-OH-P : 17- hydroxy-progesterone ; DHEAS : dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate ; LH : luteinizing hormone ; FAI : free androgen index ; FSH : follicle-stimulating-hormone ; E2 : estradiol ; AMH : anti-mullerian hormone ; 2-9 FN : 2-9 mm follicles number ; NA : not applicable ; NC : not calculed. To convert DHEAS in nanograms per milliliter, divide by 0.002714. To convert AMH in nanograms per milliliter, divide by 7.14.

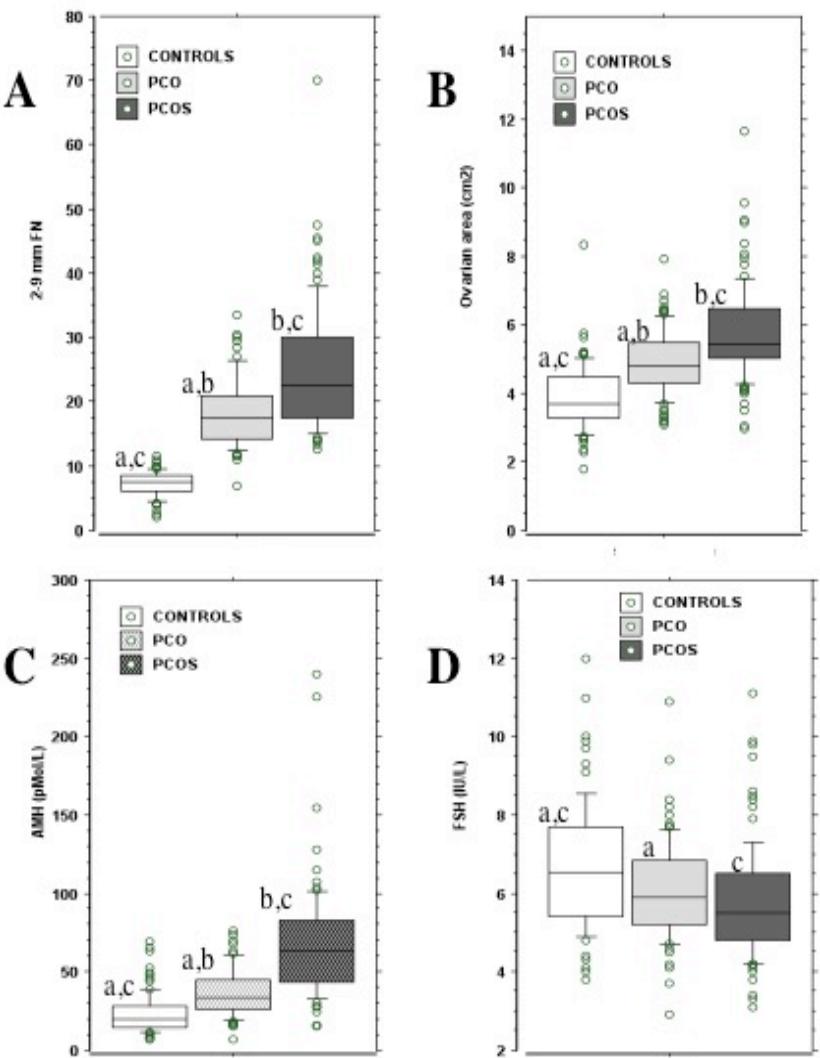
*: by Anova with Bonferroni correction on log values:

a : PCO compared with Controls, p<0.05

b : PCO compared with PCOS, p<0.05

c : Controls compared with PCOS, p<0.05

Figure 1

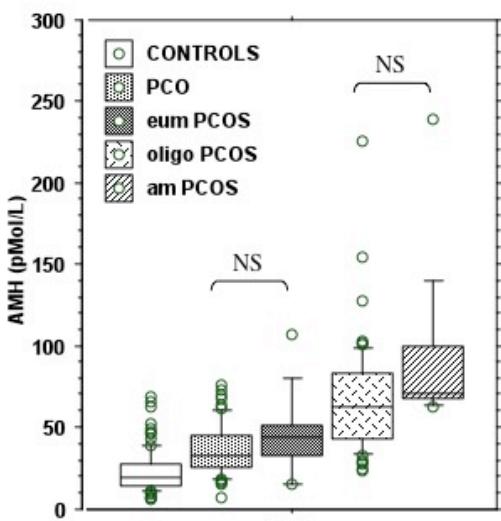


Box-and-whisker plots showing the distribution of individual values for 2-9 mm follicles number (FN) (1A), ovarian area (1B), AMH (1C) and FSH (1D) in controls, women with PCO and patients with PCOS. Horizontal small bars represent the 5th-95th percentiles range, and the boxes indicate the 25th-75th percentiles range. The horizontal line in each box corresponds to the median. Open circles represents values beyond the 95th percentile.

Comparisons between groups were performed by Anova with Bonferroni correction on log values :

- a : PCO compared with Controls, p<0.05
- b : PCO compared with PCOS, p<0.05
- c : Controls compared with PCOS, p<0.05

Figure 2



Box-and-whisker plots showing the distribution of individual values for AMH in controls, women with PCO and patients with PCOS according to their menstrual status. Horizontal small bars represent the 5th-95th percentiles range, and the boxes indicate the 25th-75th percentiles range. The horizontal line in each box corresponds to the median. Open circles represents values beyond the 95th percentile.

Pair comparisons between groups were performed by Anova with Bonferroni correction on log values. All were significant ($p<0.0001$), except comparisons between PCO and eumenorrheic PCOS and between oligo- and amenorrheic PCOS sub-groups (NS: non significant).

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Conclusion

Notre étude s'est intéressée aux patientes possédant des ovaires micropolykystiques sans hyperandrogénie (clinique ou biologique) ni trouble du cycle. Nous constatons que ces patientes n'ont pas plus d'anomalie métabolique ou androgénique à l'état basal qu'une population témoin. Cette absence d'anomalie androgénique n'est pas attribuable uniquement à l'absence de troubles métaboliques. L'aspect échographique des ovaires de notre population diffère de celui des patientes SOPK par le nombre plus modéré de follicules en excès et des surfaces ovariennes plus petites mais supérieures à celle des témoins. Ceci nous fait émettre l'hypothèse d'un dysfonctionnement plus modéré de la steroïdogénèse ovarienne que dans le SOPK. De plus, le taux sérique d'AMH ajusté aux nombres de follicules, intermédiaire entre la population témoin et le SOPK dysovulatoire permet de suspecter également un dysfonctionnement des cellules de la granulosa proche de celui du SOPK. Les ovaires micropolykystiques en dehors du syndrome et le SOPK pourraient présenter une étiopathogénie commune mais plus modérée pour ce premier. D'autres études semblent nécessaires afin de déterminer le poids de la génétique et l'influence de l'environnement sur ces différences phénotypiques.

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Titre de Thèse :

Ovaies multifolliculaires : variant de la normale ou syndrome des ovaires polykystiques silencieux ?

RESUME

Les ovaires micropolykystiques en dehors du syndrome (SOPK) ne sont pas juste une particularité morphologique. Le nombre de follicules, les surfaces ovariennes, et le taux sérique d'hormone anti-mullérienne (AMH) sont intermédiaires entre celui des témoins et celui des SOPK. Des anomalies primitives de la stéroïdogénèse proches de celles rencontrées dans le SOPK mais plus modérées pourraient être présentes dans les ovaires de ces patientes. Leur taux d'AMH sérique ajusté au nombre de follicules en excès est supérieur à celui des témoins. Ce taux est identique à celui des SOPK ovulatoires et inférieur à celui des SOPK dysovulatoires. Ceci permet de suspecter également un dysfonctionnement de la granulosa proche de celui du SOPK. Le poids de l'environnement ou de la génétique sur ces phénotypes reste à déterminer.

MOTS-CLES

Syndrome des ovaires polykystiques, ovaires polykystiques à l'échographie, AMH, cellules de la granulosa, stéroïdogénèse.