# Diagnostic Snapshot



## What Is Happening to This Patient With a Rare Leukemia?

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Authors' disclosures of conflicts of interest are found at the end of this article.

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#### **Abstract**

Blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN) is a rare cancer with primary sites in the skin and bone marrow and secondary sites in the lymph nodes, spleen, and central nervous system. First described in the 1990s, these cells express a CD123 antigen hinting at a plasmacytoid dendritic cell origin. A CD123-directed cytotoxin called SL-401 was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency. During BPDCN treatment, a lifethreatening syndrome can occur, but early awareness leads to positive patient outcomes.

#### **HISTORY**

Mr. Jones is a 68-year-old male with a rare leukemia called blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN) who was recently treated with a CD123-directed cytotoxin, tagraxofusp (Elzonris; SL-401). He presents to the emergency center with fever (38.4°C), headaches, a transient nosebleed, excessive fatigue and malaise, shortness of breath, nausea, abdominal edema and pain, and a substantial weight gain in 24 hours. He also reports edema of the lower extremities and low blood pressure (88/58 mmHg) using a home blood pressure monitor. He has had a runny nose, dyspnea, and cough for 24 hours.

A review of systems shows that he has been positive for fever for 24 hours, has facial edema, abdominal edema, pedal edema, nonproductive cough, runny nose, shortness of breath, palpitations, nausea, and vomited once. Mr. Jones denies

diarrhea, hematuria, musculoskeletal complaints, or syncopal episodes. An initial evaluation shows vital signs are blood pressure 82/54 mmHg, temperature 38.7°C, heart rate 110 beats per minute (bpm), respirations 26 per minute, oxygen saturation 89% on room air, and weight increased by 7.7 lbs in 1 day. On physical examination, Mr. Jones is an ill-appearing male, alert and oriented × 3 who responds appropriately to verbal commands but needs the assistance of a wheelchair to ambulate due to severe painful pedal edema. He is notably short of breath with increased respiratory effort and a runny nose.

### PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

A head, eyes, ears, nose, and throat examination reveals periorbital and facial edema. Pupils are equal, round, and reactive to light and accommodation. The oral mucosa is intact, and nasal mucus

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is clear. The neck is supple without nuchal rigidity. Four previously present BPDCN lesions on his back are red and painful with skin breakdown. There are small ecchymoses on his arms. His lungs have fine crackles in lower lobes bilaterally. Decreased inspiratory effort is noted. His heart has a regular rhythm but at a fast rate. His abdomen is distended with tenderness on palpation. Hypoactive bowel sounds are present. There is no palpable organomegaly. The ankles are more swollen than the knees. He has peripheral edema 3+ to the bilateral lower extremities. There is generalized weakness and an altered gait, and no acute tremors noted. He ambulates with the assistance of a wheelchair due to pedal pain and not because of focal deficits. There is no notable lymphadenopathy, and he has appropriate mood and affect.

#### **FURTHER ASSESSMENTS**

A complete blood count shows white blood count 2.2 K/ $\mu$ L, absolute neutrophil count 1.0 K/ $\mu$ L, hemoglobin 10.2 g/dL, hematocrit 47.5%, and platelets 80 K/ $\mu$ L. A complete metabolic panel shows albumin 2.0 g/dL, total protein 5.8 g/dL,

creatinine 2.2 mg/dL/blood urea nitrogen 35 mg/ dL, and liver function tests are normal. A chest x-ray reveals mild pleural effusion but no pulmonary infiltrates or opacities bilaterally. The superior vena cava is not obstructed. A CT of the chest without contrast confirms the chest x-ray findings and does not show other abnormalities. An electrocardiogram shows a sinus rhythm with tachycardia (112 bpm). A CT of the head without contrast shows no intracranial abnormalities. A CT of the abdomen shows that the inferior vena cava is not obstructed. He has mild ascites but no tumors or infection. In a urinalysis, the urine is hazy in appearance but has otherwise normal findings. An echocardiogram shows left ventricular ejection fraction of 55% and no pericardial effusion. Vascular endothelial growth factor plasma levels are elevated. Brain natriuretic peptide is mildly elevated. Thyroid function tests are normal. Lactic acidosis is mildly elevated. Procalcitonin is normal. A coagulation panel is normal. A COVID-19 test is negative. The respiratory viral panel is positive for rhinovirus. C-reactive protein and urea are elevated.

WHAT IS THE CORRECT DIAGNOSIS FOR MR. JONES?

A Sepsis

COVID-19

Pneumonia
Superior vena cava syndrome
Capillary leak syndrome

#### WHAT IS THE CORRECT DIAGNOSIS FOR MR. JONES?

- A Sepsis
- B COVID-19
- **C** Pneumonia
- Superior vena cava syndrome
- E Capillary leak syndrome (correct answer)
- A Sepsis. Fever and mild neutropenia are worrisome given potential bacterial entry sites at Mr. Jones' BPDCN skin lesions, but the most objective data do not support sepsis. His lactic acid is only mildly elevated, while his procalcitonin is normal. His low blood pressure is likely not from sepsis, but to be prudent, broad-spectrum IV antibiotics are given within 1 hour of arrival in the emergency center while further assessments are completed (CDC, 2021).
- **COVID-19.** The COVID-19 test is negative by polymerase chain reaction (Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, 2022).
- **Pneumonia.** Despite dyspnea, cough, and adventitious sounds on auscultation, his chest x-ray shows no pulmonary infiltrates or opacities (CDC, 2020).
- **Superior vena cava syndrome.** Despite his upper body edema, his superior vena cava is not obstructed in chest imaging (Cancer.Net, 2020).
- Capillary leak syndrome (correct answer). Mr. Jones was recently treated with tagraxofusperzs (SL-401), a CD123-directed cytotoxin, for his BPDCN. So far, it is the only US Food and Drug Administration–approved front-line and relapsed/refractory treatment for BPDCN. A side effect of this medication (which occurs in 21% of patients and resolves in a median of 5 days) is capillary leak syndrome (CLS), which is life-threatening but has good outcomes when diagnosed and treated promptly (Pemmaraju et al., 2019, 2021; Stemline Therapeutics, Inc., 2021).

Capillary leak syndrome (or systemic capillary leak syndrome) is characterized by capillary hyperpermeability leading to edema or anasarca,

hypotension, hypoalbuminemia, hemoconcentration, and occasionally can lead to hypovolemic shock with multiorgan failure (Siddall et al., 2017). Because signs and symptoms are nonspecific, CLS is often underdiagnosed or diagnosis is often delayed (NORD, 2020; Siddall et al., 2017). Capillary leak syndrome is not to be confused with cytokine release syndrome, which has some similar signs and symptoms.

Capillary leak syndrome can be idiopathic (also called Clarkson's disease) or secondary to certain autoimmune diseases, infections (sepsis), snakebites, cancers, and drugs (Aneja, 2021; Fuentes Fernandez et al., 2017; Jeong et al., 2019; Massafra et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2021; Siddall et al., 2017). The following has been observed in cases of CLS: increased levels of monoclonal proteins, anti-inflammatory mediators, interleukin-2, and vascular endothelial growth factor, as well as endothelial cell apoptosis (Aneja, 2021). Idiopathic CLS has low prevalence (< 1/1,000,000), with approximately 260 cases reported worldwide (Aneja, 2021; NORD, 2020).

For secondary CLS, approximately 50% of cases in patients with cancer are related to anticancer drugs, but the underlying mechanisms are not well known. Furthermore, 45 antineoplastic and immunomodulatory drugs have been associated with CLS, with episodes occurring at a median of 8 days after drug administration. Most druginduced CLS occurrences are serious adverse events (86%), with a 27% mortality rate (related or unrelated to CLS; Mertz et al., 2019; Percik et al., 2021; Polishchuk et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2018).

Since there are no standard recommendations for diagnosis and treatment of drug-induced CLS, some providers use their institutional guidelines or follow guidelines from the prescribing information. Given the complexity of the types of CLS and based on our practice as leukemia advanced practitioners who treat this patient population, we have summarized the data in an algorithm we created titled "Algorithmic Approach to Diagnosis and Management of Capillary Leak Syndrome" (Figure 1). The aim of this algorithm is to outline initial assessments and treatment for CLS, because early intervention and appropriate management help to reduce drug-induced CLS mortality.

#### **TREATMENT**

Based on information gathered during SL-401 clinical trials, in the prescribing information, from our clinical practice, in a literature review, and summarized in the algorithm, the treatment includes (1) intravenous albumin to correct low albumin level that is causing the generalized edema and weight gain; (2) fluid resuscitation to resolve acute kidney failure, hemoconcentration, and hypotension; (3) diuretics to resolve fluid overload, and (4) glucocorticoids.

Mr. Jones and any patient experiencing this type of CLS must be monitored closely with frequent labs and vital signs until they are stable for discharge. They should also have close outpatient monitoring after discharge.

#### **Disclosures**

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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#### Capillary Leak Syndrome: A Diagnosis of Exclusion Signs and symptoms Vital signs/weight Initial labs Hypotension, weight gain, fever Hypoalbuminemia, hemoconcentration, Oliquria or diuresis, edema/anasarca, dyspnea. syncope, hypovolemic shock acute renal failure **Evaluation for Capillary Leak Syndrome** Detailed H&P: Was patient recently treated with drug(s) that can cause CLS? Checkpoint inhibitors mAbs Chemotherapy Other agents Rituximab, alemtuzumab Gemcitabine, clofarabine, Nivolumab, pembrolizumab Such as tagraxofusp, interleukins, adriamycin, cisplatin, oxaliplatin, G-CSF, CAR T cells cyclophosphamide NO and if it does not coincide NO: YES: with other conditions: Evaluate for CLS that coincides with other Evaluate for idiopathic CLS (also Evaluate for drug-induced CLS conditions OR for conditions with similar called Clarkson's disease) presentation to CLS Labs/Imaging Labs **Imaging** Labs/Imaging CXR, ECHO: usually (same as drug-induced CLS) Adrenal insufficiency: cortisol levels CMP, uric acid Prodromal fatigue, dizziness, Urinalysis: normal normal at first CHF: ECHO, urinalysis (positive protein) CBC: elevated hematocrit In some cases flu-like signs and symptoms, Surgery OR snake bites OR COVID-19 OR ricin imaging could later BNP mild then rapid onset reveal pulmonary Pancreatic insufficiency: low albumin, edema, TFTs: normal Rhabdomyolysis, edema from fluid VEGF plasma: elevated compartment syndrome, CK: elevated in replacement pleural and pericardial Sepsis: blood and urine culture, lactic acid, chest imaging rhabdomyolysis effusion can be seen CRP and urea: elevated Autoimmune diseases: Kawasaki disease, Siögren syndrome, systemic sclerosis, polymyositis, Blood, urine cultures: Management normal antiphospholipid antibody syndrome 1. Diuretics: if pleural Management Procalcitonin: normal Hereditary angioma due to loss of C1 inhibitor: effusions or 1. Spontaneous recovery in Coagulation tests: PT/ cutaneous and gastrointestinal edema usually pericardial effusion some cases PTT/D-dimer/fibrinogen or pulmonary 2. Initial resuscitation and Post-HSCT engraftment syndrome edema due to fluid stabilization: secure airway, Hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis resuscitation and stabilize respiratory status, Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome Management vasopressors correct hypoxemia Heme-oncology: acute promyelocytic leukemia Fluid resuscitation 2. Antibiotics: 3. Conservative IV fluids to (differentiation syndrome), polycythemia vera IV albumin if pulmonary correct hypoperfusion/ Viral hemorrhagic fevers hypovolemia Steroids: glucocorticoids infiltrates Toxic shock syndrome: fever, low BP, positive 4. IVIG (best for nivolumab) 4. IV albumin blood culture 5. Vasopressors 5. Diuretics: prevents Gleich syndrome: recurrent angioedema, 6. Blood product intravascular volume oliguria, weight gain, eosinophilia, urticaria, transfusions overload/pulmonary edema pruritis, fever Premedications: or compartment syndrome Famotidine IV and 6. Antitumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$ diphenhydramine (e.g., infliximab) IV (histamine as 7. No steroids Management inflammatory mediator) Treatment of underlying/coinciding condition (s) Methylprednisolone IV, 9. Renal filtration if necessary Sepsis: Initiate sepsis protocol (IV antibiotics, IV acetaminophen 10. Prophylactic monthly IVIG or fluids, vasopressors, epinephrine, etc.) Anti-IL-6/cvtokine theophylline or terbutaline antagonist such as or aminophylline tocilizumab or sarilumab (for mAbs, CPIs)

**Figure.** Algorithmic approach to diagnosis and management of capillary leak syndrome. BNP = brain natriuretic peptide; BP = blood pressure; CAR = chimeric antigen receptor; CBC = complete blood count; CHF = congestive heart failure; CK = creatine kinase; CLS = capillary leak syndrome; CMP = comprehensive metabolic panel; CPI = checkpoint inhibitor; CRP = C-reactive protein; CXR = chest radiography; ECHO = echocardiography; G-CSF = granulocyte colony-stimulating factor; H&P = history and physical; HCT = hematocrit; HSCT = hematopoietic stem cell transplant; IL = interleukin; IV = intravenous; IVIG = intravenous immunoglobulin; labs = laboratory assessments; mAbs = monoclonal antibodies; premed = premedication; PT = prothrombin time; PTT = partial thromboplastin time; s/e = side effect; TFT = thyroid function tests; VEGF = vascular endothelial growth factor.