Frequency and Trends of Occupational Asthma Due to Toluene Diisocyanate: A Critical Review

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In recent years, occupational asthma has become the most frequent occupational lung disease in many countries. Reports and statements on the frequency of occupational asthma due to isocyanates are quite contradictory. In order to clarify the issue, a critical review of the medical literature of the past half century worldwide has been performed, with special emphasis on toluene diisocyanate (TDI) as the main representative of the isocyanate family. Nine longitudinal workplace studies of 2,751 persons under risk allow calculation of incidences of occupational asthma due to toluene diisocyanate. Annual incidences had repeatedly been above five percent before 1980, and have decreased to zero to 0.7 percent since 1980. There is a downward trend during the last half century that clearly parallels the downward trend of toluene diisocyanate exposure in some studies.

Prevalences of occupational asthma due to toluene diisocyanate can be estimated from 10 cross-sectional studies, based on 788 persons. Prevalences had repeatedly been above 10 percent before 1985, and have been mostly between zero and 10 percent in recent years.

Keywords Toluene Diisocyanate (TDI), Occupational Asthma, Incidence, Prevalence, Trends

In recent years, occupational asthma (OA) has become the most frequent occupational lung disease in many countries. Among the many agents that may cause OA, the isocyanates (IC) have gained wide attention. As far as the frequency of OA due to isocyanates is concerned, the medical literature is quite contradictory: On the one hand, prevalences of up to 85 percent and increasing annual incidences of more than 10 percent have been reported, and isocyanate asthma has been considered the most common type of OA. On the other hand, declining numbers of isocyanate asthma with prevalences and annual incidences down to zero percent have been observed, and isocyanate asthma has been shown to be much less common than OA due to flour, amines, platinum salts, and other agents.

For a long time, toluene diisocyanate (TDI) has been the main representative of the isocyanate family. This review, therefore, concentrates on OA caused by TDI (TDI-A).

METHODS

The frequency of OA can be derived from four sources: workforce-based studies, surveillance schemes, compensation statistics, and disease registers. The latter three usually treat the isocyanate family as an entity; besides, they are very often unaware of the number of persons at risk. Therefore, the frequency of TDI-A can be derived mainly from TDI-workforce-based health studies.

We carefully searched through our archives, which contain the complete medical literature on IC health effects since the first publication in 1951. There have been many reports on lung function and immunology. However, data on the frequency of TDI-A are rare, often hidden, and incomplete. We finally selected nine longitudinal studies and 10 cross-sectional studies that allow the calculation of incidences (occurrence of new cases in a population over a time period) and prevalences (proportion of a population affected by disease at a certain time point) of TDI-A.

Some of these studies have been published by more than one paper; in such cases, the most relevant peer-reviewed final publication will be quoted here (e.g., references 15 and 16). For the calculation of incidences and prevalences, this review considers only those publications that contain information on OA exclusively due to TDI.

The decision whether or not a study should be included in this review was quite difficult in some cases because of insufficient data. There are no absolute criteria for such a decision in "borderline" studies, and the decision, therefore, may remain somewhat subjective and debatable. However, in the results section of this review, relevant peculiarities of borderline studies will be addressed.

The calculated numbers for incidences and prevalences, too, are not unequivocal in some cases, depending on (1) the chosen size of the workforce (initial, average, or total size; consideration of the whole group or of subcohorts: inclusion or exclusion
of newcomers and leavers); (2) the chosen time period for the calculation of average annual incidences (whole study period or fractions thereof); and (3) the validity of the diagnosis "TDI-A" (suspected vs. proven cases).

As far as the size of the workforces in longitudinal studies is concerned, this review adopts the numbers upon which the individual author has based his calculation. Different use of any of the mentioned parameters may cause discrepancies between this review and others.

RESULTS

Incidence of TDI-Asthma and Trends

Table I lists the selected nine longitudinal studies in chronological order of their publication. The studies are based on a total workforce of 2,751 persons under risk, and they cover a 38-year time period from 1954 to 1992.

As can be seen, there are great differences between the average annual incidences of TDI-A. This is due to the following variables:

- Current and previous TDI exposure (cf. 23)
- Cohort size and selection (e.g., inclusion or exclusion of persons with pre-existing bronchial asthma or atopy).
- Length of observation period (During short observation periods, a fluctuation of case numbers may play an undue role.)
- Validity of diagnosis—This review distinguishes between three degrees of validity:
  - "Self-reported, work-related symptoms," which may bear little relation to the clinical diagnosis.
  - "MD opinion," which focuses on the subjective interpretation of personal and occupational history;
  - "Clinical evidence," which is corroborated by objective data such as spirometry, serial peakflow, immunological parameters, or inhalation challenge tests;
  - Current and previous TDI exposure; and
  - Cohort size and selection (e.g., inclusion or exclusion of persons with pre-existing bronchial asthma or atopy).

Some papers deserve specific comments. Woodbury mentioned two cases of TDI-A and five "possible cases" (the latter were not included here because of missing diagnostic details). The Adams study may have overestimated the incidence of TDI-A: Any employee who was reassigned to another production unit because of respiratory signs and symptoms was counted as a case of "TDI sensitization," thus, it could have been difficult to distinguish acute irritant from asthmatic responses. Incidentally, the annual incidence rate of TDI-A was 18 percent for the first year of employment and 2.3 percent thereafter. The study by Porter et al. is a good example of different annual incidences that can be calculated from the very same data: the average annual incidence of TDI-A for the whole 17-year study period is 0.9 percent. If we break up the study period into several fractions, the resulting average annual incidences are 1.1 percent for the period of 1957-1971, and zero percent for the period of 1972-1974 (see Table I), or steadily declining annual incidences from 2 percent in 1957 down to zero percent in 1972-1974 (see Figure 1).

Several reports with inconsistent results have been published on the Tulane study, which was conducted during 1973-1978. According to Butcher et al., the average annual incidence of "clinical sensitivity" was 1 percent, while Weill et al. and Diem et al. reported 0.9 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively, as the average annual rate of "clinical TDI asthmatic reactors" per annum.

The differences are obviously due to (1) different criteria for the diagnosis of TDI-A and (2) differences in the size of the study population used for the calculations (inclusion or exclusion of newcomers and leavers). For this review, the Diem et al. figures have been used because this publication was the final one.

The paper by Omae must be carefully interpreted. On one hand, it mentions six cases of "latent or subclinical asthma," that obviously had developed during long-term TDI exposure prior to the study. On the other hand, these cases remained "silent" during the two-year longitudinal study, with low TDI exposures, and no new cases of TDI-A were registered during the study period. Thus, a zero percent annual incidence of TDI-A must be calculated for the study period.

The Jones et al. study reported a total of 12 cases of TDI-A as observed during the study period: six were proven by specific inhalation challenge, and six were probable cases. However, all six proven cases had developed symptoms prior to the start of the study and were thus prevalent cases. We quote the six probable cases in this review, accounting for the very high medical standard of the study.

The largest longitudinal study has been conducted in the United Kingdom, and several reports have been published. We adopted the data supplied by the final Clark et al. paper. It should be noted that six of 18 cases counted as TDI-A had upper airway symptoms only, and that none complained of severe wheeze and breathlessness.

As can be seen, the average annual incidences of TDI-A had been as high as 2.7 to 5.5 percent in the early days of TDI production and use. Annual incidences have decreased to 0.3 to 0.7 percent since the late 1970s. Zero percent annual incidences have been observed. There is no obvious difference between TDI manufacture and flexible foam production. Most of the data come from the United States. There is no significant difference between the European study and the American studies.

Figure 1 illustrates the quoted annual incidences plotted against the time period of their observation. A general downward
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Cohort size (# of persons at risk)</th>
<th>Industrial process</th>
<th>Study type, observation period</th>
<th>Criteria for the diagnosis of TDI asthma</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Average annual incidence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woodbury,(17) 1956</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Flexible foam production</td>
<td>1.5 year retros., 1954–1955</td>
<td>MD opinion</td>
<td>Frequent spills</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamson,(18) 1965</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>TDI research and development</td>
<td>1.5 year retros., 1962–1963</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td>Frequent spills</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams,(19) 1975</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>TDI manufacture</td>
<td>9 year prospect., 1961–1970</td>
<td>MD opinion and spirometry</td>
<td>Frequent overexposures</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diem et al.,(15) 1982</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>TDI manufacture</td>
<td>5 year prospect., 1973–1978</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td>Frequent pre-existing respiratory symptoms; 50% of asthma cases after major spills</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omae,(20) 1984</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>TDI manufacture and research</td>
<td>2 year prospect., 1980–1982</td>
<td>MD opinion and spirometry</td>
<td>High attrition rate</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones et al.,(21) 1992</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>Flexible foam production</td>
<td>5 year prospect., 1982–1986</td>
<td>MD opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark et al.,(16) 1998</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>Flexible foam production</td>
<td>5 year retros., 1981–1986</td>
<td>Self-reported symptoms</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE I
Workplace data on the incidence of TDI asthma
trend over the past half century is obvious, in spite of the fact that
the average annual incidence during a longitudinal study period
has often been plotted as a horizontal bar for the whole study
period. The downward trend is quite conspicuous in the two
studies that estimated the incidence of TDI-A within a certain
workforce for different time periods.\(^{(12,22)}\)

Prevalence of TDI-Asthma and Trends

In the medical literature worldwide, 10 relevant cross-
sectional studies have been found that allow the calculation of
prevalences of TDI-A. The publications report on a total work-
force of 788 persons at risk, and they cover a 38-year period
from 1954--1992. Table II lists these studies in chronological
order of their publication.\(^{(2,13,26--33)}\)

The validity of most of these studies is rather limited: small cohorts prevail.\(^{(2,13,26,27,30,32)}\) some cohorts are highly
selected.\(^{(26,27)}\) some represent survivor populations,\(^{(27,28)}\) several studies rely on self-reported symptoms,\(^{(2,29,31)}\) the industrial processes are quite heterogeneous, and TDI exposures vary
considerably.\(^{(2,13)}\)

Some studies require specific comments. Two Asian
studies\(^{(2,13)}\) report prevalences of TDI-A among very small sub-
cohorts with quite high TDI exposures (up to 112 ppb); at these TDI concentrations, it should have been difficult to dis-
tinguish between irritant and allergic reactions without confir-
mation by specific inhalation challenge.

The study by White et al.\(^{(28)}\) is difficult to interpret. Thirteen
out of 68 persons (19\%) reported asthmatic symptoms prior to
the use of the TDI-laminated nylon foam fabric. Positive inhala-
tion challenges by handling the TDI-laminated nylon fabric were
observed in three persons, and a positive exposure test during
painting a TDI varnish was observed in one person. All these
challenges were performed with unknown concentrations; thus,
it should have been difficult to distinguish between reactions
due to nonspecific bronchial hyperreactivity and those due to
ture TDI-A. This review quotes the authors’ assumption that
TDI-A developed in one subject.

In view of all the quoted limitations, it is not surprising that
the reported prevalences of TDI-A scatter over a wide range
between zero and 85\%. During the past 15 years, measures
of prevalences between zero and 10\% have been observed

FIGURE 1
TABLE II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Cohort size (# of persons at risk)</th>
<th>Industrial process</th>
<th>Criteria for the diagnosis of TDI asthma</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Prevalence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruckner et al.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>TDI manufacture</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td>Selected cohort</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franzinelli et al.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Foam production</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td>Survivor population</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White et al.</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>Sewing laminated nylon</td>
<td>MD opinion</td>
<td>Frequent pre-existing</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>respiratory symptoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kido</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Lacquer varnishing</td>
<td>Self-reported symptoms</td>
<td>Survivor population</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belin et al.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Foam production</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venables et al.</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>Foam coating of steel</td>
<td>Mostly self-reported symptoms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang et al.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Adhesive tape production</td>
<td>Self-reported symptoms</td>
<td>Small subgroups with</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mean exposures of 12,</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21, and 47 ppb TDI</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang et al.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Varnish application</td>
<td>MD opinion</td>
<td>Small subgroups with</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>mean exposures of 44,</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and 112 ppb TDI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee-Phoon</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Foam production</td>
<td>MD opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim et al.</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Paint application</td>
<td>Clinical evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Workplace data on the prevalence of TDI asthma

at workplaces with mean TDI exposures below 15 ppb. A strong correlation between the prevalence of TDI-A and TDI exposure has been suggested by two studies. (2, 13)

DISCUSSION

This review analyzes the results of studies that are quite heterogeneous in regard to population, validity of TDI-A diagnosis, industry branch, and TDI exposure. The picture is irregular and laden with inaccuracies and bias, but it is the best that can be done with the information currently available.

The presented data show an obvious downward trend of the incidence of TDI-A over the past half century. The search for the causes of this development may give clues to better prevention. Several reasons seem possible. The downward trend of TDI-A correlates closely with the downward trend of TDI exposure. (12, 22) Reduced TDI exposure, therefore, appears to be of prime importance. An increasing tendency toward earlier removal of persons with workplace-related respiratory symptoms could theoretically play a role, but there is no indication of such a tendency. A reduction of the population at risk (due to dismissals in times of economic recession) would lead to fewer new cases; the incidence, however, (as the ratio of both entities) would remain unaffected. Reduced TDI manufacture and use as a causal factor can be ruled out. The worldwide production of TDI has steadily increased during the past half century. (34)

The prevalence of TDI-A has also been addressed in this review because this metric has played an important role in past discussions. Certainly, "prevalence" is the traditional metric for the frequency of a disease within a population. However, for the estimation of the frequency of OA, this metric is now considered less reliable because, on one hand it registers asthma cases that have remained at the workplace for years, and on the other hand it fails to register those cases that have left the workplace.

It is interesting to note that the downward trend of TDI-A is not an isolated phenomenon. According to general surveillance schemes, compensation statistics, and disease registers, the annual case numbers of OA due to all types of isocyanates also show a downward trend in most countries during recent years. (7–11) in spite of steadily increasing production and use of all isocyanates. (34) The regional distribution, however, varies. While isocyanates as a cause of OA prevail in some North American states, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand, (7, 14, 35) they rank far behind flour, animal dander, amines, platinum salts, and other agents in Germany, Switzerland, and Finland. (8–10) These differences are likely due to (1) different types and sizes of regional industries with different standards of working practice and (2) differences in legal requirements, sources of reports, referral patterns, and diagnostic criteria. (14)

CONCLUSIONS

The published data are not easy to interpret because of a great number of variables. Cautious analysis leads to the conclusion that the incidence of TDI-A shows a clear downward trend in the United States and Europe during the past half century. Annual incidences of TDI-A worldwide have oscillated between zero and 0.7 percent during the past two decades. The prevalence of TDI-A has been reported to range between zero and 10 percent during the past decade at workplaces with mean TDI exposures below 15 ppb.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should be directed toward assessing the frequency of OA due to other specific isocyanates, such as methylene diphenyl diisocyanate and hexamethylene diisocyanate prepolymers, which are quite different from TDI in regard to industrial use and health risks. This would help to detect clusters of OA, which could then be tackled by specific preventive measures.

REFERENCES