Cutaneous bacillary angiomatosis: A marker of systemic disease in HIV

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A 33-year-old man presented with a 5-week history of relapsing fever, weight loss and right upper quadrant pain. He was pyrexial, the liver and spleen were enlarged and tender, and he had a few pyogenic granuloma-like tumours on the skin (Fig. 1). He was HIV positive (CD4 cell count 119/μl), and had raised liver enzyme levels (alkaline phosphatase (ALP) 258 IU/l and gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (GGT) 218 IU/l). Results of hepatitis studies and the alpha-fetoprotein level were normal, blood cultures were negative and a chest radiograph was normal. An abdominal ultrasound scan showed an enlarged and markedly echogenic liver and spleen with multiple hypo-echoic foci in keeping with possible micro-abscesses. The skin and liver showed similar histological features: clusters of purple, granular material that stained positive for organisms, confirmed on the Warthin-Starry stain (Figs 2a, 2b and 2c).

The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) confirmed the presence of *Bartonella* spp, on both biopsy specimens. The skin lesions had almost completely disappeared after 1 month on erythromycin 500 mg 4 times a day, but the patient was subsequently lost to follow-up.

**Discussion**

Bacillary angiomatosis (BA) is caused by the Gram-negative bacteria *B. henselae* and *B. quintana*. Cutaneous BA was first described in 1983, and the first case in South Africa (where disease prevalence in the host, the domestic cat, is 24%) was reported in 1993. BA is difficult to diagnose, requiring culture for at least 21 days; serological studies are often unreliable, and special staining with the Warthin-Starry stain is used to confirm the tissue diagnosis. The prevalence of *Bartonella*

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*Fig. 1. Pyogenic granuloma-like lesion above right ear*

*Fig. 2a. Low-power H&E stain of the lesion.*

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bacteraemia (nested PCR) was 10% at the Johannesburg HIV outpatient clinics. The treatment of choice is erythromycin 500 mg 4 times a day for 3 months; also useful are doxycycline, ceftriaxone and the fluoroquinolones.

Examination of the skin is mandatory because cutaneous lesions may be a marker of systemic BA infection, especially in HIV-positive patients, and skin biopsy is much safer than liver biopsy for tissue diagnosis.