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Successful Management of Grade III Tetanus with Therapeutic Plasma Exchange: A Case Report

Jati Febriyanto Adi Listyono Putro[1*], Andy Nugroho[1], Septian Adi Permana[1], Andi Hermawan[1]

[1]Department of Anesthesiologist and Intensive Care Therapy, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Sebelas Maret/Dr. Moewardi Regional General Hospital, Surakarta, Indonesia

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***Corresponding author:**
Jati Febriyanto Adi Listyono Putro

E-mail address:
jatifal@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Tetanus, a severe neurologic disorder caused by Clostridium tetani neurotoxin, presents with progressive muscle rigidity and spasms. Grade III tetanus, characterized by generalized tetanus with severe spasms, carries a high mortality risk. Therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) has emerged as an adjunctive therapy to remove circulating toxins and inflammatory mediators. **Case presentation:** We report a 50-year-old male with grade III tetanus following a minor injury. Despite standard treatment with tetanus immunoglobulin, antibiotics, and muscle relaxants, his condition deteriorated, necessitating intensive care unit (ICU) admission and mechanical ventilation. The patient underwent two sessions of TPE, demonstrating significant clinical improvement with reduced muscle spasms and successful ventilator weaning. **Conclusion:** This case highlights the potential benefit of TPE in managing severe tetanus, particularly in cases refractory to conventional therapy. Early recognition and aggressive management, including TPE, can improve outcomes in this life-threatening condition.

1. Introduction

Tetanus, an often fatal neurologic disorder, arises from the potent neurotoxin tetanospasmin, secreted by the anaerobic bacterium Clostridium tetani. This toxin disrupts the nervous system by binding irreversibly to nerve terminals, impeding the release of inhibitory neurotransmitters, and consequently causing uncontrolled muscle contractions and spasms. The clinical spectrum of tetanus ranges from localized stiffness to generalized tetanus, with the latter classified into grades based on severity. Grade III tetanus, the most severe form, manifests with generalized muscle rigidity, severe spasms, and autonomic instability, often necessitating intensive care unit (ICU) admission and mechanical ventilation. Despite advancements in critical care, tetanus remains a global health concern, particularly in regions with limited access to healthcare and immunization. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that tetanus caused approximately 213,000 deaths in 1990, with a significant decline to 38,000 deaths in 2017 due to increased vaccination coverage. However, tetanus continues to pose a significant risk in developing countries, with neonatal tetanus accounting for a substantial proportion of cases.[1-3]

The pathophysiology of tetanus involves the binding of tetanospasmin to peripheral nerve terminals, followed by retrograde transport to the central nervous system. The toxin then blocks the release of inhibitory neurotransmitters, primarily glycine and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), leading to unopposed muscle excitation and spasms. The clinical manifestations of tetanus typically appear 4 to 21 days after injury, with a shorter incubation period associated with more severe disease. The management of tetanus requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing wound debridement, tetanus immunoglobulin administration, antibiotics, and aggressive supportive care. Wound debridement aims to remove the source of toxin production, while tetanus immunoglobulin neutralizes circulating toxin. Antibiotics, such as metronidazole or penicillin, target the vegetative form of *C. tetani*. Supportive care, including muscle relaxants, sedation, and mechanical ventilation, is crucial in managing severe tetanus and preventing complications such as respiratory failure, aspiration pneumonia, and autonomic dysfunction.[4,5]

Despite these measures, the mortality rate of severe tetanus remains high, ranging from 10% to 60%. This underscores the need for adjunctive therapies to improve outcomes in this challenging condition. Therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE), also known as plasmapheresis, has emerged as a potential adjunctive therapy in severe tetanus. TPE involves removing plasma containing circulating toxins and inflammatory mediators and replacing it with fresh frozen plasma or albumin. The rationale for TPE in tetanus lies in its ability to remove unbound tetanus toxin from the circulation, thereby potentially reducing its neurotoxic effects. Additionally, TPE may also remove inflammatory mediators and cytokines, which contribute to the systemic inflammatory response and complications associated with tetanus. Several case reports and small series have reported positive outcomes with TPE in severe tetanus, including reduced muscle spasms, shorter ICU stays, and improved survival.[6,7]

However, the evidence supporting TPE in tetanus remains limited, and its optimal timing, frequency, and replacement fluids are yet to be established. Further research is warranted to elucidate the role of TPE in tetanus management and develop standardized protocols for its use.[8-10] In this case report, we present a 50-year-old male with grade III tetanus who developed progressive muscle rigidity and spasms despite standard treatment. The initiation of TPE was associated with significant clinical improvement, highlighting its potential as an adjunctive therapy in severe tetanus. This case adds to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of TPE in this challenging condition and underscores the need for further research to optimize its application.

2. Case Presentation

A 50-year-old male, with no prior history of tetanus vaccination, presented to the emergency department with a chief complaint of acute-onset, progressive body stiffness and difficulty opening his mouth (trismus). These symptoms had emerged abruptly one day prior to his admission. He recounted a seemingly minor laceration to his right thumb sustained two weeks earlier during a traffic accident. At that time, he sought care at a local health facility where the wound was cleaned and treated, presumably without tetanus prophylaxis given his unvaccinated status.

Upon initial evaluation, the patient exhibited hallmark signs of generalized tetanus. He displayed pronounced muscle rigidity throughout his body, accompanied by the characteristic opisthotonus - a severe arching of the back due to muscle spasm. His trismus was so severe that he could barely open his mouth two finger-widths. Despite these alarming neuromuscular manifestations, his vital signs were relatively stable, notable only for tachycardia (heart rate of 112 beats per minute), while his blood pressure and oxygen saturation remained within normal limits. Further clinical assessment revealed additional signs consistent with tetanus. His abdomen was distended and tender, suggesting involvement of the abdominal musculature. A comprehensive neurological examination was challenging due to the patient's severe muscle rigidity, but it corroborated the presence of generalized hypertonia and exaggerated reflexes.

Laboratory investigations provided further evidence of tetanus and its systemic effects. The patient's

creatine kinase (CK) level was markedly elevated at 500 U/L, indicative of significant muscle damage due to sustained contractions. A mild leukocytosis (white blood cell count of 12,000/uL) was also noted, likely reflecting the inflammatory response associated with tetanus. Other laboratory parameters, including renal function, electrolytes, and complete blood count, were within normal limits. Based on the clinical presentation and laboratory findings, the patient was diagnosed with grade III tetanus, the most severe form of the disease characterized by generalized tetanus with severe muscle spasms. He was promptly admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) for close monitoring and aggressive management.

The initial therapeutic approach encompassed a multi-pronged strategy aimed at neutralizing the tetanus toxin, eradicating the causative bacteria, and providing supportive care to mitigate the life-threatening complications of tetanus. Tetanus immunoglobulin (TIG) was administered to neutralize circulating toxin, while intravenous metronidazole and ampicillin-sulbactam were initiated to target the vegetative form of *C. tetani*. Continuous infusions of diazepam and magnesium sulfate were employed to control muscle spasms and prevent seizures. Despite these interventions, the patient's condition deteriorated over the subsequent 48 hours. He experienced escalating muscle spasms, culminating in respiratory distress and overt seizure activity. His oxygen saturation plummeted to 88% despite supplemental oxygen, necessitating endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation. Arterial blood gas analysis revealed mild respiratory acidosis and elevated lactate levels, indicative of impaired tissue perfusion.

In light of the patient's worsening condition and lack of response to standard therapy, the decision was made to initiate therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) on day 6 of his ICU admission. TPE, also known as plasmapheresis, involves removing the patient's plasma, which contains circulating toxins and inflammatory mediators and replacing it with fresh frozen plasma or albumin. The procedure was performed without complications, with a total of 2700 ml of plasma exchanged with 1500 ml of 5% albumin and 1200 ml of 0.9% NaCl. Following the first TPE session, the patient demonstrated a gradual but significant improvement in his clinical status. The frequency and severity of muscle spasms diminished, allowing for a reduction in sedative and muscle relaxant dosages. His hemodynamic parameters stabilized, and laboratory markers of muscle injury and inflammation trended towards normalization. By day 10, he was seizure-free, and his CK levels had returned to baseline.

On day 15, the patient was successfully weaned off mechanical ventilation and extubated. However, given the potential for airway compromise due to residual muscle weakness and the need for ongoing respiratory support, a tracheostomy was performed to facilitate airway management and secretion clearance. He continued to make steady progress, with further reduction in muscle stiffness and gradual improvement in mobility. To consolidate the gains achieved with the first TPE session and further expedite his recovery, a second TPE session was performed on day 17. A similar volume of plasma was exchanged, and the procedure was once again well-tolerated. The patient's clinical course continued on an upward trajectory, with progressive improvement in muscle strength and functional status.

On day 20, the patient was deemed stable enough to be transferred out of the ICU to the general ward. He continued to receive comprehensive care, including physiotherapy and rehabilitation to regain his strength and mobility. On day 23, he was discharged home, having made a remarkable recovery from a life-threatening illness. This case underscores the potential of TPE as a valuable adjunctive therapy in the management of severe tetanus, particularly in cases refractory to conventional treatment modalities. The patient's dramatic improvement following TPE highlights its ability to remove circulating tetanus toxin and inflammatory mediators, thereby mitigating the neurotoxic and systemic effects of the disease.

Table 1. Summary of disease progression.

Day	Clinical presentation	Interventions	Laboratory findings
0	Minor laceration to the right thumb	Wound cleaning, medication at local facility	-
14	Onset of body stiffness, trismus	-	-
15	Generalized muscle rigidity, opisthotonus, dysphagia	Wound debridement, metronidazole, ampicillin-sulbactam, tetanus immunoglobulin, diazepam, MgSO4	Elevated CK (500 U/L), WBC (12,000/uL)
17	Worsening spasms, respiratory distress	ICU admission, intubation, midazolam, dexmedetomidine, meropenem	ABG: mild respiratory acidosis, elevated lactate (3 mmol/L)
22	First TPE session	2700 ml plasma exchange	Decreased CK (300 U/L), normal lactate
23	Tracheostomy	-	-
27	Reduced spasms, hemodynamic stability	-	Normal CK, WBC
32	Successful extubation	-	-
34	Second TPE session	2600 ml plasma exchange	-
37	Transfer to the general ward	-	-
40	Discharge	-	-

CK: Creatine kinase, a marker of muscle damage; WBC: White blood cell count; ABG: Arterial blood gas.

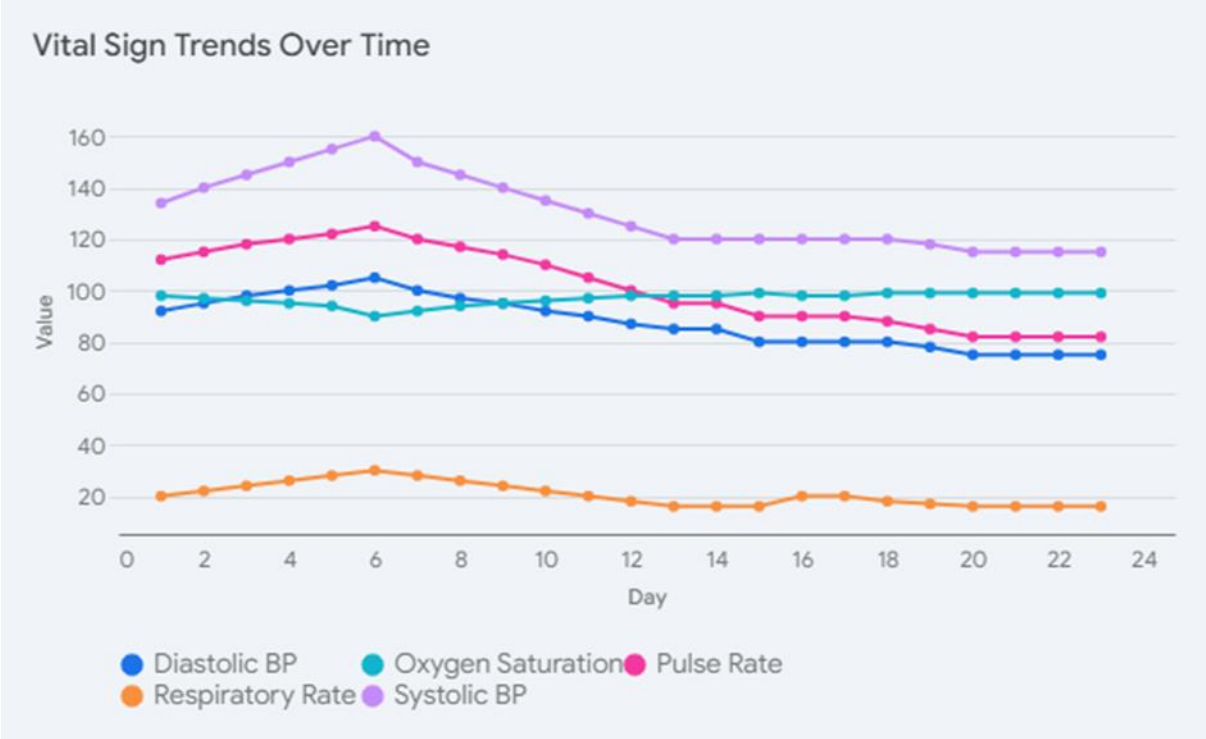

Figure 1. Vital sign trends over time.

3. Discussion

Tetanus, often dubbed the "lockjaw" disease, is a severe and potentially fatal neurologic disorder caused by the potent neurotoxin tetanospasmin produced by the anaerobic bacterium Clostridium tetani. The insidious nature of its onset and the rapid progression of symptoms, particularly in severe cases, underscore the critical importance of early recognition and diagnosis to initiate timely and appropriate management. The adage "time is muscle" holds particularly true in tetanus, as delays in diagnosis and treatment can lead to devastating consequences, including respiratory failure, autonomic instability, and death. The initial presentation of tetanus can be subtle and easily overlooked, often mimicking other more common conditions. Early symptoms may include localized muscle stiffness or spasms near the site of injury, followed by progressive trismus (lockjaw), difficulty swallowing, and facial muscle spasms. As the disease advances, generalized muscle rigidity, painful spasms, and opisthotonus (severe back arching) may ensue. In severe cases, autonomic dysfunction can manifest as labile blood pressure, cardiac arrhythmias, and hyperpyrexia. The diagnosis of tetanus is primarily clinical, relying on a thorough history and physical examination. A history of recent injury, particularly a puncture wound or contaminated laceration, in an individual with incomplete or absent tetanus immunization is a crucial red flag. The presence of characteristic clinical features, such as trismus, muscle rigidity, and spasms, further strengthens the diagnosis. Laboratory investigations, including elevated creatine kinase levels reflecting muscle damage, can provide supportive evidence but are not diagnostic. Early recognition of tetanus hinges on a high index of suspicion, particularly in patients presenting with unexplained muscle stiffness or spasms, especially in the context of a recent injury. Healthcare providers must be vigilant in eliciting a detailed history, including immunization status and potential exposures to *C. tetani*. A comprehensive physical examination, focusing on neuromuscular manifestations, is essential to identify subtle signs of tetanus. Prompt diagnosis is paramount in initiating timely and appropriate management. The cornerstone of tetanus treatment involves neutralizing circulating toxin with tetanus immunoglobulin, eradicating the causative bacteria with antibiotics, and providing aggressive supportive care to manage complications. Delays in diagnosis can lead to increased toxin binding to nerve terminals, rendering treatment less effective and increasing the risk of severe complications and mortality. In the presented case, the patient exhibited classic signs of generalized tetanus, including muscle rigidity, opisthotonus, and trismus. The elevated creatine kinase level further corroborated the diagnosis, reflecting the extensive muscle damage caused by uncontrolled spasms. Fortunately, the patient sought medical attention promptly, enabling early diagnosis and initiation of standard tetanus treatment. However, despite these measures, his condition deteriorated, highlighting the aggressive nature of severe tetanus and the need for adjunctive therapies. The importance of early recognition and diagnosis in tetanus cannot be overstated. It allows for the timely administration of tetanus immunoglobulin, which is most effective when given before the toxin binds irreversibly to nerve terminals. Early diagnosis also facilitates the prompt initiation of antibiotics and supportive care, which are crucial in preventing complications and improving outcomes. Healthcare providers must remain vigilant in identifying potential cases of tetanus, particularly in individuals with incomplete immunization histories and recent injuries. A high index of suspicion, coupled with a thorough history and physical examination, is essential in recognizing this potentially devastating disease. Early diagnosis and prompt initiation of treatment are key to improving outcomes and reducing the burden of tetanus, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to healthcare and immunization may be limited. Severe tetanus, particularly grade III, presents a formidable challenge in critical care management, often demanding a multi-pronged, resource-intensive approach and constant vigilance against a cascade of life-threatening complications. Even with the prompt initiation of standard treatment protocols, the disease can progress relentlessly, underscoring the gravity and

complexity of this neurologic emergency. The case in question serves as a stark reminder of the unpredictable and often devastating course of severe tetanus. Despite receiving timely and appropriate treatment, including tetanus immunoglobulin, antibiotics, and muscle relaxants, the patient's condition deteriorated rapidly. This progression to respiratory failure, seizures, and the need for mechanical ventilation vividly illustrates the life-threatening potential of tetanus, even in the context of optimal medical care. The challenges in managing severe tetanus stem from the multifaceted nature of the disease and its impact on multiple organ systems. The hallmark of tetanus is uncontrolled muscle contractions and spasms, which can affect any muscle group in the body. Spasms of the respiratory muscles, including the diaphragm and intercostal muscles, can impair ventilation and lead to respiratory failure. Laryngospasm, a sudden and forceful closure of the vocal cords, can further obstruct the airway and pose an immediate threat to life. Difficulty swallowing and impaired airway protection due to muscle spasms increase the risk of aspiration of oral secretions or gastric contents, leading to pneumonia. Aspiration pneumonia is a common complication of severe tetanus and can significantly worsen the prognosis. The forceful and sustained muscle contractions can result in fractures and dislocations, particularly of the spine and long bones. These injuries can further complicate the clinical course and necessitate additional interventions. Tetanus can disrupt the autonomic nervous system, leading to labile blood pressure, cardiac arrhythmias, and hyperpyrexia. These manifestations can be challenging to manage and contribute to the high mortality rate associated with severe tetanus. The intense muscle activity and hypermetabolic state associated with tetanus can lead to electrolyte imbalances, acid-base disturbances, and rhabdomyolysis (breakdown of muscle tissue). These metabolic derangements require careful monitoring and correction to prevent further complications. In addition to these direct complications, the management of severe tetanus is often fraught with logistical and resource challenges. Patients typically require prolonged ICU stays, often necessitating mechanical ventilation, sedation, and continuous monitoring. The intensive nursing care and specialized interventions required can strain healthcare resources, particularly in settings with limited capacity. Furthermore, the psychological impact of tetanus on patients and their families cannot be overlooked. The experience of severe muscle spasms, respiratory distress, and prolonged ICU stay can be traumatic, leading to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Providing adequate psychological support and rehabilitation is essential in facilitating recovery and improving long-term outcomes. The case presented here serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities and challenges inherent in managing severe tetanus. Despite advances in critical care, this disease continues to pose a significant threat, particularly in regions with limited access to healthcare and immunization. The progression to respiratory failure, seizures, and the need for mechanical ventilation, despite receiving standard treatment, underscores the importance of vigilance and preparedness for potential complications. This case also highlights the critical role of early recognition and diagnosis in tetanus management. Prompt identification of the disease allows for the timely administration of tetanus immunoglobulin and antibiotics, which can neutralize circulating toxin and eradicate the causative bacteria. Early initiation of supportive care, including muscle relaxants, sedation, and mechanical ventilation, is crucial in preventing complications and improving outcomes.[11,12]

In the intricate and often perilous landscape of severe tetanus management, the therapeutic potential of Therapeutic Plasma Exchange (TPE), also referred to as plasmapheresis, emerges as a beacon of hope. This innovative procedure, involving the removal and replacement of plasma, offers a unique approach to combating the devastating effects of tetanus toxin and the associated systemic inflammatory response. In the context of the presented case, the initiation of TPE marked a pivotal turning point in the patient's clinical course. Despite receiving the standard armamentarium of tetanus treatment, including tetanus immunoglobulin, antibiotics, and muscle relaxants, the patient's condition continued its downward spiral. The

specter of respiratory failure, the onset of seizures, and the necessity for mechanical ventilation painted a grim picture, underscoring the urgency for an alternative therapeutic strategy. It was at this critical juncture that TPE was introduced, offering a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak scenario. The procedure, though complex, is conceptually straightforward: the patient's plasma, laden with circulating tetanus toxin and inflammatory mediators, is removed and replaced with fresh frozen plasma or albumin. This strategic maneuver aims to achieve a dual therapeutic effect: reducing the toxin burden and attenuating the systemic inflammatory response that wreaks havoc in severe tetanus. The removal of circulating tetanus toxin is a cornerstone of TPE's therapeutic potential. Tetanus toxin, once released from the bacterium Clostridium tetani, binds irreversibly to nerve terminals, blocking the release of inhibitory neurotransmitters and leading to the characteristic muscle spasms and rigidity. By extracting plasma containing unbound toxin, TPE effectively reduces the toxin load, potentially limiting its access to neuronal targets and mitigating its devastating neurotoxic effects. Beyond toxin removal, TPE also plays a crucial role in modulating the systemic inflammatory response triggered by tetanus. The inflammatory cascade, while initially protective, can become dysregulated in severe tetanus, leading to a cytokine storm and multi-organ dysfunction. TPE, by removing inflammatory mediators and cytokines, helps to restore immune homeostasis and prevent the collateral damage inflicted by an overzealous inflammatory response. The efficacy of TPE in tetanus, while primarily supported by case reports and small series, is compelling. Numerous studies have documented positive outcomes following TPE, including a reduction in muscle spasm frequency and severity, decreased duration of mechanical ventilation, shorter ICU stays, and improved survival rates. These encouraging results, though not yet validated by large-scale randomized controlled trials, suggest that TPE can be a valuable adjunctive therapy in severe tetanus, particularly when conventional treatment modalities prove inadequate. The timing of TPE initiation remains a subject of ongoing debate. Some experts advocate for early TPE in severe cases, aiming to preemptively reduce the toxin burden and prevent complications. Others reserve TPE for patients who fail to respond to standard therapy, using it as a rescue measure when conventional approaches falter. In the presented case, TPE was initiated after the patient's condition deteriorated despite receiving standard treatment, highlighting its potential as a salvage therapy in refractory tetanus. The optimal number of TPE sessions and the choice of replacement fluids are additional areas that warrant further investigation. In this case, two TPE sessions were performed, with albumin and saline used as replacement fluids. This approach proved successful, but further research is needed to establish standardized protocols for TPE in tetanus, including the ideal number of sessions and the most appropriate replacement fluids. The remarkable recovery observed in this patient following TPE underscores its therapeutic potential in severe tetanus. The reduction in muscle spasms, successful ventilator weaning, and eventual hospital discharge stand as a testament to the efficacy of this procedure in mitigating the neurotoxic and systemic effects of tetanus. While further research is needed to solidify its place in the tetanus management algorithm, TPE offers a ray of hope in a disease that has long been associated with high morbidity and mortality. Therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) in the context of tetanus functions as a multifaceted therapeutic intervention, strategically targeting two key pathological drivers: the neurotoxic effects of the tetanus toxin and the dysregulated systemic inflammatory response that ensues. By effectively neutralizing these intertwined processes, TPE offers a promising avenue for mitigating the devastating consequences of this formidable disease. The primary mechanism underlying TPE's efficacy in tetanus lies in its ability to remove unbound tetanus toxin from the circulation. Tetanus toxin, a potent neurotoxin produced by Clostridium tetani, exerts its devastating effects by binding irreversibly to nerve terminals, particularly at the neuromuscular junction and within the central nervous system. This binding disrupts the release of inhibitory neurotransmitters, leading to unopposed muscle excitation, spasticity, and the characteristic clinical manifestations of tetanus. TPE acts as a molecular sieve, selectively removing

plasma containing unbound tetanus toxin. This process effectively reduces the toxin load in the circulation, thereby limiting its access to neuronal targets and potentially mitigating its neurotoxic effects. The removal of unbound toxin may also create a concentration gradient, favoring the dissociation of toxin already bound to nerve terminals, further enhancing its clearance. The kinetics of tetanus toxin binding and internalization are crucial in understanding the therapeutic window for TPE. Studies have shown that tetanus toxin binds rapidly to nerve terminals, with internalization occurring within hours. Once internalized, the toxin is largely inaccessible to circulating antibodies or TPE. Therefore, the effectiveness of TPE is likely to be greatest when initiated early in the course of the disease, before significant toxin binding and internalization have occurred. Beyond its role in toxin removal, TPE also exerts a profound impact on the systemic inflammatory response associated with tetanus. Tetanus, particularly in its severe forms, triggers a cascade of inflammatory mediators, including cytokines, chemokines, and reactive oxygen species. While this inflammatory response is initially protective, aiming to contain the infection and promote tissue repair, it can become dysregulated and contribute to the pathogenesis of tetanus. The excessive release of inflammatory mediators can lead to a cytokine storm, characterized by a self-amplifying cycle of inflammation that can damage multiple organ systems. This systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS) can manifest as fever, hypotension, tachycardia, and multi-organ failure, further complicating the clinical course of tetanus. TPE, by removing plasma containing inflammatory mediators, helps to restore immune homeostasis and interrupt the vicious cycle of inflammation. This modulation of the inflammatory cascade may help prevent or mitigate organ damage, reduce the severity of complications, and promote recovery. Additionally, TPE may also remove other circulating factors that contribute to the pathophysiology of tetanus, such as autoantibodies and immune complexes. The dual mechanisms of action of TPE in tetanus, namely toxin removal and modulation of the inflammatory response, are supported by both experimental and clinical evidence. Animal studies have demonstrated that TPE can effectively remove tetanus toxin from the circulation, leading to improved survival rates and reduced neurologic sequelae. Clinical reports have also documented a reduction in muscle spasms, shorter duration of mechanical ventilation, and improved outcomes following TPE in patients with severe tetanus. Furthermore, laboratory investigations have revealed elevated levels of inflammatory markers, such as C-reactive protein and pro-inflammatory cytokines, in patients with tetanus. These findings suggest that the systemic inflammatory response plays a significant role in the pathogenesis of tetanus and that TPE, by modulating this response, may contribute to improved outcomes.[13,14]

While the gold standard of evidence-based medicine, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), remains elusive in the realm of TPE for tetanus, a growing body of clinical experience, meticulously documented in case reports and small case series, paints a compelling picture of its potential benefits. These observational studies, though not without limitations, offer valuable insights into the real-world impact of TPE in patients grappling with the devastating consequences of tetanus. A consistent theme that emerges from these reports is the observation of reduced muscle spasm frequency and severity following TPE. Muscle spasms, the hallmark of tetanus, are not only excruciatingly painful but also contribute to a cascade of complications, including respiratory compromise, fractures, and metabolic derangements. The ability of TPE to attenuate these spasms, as documented in multiple case reports, represents a significant therapeutic advantage, potentially improving patient comfort, facilitating weaning from mechanical ventilation, and reducing the risk of complications. Another promising observation is the potential for TPE to shorten the duration of mechanical ventilation in patients with severe tetanus. Respiratory failure, often necessitating prolonged mechanical ventilation, is a major contributor to morbidity and mortality in tetanus. By mitigating muscle spasms and improving respiratory function, TPE may facilitate earlier extubation and reduce the associated risks of ventilator-associated pneumonia

and other complications. Furthermore, several studies have reported a decrease in ICU length of stay following TPE in tetanus patients. ICU stays are often prolonged in severe tetanus due to the need for close monitoring, aggressive supportive care, and management of complications. By accelerating recovery and reducing the incidence of complications, TPE may contribute to shorter ICU stays, optimizing resource utilization and potentially improving patient outcomes. Perhaps the most compelling evidence supporting TPE in tetanus is the observed improvement in survival rates. While mortality in severe tetanus remains high, case reports and case series have documented favorable outcomes in patients treated with TPE, even in those with refractory disease. Although these findings need to be interpreted cautiously due to the limitations of observational studies, they suggest that TPE may offer a life-saving intervention in this challenging condition. The collective experience from these clinical reports, despite the absence of RCTs, provides a strong rationale for considering TPE as an adjunctive therapy in severe tetanus. The consistent observation of reduced muscle spasms, shorter duration of mechanical ventilation, decreased ICU stay, and improved survival rates suggests that TPE can be a valuable tool in the armamentarium against this formidable foe. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the existing evidence base. Case reports and small case series are inherently prone to selection bias and confounding factors, and they may not accurately reflect the broader population of tetanus patients. The heterogeneity in patient characteristics, disease severity, and treatment protocols further complicates the interpretation of these findings. Therefore, while the current evidence supports the use of TPE in severe tetanus, further research, particularly randomized controlled trials, is warranted to definitively establish its efficacy and define its optimal role in the management algorithm. These trials should focus on standardizing TPE protocols, including the timing of initiation, number of sessions, and choice of replacement fluids.[15,16]

The optimal timing for initiating therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) in the management of tetanus remains a contentious issue, with no clear consensus among experts. This lack of definitive guidance stems from the complex interplay of factors influencing the decision, including disease severity, the patient's clinical trajectory, and the potential risks and benefits associated with TPE. Proponents of early TPE in tetanus advocate for its initiation as soon as the diagnosis of severe tetanus is established, even before the full extent of the disease manifests. This proactive approach is rooted in the understanding that tetanus toxin, once released from the bacterium Clostridium tetani, rapidly binds to nerve terminals and initiates its neurotoxic effects. Early TPE, it is argued, can effectively remove circulating unbound toxin, thereby preventing its further dissemination and potentially mitigating the severity of the disease. Furthermore, early TPE may also help to modulate the systemic inflammatory response that ensues in tetanus. By removing inflammatory mediators and cytokines early in the course of the disease, TPE may prevent the development of a cytokine storm and its associated complications, such as multi-organ dysfunction. This proactive approach aims to nip the inflammatory cascade in the bud, potentially improving outcomes and reducing the risk of long-term sequelae. However, early TPE is not without its drawbacks. The procedure itself carries inherent risks, including bleeding, infection, and allergic reactions. Additionally, TPE requires specialized equipment and expertise, which may not be readily available in all settings. The potential benefits of early TPE must be carefully weighed against these risks, particularly in patients with mild or moderate tetanus who may respond well to standard treatment. On the other end of the spectrum, some experts advocate for a more conservative approach, reserving TPE for patients who fail to respond to standard tetanus treatment. This delayed approach aims to minimize the risks associated with TPE by limiting its use to patients with refractory disease, where the potential benefits outweigh the risks. In these cases, TPE acts as a rescue therapy, offering a last resort when conventional approaches prove inadequate. By removing circulating toxin and inflammatory mediators, TPE may help to reverse the downward spiral of severe tetanus, potentially improving outcomes and preventing further

deterioration. However, delaying TPE until the patient's condition deteriorates carries its own set of risks. The longer the toxin remains in circulation, the greater the likelihood of irreversible neuronal damage and complications. Additionally, the systemic inflammatory response may become entrenched and more difficult to control, increasing the risk of organ damage and mortality. In the presented case, TPE was initiated after the patient's condition deteriorated despite receiving standard treatment. This delayed approach, while not ideal, proved successful in reversing the course of the disease and facilitating recovery. The patient's dramatic improvement following TPE, including reduced muscle spasms, successful ventilator weaning, and eventual hospital discharge, underscores its potential as a rescue therapy in severe tetanus. However, this case also highlights the potential risks of delaying TPE. The patient experienced significant morbidity, including respiratory failure, seizures, and prolonged ICU stay, before TPE was initiated. Had TPE been initiated earlier, it is possible that some of these complications could have been prevented or mitigated. The realm of therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) in tetanus, while promising, remains shrouded in a degree of uncertainty, particularly when it comes to establishing standardized protocols for the number of TPE sessions and the choice of replacement fluids. These critical aspects of TPE administration, though seemingly mundane, can significantly impact its therapeutic efficacy and safety profile. The optimal number of TPE sessions required to achieve maximal benefit in tetanus is yet to be definitively determined. In the presented case, the patient underwent two TPE sessions, demonstrating a remarkable recovery. However, this does not necessarily imply that two sessions are universally ideal for all tetanus patients. Patients with more severe tetanus, characterized by higher toxin loads and more pronounced systemic inflammation, may require additional TPE sessions to achieve adequate toxin removal and immunomodulation. The patient's clinical trajectory and response to initial TPE sessions can guide the decision to continue or discontinue therapy. If the patient demonstrates significant improvement after one or two sessions, further TPE may not be necessary. However, if the response is suboptimal or the patient's condition deteriorates, additional sessions may be warranted. TPE, while generally safe, is not without risks. Repeated procedures can increase the likelihood of complications, such as bleeding, infection, and allergic reactions. The potential benefits of additional TPE sessions must be carefully weighed against these risks. Currently, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how many TPE sessions are ideal in tetanus. Clinical judgment, guided by the patient's individual characteristics and response to therapy, remains paramount in determining the optimal number of sessions. Further research, including randomized controlled trials comparing different TPE regimens, is needed to establish evidence-based guidelines. The choice of replacement fluids in TPE is another crucial aspect that warrants further investigation. In the presented case, albumin and saline were used as replacement fluids, a common practice in TPE. Albumin, a natural plasma protein, helps to maintain oncotic pressure and fluid balance, while saline provides electrolytes and hydration. However, other replacement fluids, such as fresh frozen plasma (FFP), may also be considered. FFP contains all the components of plasma, including clotting factors and immunoglobulins, which may be beneficial in certain situations. For instance, in patients with coagulopathy or immunodeficiency, FFP may be a more appropriate choice than albumin or saline. The optimal choice of replacement fluids depends on several factors, including the patient's clinical condition, the availability of different fluids, and the potential risks and benefits associated with each option. For example, FFP carries a risk of transfusion-related reactions and infections, while albumin may be contraindicated in patients with certain medical conditions.[17,18]

The successful navigation of the treacherous terrain of severe tetanus necessitates a harmonious symphony of expertise, orchestrated by a multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals. This collaborative approach, seamlessly integrating the specialized knowledge and skills of various disciplines, is paramount in providing comprehensive care and optimizing patient outcomes in this complex and often unpredictable disease. The case presented here serves

as a testament to the power of multidisciplinary management in tetanus. The patient's journey, from the initial presentation with ominous signs of generalized tetanus to the eventual triumph of recovery, was guided by the coordinated efforts of intensivists, anesthesiologists, neurologists, infectious disease specialists, and rehabilitation therapists. Each discipline, contributing its unique perspective and expertise, played a crucial role in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by severe tetanus. Intensivists, as the orchestrators of critical care, assume a central role in the management of severe tetanus. They are responsible for overseeing the patient's overall care, coordinating the efforts of the multidisciplinary team, and making critical decisions regarding treatment modalities and interventions. Their expertise in managing complex medical conditions, including respiratory failure, hemodynamic instability, and multi-organ dysfunction, is invaluable in navigating the often turbulent course of severe tetanus. In the presented case, the intensivists played a pivotal role in recognizing the deteriorating clinical trajectory and initiating timely interventions, including endotracheal intubation, mechanical ventilation, and therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE). Their astute clinical judgment and decisive action were instrumental in averting further complications and facilitating the patient's recovery. Anesthesiologists, with their expertise in airway management, pain control, and sedation, are indispensable members of the tetanus management team. In severe tetanus, where muscle spasms can compromise airway patency and necessitate prolonged mechanical ventilation, the skills of anesthesiologists are crucial in ensuring adequate oxygenation and ventilation while minimizing patient discomfort. In this case, the anesthesiologists played a key role in securing the patient's airway, managing his sedation and analgesia, and facilitating the successful weaning from mechanical ventilation. Their expertise in critical care procedures, such as tracheostomy, further contributed to the patient's overall management and recovery. Neurologists bring a unique perspective to the management of tetanus, focusing on the intricate interplay between the neurotoxin and the nervous system. Their understanding of the pathophysiology of tetanus, including the mechanisms of toxin action and the resulting neurological manifestations, informs the diagnostic and therapeutic approach. In this case, the neurologists played a crucial role in confirming the diagnosis of tetanus, assessing the severity of neurological involvement, and monitoring the patient's response to treatment. Their expertise in managing neurological complications, such as seizures and autonomic dysfunction, was invaluable in optimizing the patient's care. Infectious disease specialists contribute their knowledge of the microbiology and epidemiology of tetanus to the multidisciplinary team. They guide the selection of appropriate antibiotics, ensuring adequate coverage against Clostridium tetani and preventing secondary infections. Their expertise in managing infectious complications, such as pneumonia and sepsis, is also crucial in optimizing patient outcomes. In this case, the infectious disease specialists played a key role in selecting the appropriate antibiotic regimen and monitoring the patient's response to therapy. Their vigilance in identifying and managing potential infectious complications further contributed to the patient's successful recovery. Rehabilitation therapists, including physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists, play a vital role in the recovery phase of tetanus. They help patients regain strength, mobility, and function after prolonged immobilization and muscle weakness. Their expertise in designing and implementing individualized rehabilitation programs is essential in maximizing patient independence and quality of life. In this case, the rehabilitation therapists worked closely with the patient to develop a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, addressing his physical and functional limitations. Their dedication and support were instrumental in facilitating his return to normal activities and improving his overall well-being. The successful management of severe tetanus, as exemplified in this case, is a testament to the power of collaboration and the synergistic effect of multidisciplinary expertise. Each discipline, contributing its unique perspective and skills, creates a holistic approach that addresses the complex and multifaceted challenges posed by this disease. The

coordinated efforts of the multidisciplinary team ensure that all aspects of the patient's care are addressed, from the initial diagnosis and acute management to the long-term rehabilitation and recovery. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility and empowers each team member to contribute their expertise to the patient's overall well-being.[19,20]

4. Conclusion

This case report underscores the potential of therapeutic plasma exchange (TPE) as a valuable adjunctive therapy in the management of severe tetanus, particularly in cases refractory to conventional treatment. The patient's remarkable recovery, despite the initial deterioration, highlights the efficacy of TPE in mitigating the neurotoxic and systemic effects of tetanus. While further research is warranted to establish its optimal role in the tetanus management algorithm, TPE represents a promising avenue for improving outcomes and reducing mortality in this challenging and often life-threatening condition.

5. References

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