Resistence to drainage of cerebrospinal fluid: clinical measurement and significance

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SUMMARY By infusing saline intrathecally at a constant rate until a new steady-state cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) pressure is attained, one can estimate clinically the apparent resistance (Ra) to drainage of CSF in mm saline/ml./minute. This intrathecal saline infusion test (ITSIT) was performed 36 times on 29 patients with diverse intracranial problems, and the results were analysed and, in most cases, compared with the pneumoencephalogram and the isotope cisternogram. The ITSIT is a safe, simple test to estimate Ra, but factors which are difficult to control (occult leaks from the subarachnoid space; independent fluctuations of CSF pressure) limit its reliability and clinical usefulness. If closely correlated with the clinical syndrome, the pneumoencephalogram, and the isotope cisternogram, an ITSIT may identify decisively the patient who needs a shunt. In addition the ITSIT offers another method by which to investigate the pathophysiological mechanisms of the various states of intracranial hypertension. Results from the test performed on four patients with intracranial hypertension of unknown cause (pseudotumor cerebri) suggest that the underlying mechanism in this condition is probably an impediment to normal CSF drainage.

To improve their ability to identify those patients with enlarged ventricles who would benefit from a shunt, Katzman and Hussey (1970) devised a simple constant-infusion manometric test to estimate ‘cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) absorptive ability’. An extension of a method first described in 1948 by Folds and Arrowood, the intrathecal saline infusion test (ITSIT) of Katzman and Hussey is performed by infusing saline intrathecally at a constant rate until a new steady-state CSF pressure is reached. They found that at an arbitrarily chosen infusion rate of 0·76 ml./minute the CSF pressure does not rise above 300 mm saline in normal subjects. However, at the same infusion rate in patients with an impediment to CSF drainage, the pressure stabilizes at a higher level or even continues to rise until the infusion must be stopped before a steady-state pressure is reached. They concluded that the ITSIT helped them to identify patients who would benefit from a shunt (Hussey, Schanzer, and Katzman, 1970).

This report of additional experience with the ITSIT helps to clarify its role in current clinical practice.

METHOD

The test was performed essentially as described by Katzman and Hussey (1970), except that sedation was usually unnecessary. Briefly, the procedure begins with a routine lumbar puncture performed with an 18 gauge needle. The patient remains in the lateral decubitus with the mid-sagittal plane of his neuraxis horizontal. The CSF pressure is recorded after a 15 minute stabilization period, and the intrathecal saline infusion is begun. A Harvard pump, previously calibrated, infuses 0·9% sodium chloride solution (prepared for intravenous use) at a constant rate of 0·76 ml./minute, and measurements of the CSF pressure are made every one to five minutes. The infusion is stopped when a new steady-state pressure is reached, or when the CSF pressure rises above 800 mm saline.

At the end of the ITSIT in 25 patients, the CSF pressure is returned to the opening level, and through the lumbar puncture needle 100 mCi of high specific activity radioactive iodinated human serum albumin (RISA) is injected intrathecally for subsequent routine cisternography.
Pressure recordings were plotted against time and these curves compared with the range of normal established by Katzman and Hussey (1970) (Fig. 1). The same data were also used to calculate resistance to CSF drainage.

Pappenheimer, Heisey, Jordan, and Downer (1962) and Davson, Hollingsworth, and Segal (1970) have proposed that the normal flow of CSF from the subarachnoid space—that is, drainage—follows Poiseuille's law:

\[
\text{Flow} = \frac{\text{Pressure gradient (CSF pressure–dural sinus pressure)}}{\text{Resistance}}.
\]

If this is accepted then the slope of change in pressure gradient (\(\Delta P\)) versus change in flow or drainage rate (\(\Delta Q\)) is a measure of resistance (\(R\)) to CSF drainage (Davson et al., 1970):

\[
R = \frac{\Delta P}{\Delta Q}
\]

To calculate \(R\) from the ITSIT results, the change in pressure (new steady-state pressure–opening pressure) is divided by the change in drainage rate, which in this series was 0.76 ml./minute; \(R\) is recorded as mm saline/ml./minute. These data can be plotted on a graph and the slope of \(\Delta P\) versus \(\Delta Q\) compared with normals. At the steady-state opening pressure, \(Q\) is assumed to be 0.35 ml./minute (Rubin, Henderson, Ommaya, Walker, and Rall, 1966; Cutler, Page, Gallicich and Watters, 1968; Lorenzo, Page, and Watters, 1970). Figure 2 depicts the upper limit of the normal pressure–flow relationship as reported by Katzman and Hussey (1970). The slope of the line is a measure of resistance, and the upper limit is taken as 180 mm saline/ml./minute. Plotted on the same graph are the data reported by Cutler et al. (1968). Using a different method they found the average resistance to be 132 mm/ml./min.

The validity of the preceding hypothesis depends on the following assumptions being correct:

1. Flow characteristics of saline and CSF are sufficiently similar to permit one to simulate increased CSF flow by injecting saline.
2. Resistance to flow offered by the infusion tubing and needle, and by the normal spinal sub-
arachnoid space is negligible. Resistance of the tubing used in the tests reported here is less than 1 mm saline/ml./minute. Resistance of the normal spinal subarachnoid space is unknown, but it is assumed to be small and sufficiently similar from patient to patient to allow one to ignore it.

3. Endogenous CSF is formed at a constant rate regardless of the CSF pressure. This has been found to be true for humans both normal (Rubin et al., 1966; Cutler et al., 1968) and abnormal (Lorenzo et al., 1970), at least up to 400 mm water, but not for the cat (Hochwald, Lux, Sahar, and Ransohoff, 1972).

4. The observed ΔP is in fact equal to the actual change in pressure gradient (CSF pressure–dural sinus pressure). For this to be the case, dural sinus pressure must remain constant while the intracranial CSF pressure increases, which has been demonstrated to be true for cats and dogs (Weed and Flexner, 1933; Weed, 1935; Bering, 1958; Shulman, Yarnell, and Ransohoff, 1964; Shulman, 1965), as well as most adult humans so tested (author's unpublished data). But other reports leave little doubt that in some infants with hydrocephalus (Shulman and Ransohoff, 1965; Norrell, Wilson, Howieson, Megison, and Bertan, 1969), adults with subdural haematomas (Osterholm, 1970) and in hydrocephalic animals (Shulman et al., 1964; Sahar, Hochwald, and Ransohoff, 1970), the dural sinus pressure does indeed increase as the intracranial pressure increases. In this case R, as measured by monitoring CSF pressure while changing Q with the saline infusion, will be falsely high. Although a rise in dural sinus pressure does impede CSF drainage, forcing the steady-state CSF pressure yet higher, it does so by affecting the pressure gradient and not the resistance.

And unless the dural sinus pressure is monitored during the ITSIT, one does not know in a given case if an impedance to CSF drainage is due to abnormal R, to a rising dural sinus pressure, or to both. Consequently, resistance as measured in this study, without monitoring the dural sinus pressure, is referred to as 'apparent resistance' (Ra).

RESULTS

Of 36 tests attempted on 29 patients 35 were carried to completion. One test ended prematurely because the patient had radicular pain from needling of a rootlet. Complications were minor. About one-quarter of the patients had mild paresthesiae of the lower extremities that resolved within an hour of the end of the test. One-third had some degree of typical post-lumbar puncture headache, which resolved within one week. Neither aseptic nor pyogenic meningitis was encountered.

FIG. 3. CSF pressure–flow relationships in patients with diverse intracranial problems. (a) Hydrocephalus: two of the five are abnormal. (b) Post-traumatic encephalopathy (three cases—all normal) and active cryptococcal meningitis (one case—abnormal. Infusion stopped before steady-state was achieved). (c) Dural sinus obstruction: two cases, both abnormal. (d) Pseudotumor cerebri: four of five cases abnormal. The one case with normal Ra had had a subtemporal decompression two years before ITSIT. — from Cutler et al. (1968). ▲—▲ = from Katzman and Hussey (1970). ■——■ = meningitis. ○—○ = cases, except in (b) where ○—○ = post-traumatic.
a patient with communicating hydrocephalus and dementia. In another patient, whose neurological examination and contrast studies were normal, the test was abnormal. Such results provoke two questions: First, how reliable is this test? Second, what is the significance of an abnormal test?

This study indicates that the ITSIT is not completely reliable because both false normal and false abnormal tests occur. A test will be falsely normal if all the saline is not infused into the subarachnoid space or if fluid leaks from the subarachnoid space through a hole in the meninges (Lundberg and West, 1965). Subsequent isotope cisternography helps to identify invalid tests, in that the isotope may loculate subdurally or fail to rise normally into the head, as happened in seven of the 36 tests reported here. But it will not identify all occult leaks. Consequently a normal ITSIT should be given little weight in the final decision-making process for or against shunt emplacement. A test will be falsely abnormal if an extraneous factor such as increased cerebral blood flow due to CO2 retention independently increases CSF pressure. Dozing may increase PCO2 sufficiently to raise CSF pressure (Meyer, Gotham, Tazaki, and Gotoh, 1961). Both ketamine and halothane anaesthesia also increase cerebral blood flow and, in turn, the CSF pressure (McDowall, 1966; McDowall, Barker, and Jennett, 1966; Dawson, Michenfelder, and Theye, 1971; Gardner, Olson, and Lichtiger, 1971). Finally, CSF pressure can be driven to spuriously high levels if a pot-bellied patient increases his central venous pressure by rolling even slightly prone. Nevertheless, because factors producing false abnormal tests are relatively easy to control, abnormal test results tend to be more reliable than normal ones.

What is the significance of increased resistance to CSF drainage? Often it appears to be related directly to symptoms, as for example in patients with hydrocephalus. But increased resistance to CSF drainage, and the attendant intracranial hypertension, can be asymptomatic, as was true for most patients with pseudotumor cerebri (intracranial hypertension of unknown cause) or partial occlusion of a dural sinus reported here. Therefore a cause and effect relationship between symptoms and increased resistance to CSF

Table 1 summarizes the results from the entire series, and Table 2 compares the results of the ITSIT in 23 patients who also had pneumoencephalograms and isotope cisternograms suitable for comparison.

**DISCUSSION**

As expected, Ra was increased above normal in those conditions commonly considered as impeding CSF drainage, such as brain tumour, communicating hydrocephalus, and meningitis (Fig. 3). On the other hand, some results were unexpected. For example, the test was normal in
drainage cannot be assumed. To assess the significance of an abnormal ITSIT one must correlate it with the entire clinical picture. An abnormal infusion test alone is insufficient to justify placing a shunt.

For two patients among the 29 studied, the test provided decisive data: one patient with intracranial hypertension caused by partial occlusion of a lateral sinus, and another with active cryptococcal meningitis. Both patients had enormous increases in Ra to CSF drainage (Fig. 3b and c), neither had hydrocephalus, yet both probably benefited from shunt emplacement.

Table 2 compares the results of the pneumoencephalogram and isotope cisternogram with the ITSIT among each of 23 patients. TheITSIT revealed that 14 had impaired CSF drainage. Six of these 14 patients had normal pneumoencephalograms and they included four with pseudotumor cerebri, one with partial occlusion of a dural sinus, and one with a sociopathic personality but no neurological abnormality. Eight of the same 14 had normal isotope cisternograms and they included the four with pseudotumor cerebri, two with partial occlusion of a dural sinus, one with a thalamic glioblastoma, and the one sociopath. These data imply that impediment to CSF drainage sufficient to cause intracranial hypertension need not be associated with hydrocephalus; indeed such is usual for both patients and experimental animals with chronically elevated dural sinus pressure (Russell, 1949; Foley, 1955; Bradshaw, 1956; Kalbag and Woolf, 1967; Guthrie, Dunbar, and Karpell, 1970). Furthermore, they imply that unless the process that is increasing resistance to CSF drainage also grossly changes the CSF compartment, both pneumoencephalogram and isotope cisternogram remain normal. Finally, they imply that some cases of pseudotumor cerebri are caused by a process that impedes CSF drainage. Indirect evidence suggests two possible causes for the impediment. One is an occult lesion of the arachnoid villi, as suggested by the work of Hayes, McCombs, and Faherty (1971) with vitamin A-deficient calves that develop increased CSF pressure, presumably due to interference with CSF drainage by a fibrosis of the arachnoid villi. These calves do not develop hydrocephalus (K. C. Hayes, 1971, personal communication).

The second is a partial obstruction to the craniocephalic venous drainage system that is angiographically undetectable but nevertheless physiologically significant enough to elevate chronically the dural sinus pressure (Ray and Dunbar, 1951; Davidoff, 1956). These speculations could be sustained or refuted by adequate study in suitable cases of the morphology of the arachnoid villi and pressures within the dural venous sinuses.

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*J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1973 36: 313-318
doi: 10.1136/jnnp.36.2.313

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