Short report

The significance of the incidental finding of basal ganglia calcification on computed tomography

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SUMMARY  Basal ganglia calcification was found as an incidental finding in 42 out of 7000 patients who underwent computed tomography. The calcification showed on plain skull radiography when the maximum density on computed tomography exceeded 100 Hounsfield units. The 26 patients with basal ganglia calcification detected on computed tomography who were available for follow-up, were investigated with matched controls. No clinical features of basal ganglia calcification were noted. Twenty-four patients had no significant metabolic abnormality and two patients had parathyroid disorder identified.

Basal ganglia calcification identified radiographically has been associated with any one of 24 conditions1,2 (table) with treatable parathyroid disease being the most common of these associations.3 Computed tomography (CT) has identified basal ganglia calcification more sensitively than plain skull radiographs,4–9 but the incidence of disease including parathyroid disorder in the CT group has been less.2,4–7 This study was carried out to correlate radiographically basal ganglia calcification on CT with that on plain skull radiographs; to attempt to define any systemic metabolic mechanism of basal ganglia calcification formation; and to investigate the possibility of early detection of treatable parathyroid disease.

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Table  24 conditions described1,2 in association with radiographically identified basal ganglia calcification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Patients and methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idiopathic hypoparathyroidism</td>
<td>Cockayne's syndrome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary hypoparathyroidism</td>
<td>Lipoid proteinosis (hyalinosis cutis)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudohypoparathyroidism</td>
<td>Tuberose sclerosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo-pseudohypoparathyroidism</td>
<td>Parkinsonism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hyperparathyroidism</td>
<td>Vascular disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothyroidism</td>
<td>Cerebral haemorrhage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth anoxia</td>
<td>Radiation therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon monoxide intoxication</td>
<td>Methotrexate therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lead intoxication</td>
<td>Cytomegalic inclusion disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fahr's syndrome (ferrocacinosis)</td>
<td>Encephalitis (measles, chicken pox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial idiopathic symmetrical basal ganglia calcification</td>
<td>Toxoplasmosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hastings-James syndrome (idiopathic lenticulo-dentate calcification)</td>
<td>Cysticercosis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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albumin, bilirubin, alkaline phosphatase, transaminases, gamma GT, creatine kinase, urates, cholesterol and magnesium were measured by standard techniques as were urinary electrolytes, urea, creatinine, calcium, phosphate and magnesium. Serum calcium was corrected for albumin, urine calcium/creatinine ratio and renal threshold phosphate concentration (TmPO4/GFR) were derived.

Results

The diagnosis of the patient group was most frequently epilepsy, headache, cerebral infarction or dementia. No clinical evidence of basal ganglia disease was found in the patient group. Features of idiopathic hypoparathyroidism and pseudohypoparathyroidism were each found in one patient. Of the eight epileptic patients, one had cataracts, macular degeneration, sensori-neural deafness, psychoneurosis and hypertension with negative family history; another two had had birth anoxia. One male with optic atrophy had low intelligence. All but nine patients were receiving drugs: most commonly these were anticonvulsants, diuretics or steroids.

Plain skull radiographs showed basal ganglia calcification in eight out of 26 patients. There was no correlation between the distribution of basal ganglia calcification on CT and underlying disease. Fifteen patients had more or less identical density of basal ganglia calcification in each hemisphere; two more were significantly denser in the right hemisphere and seven more were denser in the left hemisphere (a significant difference being greater than 20H). In general basal ganglia calcification showed on the plain skull radiographs where the maximum density on CT was greater than 100H and where average density was greater than 65H. The only exception was one patient who had a maximum density of 211H and average density of 71H with negative plain skull radiographs; this was explained by the very small area of calcification involved.

There was no significant difference between the patient and control groups in any of the direct and derived biochemistry, except for the serum albumin, where the control group had a lower range than the patient group (p < 0.002), but both were within the normal range. Of all other indices, the following were normal: serum electrolytes, urea, creatinine, urate, cholesterol, bilirubin, transaminases and lactate dehydrogenase. Elevated blood glucose was present in five patients with either idiopathic or steroid-induced diabetes. Elevated serum gamma GT was found in five patients who were either on anticonvulsant therapy or were regular alcohol drinkers and the same patients had elevated serum alkaline phosphatase levels (the increased isoenzyme being of liver origin.) One patient had biochemistry typical of idiopathic hypoparathyroidism and one of pseudo-hypoparathyroidism. There were isolated mild abnormalities of either serum phosphate, magnesium TmPO4/GFR or urine calcium/creatinine ratio in nine patients not suggestive of significant metabolic disease.

Discussion

Anticonvulsant therapy has been linked with basal ganglia calcification; however, there is no evidence that anticonvulsant therapy per se causes such calcification. Of our eight epileptic patients, all taking anticonvulsant therapy, two had confirmed parathyroid disorder and a further three had isolated biochemical abnormalities of doubtful significance. Our control group also received anticonvulsant therapy. Osteomalacia has occasionally been described with anticonvulsant therapy but it is not known to be associated with basal ganglia calcification.

Radiologically, where basal ganglia calcification has been identified by CT, the rate of detection by plain skull radiographs ranges from 7-10%. Our higher proportion of 30% is probably attributable to the fine focus x-ray tube used. It has been stated that where regions other than the globus pallidus were involved, “pathological calcification” existed. We accept that this is frequently the case where metabolic groups are being studied but we did not find this correlation. Indeed our patient with idiopathic hypoparathyroidism had negative plain films and mild calcification of only the globus pallidus, while one of the most florid examples of basal ganglia calcifications on CT with positive plain skull radiographs was a 43-year-old man with headaches, no drug therapy and normal clinical and biochemical assessment. Owing to the superior sensitivity of CT over plain skull radiographs in the detection of basal ganglia calcification, the patient with idiopathic hypoparathyroidism was undoubtedly diagnosed earlier.

References

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