We used [123I]IBZM SPECT. The ten consecutive right-handed patients (eight male and two female) were classified into four with simple and six with dystonic writer's cramp depending on whether or not the symptoms appeared only during writing. None of the patients had been treated with neuroleptic, dopaminergic, or anticholinergic drugs during the two weeks prior to the examination. Hypokinetic-rigid symptoms and resting tremor were absent in all patients. Bradykinesia of the hands was assessed with a pegboard test, measuring the time (s) required to invert eight pegs. Pegboard performance of patients was compared with that of 46 age-matched controls. Results from [123I]IBZM SPECT were compared with 12 other age-matched controls from the normal population. A brain dedicated SPECT system, the Strichman Medical Equipment 810X, was used. Two hours after intravenous injection of approximately 185 MBq [123I]IBZM (Cygnus Technical University, Eindhoven), tomographic SPECT studies were performed. A maximum of 12 slices was made, starting at the orbitomeatal line and proceeding parallel to it (300 s/slice; inter-slice distance 2 mm). For analysis of specific striatal [123I]IBZM binding, two slices with the highest striatal activity were summed and a template with fixed regions of interest for the striatum and occipital cortex was placed bilaterally on the summed images.2 The ratio of the striatal binding divided by the occipital binding quantifies specific binding.

The ratios (table) did not differ among the three groups (t tests). Left and right [123I]IBZM striatal: occipital ratios were significantly lower in patients than in controls (t test, P < 0.001). There was no asymmetry between [123I]IBZM ratios for the hemispheres in patients or controls (repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tests involving side, group, and by side: P > 0.05). The pegboard test did not differ between patients with writer's cramp and controls in either hand (t tests), showing that the patients with writer's cramp did not have bradykinesia. There was no correlation between age or duration of disease and [123I]IBZM ratios (Pearson's correlation coefficients). None of the variables differed between patients with simple and dystonic writer's cramp.

The results suggest that the striatal dopaminergic system is involved in writer's cramp given that patients with writer's cramp have a significantly lower level of striatal [123I]IBZM binding than controls. Unfortunately, lack of an accurate measure of the severity of writer's cramp itself prevented us from studying the relation between severity of dystonia and [123I]IBZM. We did not find a correlation between [123I]IBZM ratios and duration of disease or age. This probably means that the decline in striatal D2 receptors is not linearly progressiv otherwise stated, however, which accounts for the clinical impression. However, because the preclinical [123I]IBZM ratios of the individual patients were not known, it is hazardous to assess rates of decline in a population.

The results raise some questions. Firstly, there was bilateral reduction of available striatal D2 receptors, whereas the symptoms were unilateral and there was no asymmetry between the hemispheres. Bilateral abnormalities in writer's cramp, have, however, also been found by others.3 This bilaterality probably only means that the abnormalities found are related to particular motor dysfunctions which are not properly challenged, as shown by the fact that many patients develop writer's cramp on the left side, if they change to writing with the left hand. Accordingly, it is also not uncommon to find involvement of the left, or fingering hand, in musicians playing keyboards, guitars, or other stringed instruments.3

A second question is why the reduced availability of D2 receptors was not accompanied by parkinsonism in our patients. According to well known models of basal ganglia function, overactivity of the indirect striatopallidal pathway is usually associated with parkinsonism. Because D2 receptor stimulation inhibits the indirect pathway, by contrast with the D1 receptor driven direct pathway, the decreased striatal D2 receptor binding in writer's cramp indicates disinhibi tion.4 This may indicate that the abnormalities might be expected to be accompanied by parkinsonism. In line with this view, we found the mean [123I]IBZM ratio to be 1.43 (SD 0.16) in patients with hypokinetic-rigid symptoms due to multiple system atrophy or progressive supranuclear palsy,5 which is in the same range as the values obtained in most of the present patients with writer's cramp (1.27–1.59).

Therefore, our finding is probably better explained by loss of D2 receptors on cholinergic striatal interneurons rather than D2 receptors on striatal spiny output neurons. The number of D2 receptors on striatal cholinergic interneurons is sufficient to account for the decreased density of D2 receptors in our patients.6 Furthermore, striatal cholinergic interneurons are highly rep resented in the sensorimotor part of the striatum and are predominantly innervated by fibres from the thalamus suggesting a feed forward modulation from thalamus to striatum.4 A dysfunction of such thalamo-striatal sensorimotor function—caused by increased activity of striatal cholinergic interneurons resulting from disinhibition due to 1.27–1.59—might be the suggestion that central sensory processing in dystonia is impaired.7 Our hypothesis that writer's cramp dystonia could be related to an increased activity of striatal cholinergic interneurons is consistent with the increased density of striatal cholinergic interneurons in dystonia after perinatal asphyxial injury,8 and with the well known efficacy of anticholinergic therapy in dystonia.
included high dose intravenous steroid and immune absorption plasmapheresis. Because he did not improve, he was transferred to our hospital. There was no family history of neuropathy or other systemic diseases. On admission, he had anosmia (right 2-5 mm, left 3-5 mm), and light reflexes were absent on both sides. Ocular movement was impaired in all directions. The other cranial nerves were intact. Muscle power in the limbs was normal and there was no muscular atrophy. All deep tendon reflexes and Babinski’s sign were absent. Touch, cold, and pinprick sensations were slightly impaired in his hands and feet, but not in his face and trunk. There was profound loss of position and vibration senses in all limbs. The patient had pseudoneurothalamus of the upper limbs. A finger-nose test showed dysmetria with terminal tremor in both sides. He could not sit up in bed due to severe truncal ataxia. Autonomic functions were intact. Routine laboratory tests and concentrations of IgM and other immunoglobulins were normal. Serum immunoelectrophoresis did not show monoclonal gammapathy. The titre of cold agglutinin was not raised. There was no CSF pleocytosis and CSF protein content was 275 mg/dl (normal: 30-45 mg/dl). Brain MRI showed hypertrophy of both oculomotor nerves with no gadolinium enhancement (figure). The EEG was normal.

Motor nerve conduction studies showed a prolonged F. wave latencies (39.6 ms, control 25.4 ms (SD 1.4 ms)) with decreased amplitude of compound muscle action potentials (2.3 mV, control 9.5 ms (SD 3.2 mV)) in the right median nerve and prolongation of H. wave latency (44.4 ms (SD 3.4 ms)) with reduced motor conduction velocity (36 m/s, control 49 ms (SD 3 ms)) in the right tibial nerve. Sensory nerve conduction studies in the right median and sural nerves showed decreased amplitude of sensory nerve action potentials (SNAPs) and reduced conduction velocities (median nerve: SCV 24 m/s, SNAP 0.9 mV, sural nerve: SCV 38 m/s, SNAP 0.9 mV). An EMG showed mild chronic partial denervation in all limbs. Sural nerve biopsy showed a decreased density of large myelinated fibres (density of myelinated fibres: total 8721/mm², 5 μm ≥ 138/μm², 5 μm ≤ 8565/μm², control; total 8500 (SD 650)/μm², 5 μm ≥ 3080 (SD 462)/μm², 5 μm ≤ 5412 (SD 352)/μm², associated with several thinly myelinated axons. Some fibres showed myelin ovoid degeneration. A few onion bulb formations were noted. There was subperineurial oedema in some fascicles. In teased fibre preparations, the frequency of fibres with segmental demyelination with remyelination was 6%, with axonal degeneration in 20%, and remyelination without demyelination in 10%. The severe truncal ataxia and oculomotorplegia improved after double filtration plasmapheresis. However, his symptoms gradually worsened three months later with increases in several anti-ganglioside antibodies. A combination of prednisolone and azathioprine treatment was not effective. Anti-gangliosid antibodies were investigated by enzyme linked immunostaining as previously described. 1 Antigens used in enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) were GM1, GM2, GM3, GD1α, GD1b, GD3, GT1b, GQ1b, galactocerebroside (Gal-C), and asialo GM1. ELISA showed IgM antibody activities against GD1b, GD3, GT1b, and GQ1b in the patient’s serum, but not IgG antibody activities against any of the gangliosides. The reactivity was also detected by thin layer chromatography and immunostaining. Although the antibody titres decreased after plasmapheresis, the titres rose again at the time of exacerbation, three months after plasmapheresis.

This unusual case has features of both chronic sensory ataxic neuropathy and oculomotorplegia. Considering the effectiveness of plasmapheresis, the pathophysiological mechanism may be immune mediated. IgM M protein binding to several gangliosides with disialosyl residues, such as GD1b, GD3, GT1b, and GQ1b, have been detected specifically in serum samples from patients with sensory ataxic neuropathy. 1 The present patient had serum IgM antibody with reactivities to GD1b and other gangliosides with disialosyl residues, although no IgM M protein was detected. Preliminary incubation with GD1b, GD3, and GT1b, performed as previously described 1 reduced the antibody activities against all four gangliosides (data not shown). It suggests that the same IgM antibody, which may recognise the disialosyl residue, binds to all four gangliosides. This antibody reactivity may play an important part in chronic sensory ataxic neuropathy in this patient.

Gadolinium enhanced coronal T1 weighted image. Note hypertrophy of bilateral oculomotor nerve without enhancement (arrow).


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Chronic sensory ataxic neuropathy and ophthalmoplegia with oculomotor nerve hypertrophy associated with IgM antibodies against gangliosides containing disialosyl groups.

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