Matters arising

Clinical overdiagnosis of vascular dementia versus necropsy confirmed series

Frisoni et al. have used their data from clinical diagnosis of vascular dementia to question the diagnostic usefulness of apolipoprotein E (apoE)-4 in the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. As previously pointed out, the criteria for vascular dementia do not exclude Alzheimer's disease and are meant as a "guideline" and "await testing and validation." It is common to over-diagnose vascular dementia in many clinical series. Until and unless Frisoni et al. have neuropathologically confirmed their diagnostic accuracy, their conclusions must be seriously questioned. In fact, as questionable as the diagnostic considerations for a clinical diagnosis of vascular dementia may be, other investigators have failed to replicate the increased e4 allele frequency previously reported by Frisoni et al. in clinical vascular dementia.

Four series have independently measured the specificity, sensitivity, and positive predictive value of apoE genotyping in prospectively ascertained patients with neuropathologically confirmed dementia (Table 1) (Welsh-Bohmer et al., unpublished data). As often found in very large neuropathology series, vascular dementia was uncommon in each of these series. Moreover, the positive predictive value of having a single e4 allele was greater than 95% in all series of symptomatic patients, despite differences in ascertainment protocols. For example, subjects in the CERAD series were enrolled early in their disease from more than 20 different centers. The positive predictive value in the interim report of this large series with 162 subjects was 97% (Table 2) (Welsh-Bohmer et al., unpublished data).

Other authors besides Frisoni et al. have implied that their clinical diagnoses are without error and should be accepted as the gold standard. Recently, Slooter et al. reported that "apoE test characteristics for a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease were calculated, with patients having another type of dementia as reference, and our diagnostic work up as the gold standard." The real question for the evaluation of these data is whether one accepts the clinical diagnosis of vascular dementia by Frisoni et al. as the "gold standard," for which one looks to necropsy confirmed series for formal measurement of the positive predictive value. The definitive diagnoses of Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and other dementias are based on neuropathological criteria. The missing data for Frisoni et al., Slooter et al., and others are the necropsy confirmed accuracy of their diagnoses. It is highly likely that many vascular dementia patients of Frisoni et al. will meet the neuropathological criteria for Alzheimer's disease.

Frisoni et al. reply:

We appreciate Roses and Saunders' attention to our work. They refer to a brief note in which we discuss Roses' proposal that the detection of an apolipoprotein (apoE) e4/e4 genotype in a demented patient might suggest the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease with about 95% probability.

For these cross comments among authors to be useful contributions to the Journal's audience, the proposed practical application of apoE genotyping should be explicitly pointed out. The Duke group has proposed apoE genotyping (a) in the demented patient to enhance the accuracy of the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, and (b) in the patient with probable Alzheimer's disease to make the diagnosis of definite Alzheimer's disease. Our letter considered the first question and suggested that if the e4 allele is increased also in vascular dementia, the likelihood that a demented patient has Alzheimer's disease does not increase from 66 to 94% but only increases from 43 to 52% when he is found to have the e4/e4 genotype. Therefore, the diagnostic gain of apoE testing might be low. Far from claiming that our diagnosis of vascular dementia and therefore our estimate of the e4 frequency are the gold standard of reference, we cautioned that both views "will need to be verified in clinicopathological studies considering the association of e4 with non-Alzheimer's dementia." However, the data by Roses and Saunders in the above commentary consider the second issue, that of diagnosis of definite Alzheimer's disease in patients with probable Alzheimer's disease, further stressing what they recently argued in the Lancet. What the authors convincingly propose is that the detection of an e4 allele in patients with probable Alzheimer's disease brings the likelihood of them having definite Alzheimer's disease very close to 100%. Here, vascular dementia is no longer an issue. The central suggestion instead are (a) what is the prior probability that a patient with probable Alzheimer's disease has definite Alzheimer's disease?
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