The use of electrophysiological monitoring in the intraoperative management of intracranial aneurysms

Jaime R López, Steven D Chang, Gary K Steinberg

Abstract

Objectives—Somatosensory evoked potentials (SSEPs) and brainstem auditory evoked potentials (BAEPs) have been increasingly utilised during surgery for intracranial aneurysms to identify cerebral ischaemia. Between July 1994 and April 1996, we surgically treated 70 aneurysms in 49 consecutive patients (58 operations) with the aid of intraoperative evoked potential monitoring. This study sought to evaluate the usefulness of SSEP and BAEP monitoring during intracranial aneurysm surgery.

Methods—Mean patient age was 51.9 (range 18–79) years. The sizes of the aneurysms were 3–4 mm (15), 5–9 mm (26), 10–14 mm (11), 15–19 mm (seven), 20–24 mm (six), and >25 mm (five). SSEPs were monitored in 58 procedures (100%) and BAEPs in 15 (26%). The neurological status of the patients was evaluated before and after surgery.

Results—Thirteen of the 58 procedures (22%) monitored with SSEPs had SSEP changes (12 transient, one persistent); 45 (78%) had no SSEP changes. Three of 15 patients (20%) monitored with BAEPs had changes (two transient, one persistent); 12 (80%) had no BAEP changes. Of the 14 patients with transient SSEP or BAEP changes, these changes resolved with adjustment or removal of aneurysm clips (nine), elevating MAP (four), or retractor adjustment (one). Mean time from precipitating event to electrophysiological change was 8.9 minutes (range 3–32), and the mean time for recovery of potentials in patients with transient changes was 20.2 minutes (range 3–60). Clinical outcome was excellent in 39 patients, good in five, and poor in three (two patients died), and was largely related to pretreatment grade.

Conclusions—SSEPs and BAEPs are useful in preventing clinical neurological injury during surgery for intracranial aneurysms and in predicting which patients will have unfavourable outcomes.

Keywords: aneurysm, electrophysiology, evoked potentials

Previous reviews have documented the relation of somatosensory evoked potentials (SSEPs) and brainstem auditory evoked potentials (BAEPs) with cortical blood flow. Despite the benefits suggested in these reviews, electrophysiological monitoring has not been routinely used by neurosurgeons during intracranial aneurysm surgery. Many of the previous reviews utilised single modality evoked potential recordings, and, to date, very few reviews have documented larger series results using multimodality intraoperative electrophysiological monitoring. We report our results in 49 consecutive patients with 70 aneurysms who underwent 58 operations with the aid of multimodality intraoperative monitoring.

Methods

PATIENT POPULATION

From September 1994 to April 1996, the senior author (GKS) surgically clipped 70 aneurysms in 49 patients (58 operations) with the aid of evoked potential monitoring. The patients had a mean age of 51.9 years (range 18–79). There were 16 men and 33 women in this review. The patients were graded clinically using the scale of Drake et al, both before and after surgery. Grades are defined as excellent (able to work with no neurological handicaps); good (having a neurological deficit but being able to work and live independently); poor (having a severe neurological deficit and dependent on family or nursing for help); or dead. At initial presentation, 40 of the patients were graded excellent and nine were good (table 1).

Twenty two of the patients (45%) presented with one or more clinical haemorrhages, seven patients (14%) presented with visual changes, six patients (12%) presented with severe headaches, three patients (6%) presented with progressive neurological deficits, and 11 patients (22%) had their aneurysms identified as incidental findings during MRI evaluations for other diagnoses. Thirty six of the patients (73%) had one intracranial aneurysm requiring clipping; nine (18%) had two aneurysms; two (4%) had three aneurysms; and two (4%) had five aneurysms. The size of each patient’s aneurysm was measured on preoperative angiograms. Fifteen aneurysms (21%) were 3–4 mm; 26 (37%) were 5–9 mm; 11 (16%) were 10–14 mm; seven (10%) were 15–19 mm; six (9%) were 20–24 mm; and five (7%) were greater than 25 mm in maximal diameter.

ELECTROPHYSIOLOGICAL MONITORING

In the majority (52) of cases, preoperative SSEP and/or BAEP testing was performed. No
adverse effects were seen in those patients who underwent preoperative evoked potential testing. In cases where the internal carotid artery (ICA) and/or middle cerebral artery (MCA) vascular territory was at risk, cortical SSEPs in response to contralateral median nerve stimulation at the wrist were performed. Cortical SSEP monitoring of the anterior cerebral artery (ACA) vascular territory was accomplished by stimulating the contralateral posterior tibial nerve at the ankle. Monitoring of the vertebral and basilar artery vascular supply required a combination of median nerve generated cortical SSEPs and BAEPs, which were acquired after bilateral independent stimulation.

A Nicolet Viking Four Electrodiagnostic System (Nicolet Instrument Corporation, Madison, Wisconsin) was used to obtain the evoked potentials. Standard surface EEG electrodes were used and placed, using collodion (except for Erb’s point), according to the International 10–20 system. Recording electrode positions included bilateral Erb’s point, cervical spine (C7), C3’, C4’, CZ, and CZ’ for SSEP recordings and CZ for BAEP recordings. A frontal (FZ) reference was used for SSEPs, and an ear (A1/A2) was used for BAEPs. For SSEP recordings, bilateral alternating side to side stimulation was performed. Constant current stimulation of 0.2 ms duration was delivered via standard surface bar electrodes with a cathode 3 cm proximal to the anode. Stimulation intensity was sufficient to elicit thumb twitch or a clear Erb’s point evoked potential. Rate of stimulation varied between 3.7 and 4.7 Hz. Electrode impedances were kept below 5000 Ω. Filters were routinely set at 30 Hz and 3000 Hz. Sweep time was at 50 ms (median nerve) and 100 ms (posterior tibial nerve). Two hundred and fifty responses were averaged.

BAEPs were generated by applying transducer induced ear clicks using ear inserts. Click polarity was rarefaction and delivered at a rate between 10.7 and 11.1 Hz. One thousand responses were averaged. Click intensity varied from patient to patient but did not exceed 105 dB. White noise was always applied to the contralateral ear.

For analysis of SSEP recordings, both the latency and amplitude (N19-P24) of the cerebral generated evoked responses were used. Central conduction time (CCT) (N19-N13) was also used whenever a reproducible cervical spine potential was obtained. Critical SSEP changes were defined as an amplitude reduction of the cerebral evoked potential of greater than 50%, latency delay (N19/P24) of greater than 10%, and/or an increase in the CCT of >1 ms. For BAEP analysis, the latency and amplitude of all peaks (I-V) were measured. Changes in BAEP which were thought to be significant included a >50% amplitude reduction in waves III or V, and/or an increase in latency of the fifth peak or of the interpeak latency difference (PV-PV) greater than 1 ms.

Temperature effects were taken into consideration for both the SSEP and BAEP. Changes were further classified as permanent if the changes persisted to the end of the procedure and transient if the changes recovered to >50% of the baseline before completion of surgery.

### Table 1 Clinical results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient age</th>
<th>Aneurysm locations</th>
<th>EP change</th>
<th>Time from event to EP change</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Time to resolution</th>
<th>Neurological change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before surgery</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After surgery</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E=excellent; G=good; P=poor; D=dead.

### Table 2 Patients with electrophysiological changes and/or new postoperative neurological deficits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient age</th>
<th>Aneurysm locations</th>
<th>EP change</th>
<th>Time from event to EP change</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Time to resolution</th>
<th>Neurological change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>R superior hypophyseal, 5 mm</td>
<td>60% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>4 min</td>
<td>Clip repositioned</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 3 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>L P-com, 6 mm</td>
<td>60% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Clip repositioned</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 16 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>R P-com, 15 mm</td>
<td>100% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>10 min</td>
<td>Clip repositioned</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 14 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>R P-com, 3 mm; R ICA, 10 mm; R MCA, 15 mm</td>
<td>55% decrease in left SSEP; 39% decrease in right SSEP</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 9 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>L PICA, 10 mm</td>
<td>50% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Temporary clip removed</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 5 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>R P-com, 18 mm; R ICA, 15 mm</td>
<td>50% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>17 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 26 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>A-com, 35 mm</td>
<td>60% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>12 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 12 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>L MCA, 7 mm</td>
<td>70% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Retractor adjusted</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 4 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Basilar, 10 mm</td>
<td>100% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>3 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 3 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>L MCA, 25 mm</td>
<td>60% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Temporary clip removed</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 10 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>A-com, 22 mm</td>
<td>65% decrease in SSEP (right)</td>
<td>8 min</td>
<td>Temporary clip removed</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 18 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>L vertebral, 20 mm</td>
<td>Delayed left BAEP, waves III-V</td>
<td>7 min</td>
<td>Temporary clip removed</td>
<td>Partial recovery in 5 minutes; complete recovery in 60 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>R MCA, 7 mm; 3 R P1 segment aneurysms (2-3 mm)</td>
<td>100% decrease in SSEP</td>
<td>32 min</td>
<td>Clip repositioned</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 16 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Vertebral-basilar junction, 10 mm</td>
<td>50% decrease in SSEP (left)</td>
<td>12 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 30 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>50% decrease in SSEP (right)</td>
<td>8 min</td>
<td>Increased MAP</td>
<td>Complete resolution in 16 minutes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All electrophysiological changes are cortical potentials and correspond to the same side of the brain as the aneurysm in question, except where indicated; SSEP=somatosensory evoked potential; BAEP=brainstem auditory evoked potential; EP=electrophysiological; R=right; L=left; MCA=middle cerebral artery; ICA=internal carotid artery; P-com=posterior communicating artery; PICA=posterior inferior cerebral artery; A-com=anterior communicating artery.
Figure 1  A 61 year old woman presented with a subarachnoid haemorrhage. Evaluation disclosed a 7 mm right MCA aneurysm and four additional 2–3 mm posterior circulation complex aneurysms. Baseline SSEPs are shown (A). Five minutes after an aneurysm clip was placed over the MCA aneurysm, the right SSEP was lost (B). Careful inspection disclosed a perforating artery to be involved in the clip, and reposition of the clip resulted in restoration of the right SSEP over 59 minutes (C).

Trace 1, left BAEP; trace 2, right cortical evoked potential (C4' - FZ) after left median nerve stimulation; trace 3, right cortical evoked potential (C4' - C3') after left median nerve stimulation; trace 4, left brachial plexus evoked potential; trace 5, right BAEP; trace 6, left cortical evoked potential (C3' - FZ) after right median nerve stimulation; trace 7, left cortical evoked potential (C3' - C4') after right median nerve stimulation; trace 8, right brachial plexus evoked potential.
Figure 2  A 57 year old woman presented with a 2 cm left vertebral artery aneurysm after a subarachnoid haemorrhage. (A) Shows baseline SSEPs and BAEPs. (B) Seven minutes after a temporary clip was placed on the vertebral artery, the left BAEP was prolonged and waves IV and V were lost. (C) Removal of the clip resulted in restoration of the left BAEP over 5 minutes. Trace 1, left BAEP; trace 2, right cortical evoked potential (C4'-FZ) after left median nerve stimulation; trace 3, right cortical evoked potential (C4'-C3') after left median nerve stimulation; trace 4, left brachial plexus evoked potential; trace 5, right BAEP; trace 6, left cortical evoked potential (C3'-FZ) after right median nerve stimulation; trace 7, left cortical evoked potential (C3'-C4') after right median nerve stimulation; trace 8, right brachial plexus evoked potential.
A 48 year old man presented with a 2.2 cm anterior communicating artery aneurysm after a subarachnoid haemorrhage. (A) Shows baseline SSEPs. (B) Eight minutes after temporary clips were applied to both A1 arteries, there was a 50%-65% decrease in the cerebral SSEPs after right leg stimulation. (C) Removal of the temporary clips resulted in recovery of the SSEPs over 18 minutes. (D) Shows sequential changes in the SSEPs. Trace 1, right cortical SSEP (C4'-FZ) after left median nerve stimulation; trace 2, left brachial plexus: cortical SSEP (left Erb's-FZ) after left median nerve stimulation; trace 3, left cortical SSEP (C3'-FZ) after right median nerve stimulation; trace 4, right brachial plexus: cortical SSEP (right Erb's-FZ) after right median nerve stimulation; trace 5, right cortical SSEP (CZ'-FZ) after left posterior tibial nerve stimulation; trace 6, right cortical SSEP (CZ-FZ) after left posterior tibial nerve stimulation; trace 7, left cortical SSEP (CZ-FZ) after right posterior tibial nerve stimulation; trace 8, left cortical SSEP (CZ-FZ) after right posterior tibial nerve stimulation.

Figure 3
ELECTROPHYSIOLOGICAL RESULTS

Thirteen of the 58 procedures (22%) monitored with SSEPs were noted to have electrophysiological changes manifested as a 50% or greater decrease in amplitude (table 2). Forty-five (78%) procedures had no SSEP changes. Of the 13 procedures with unilateral SSEP changes, 12 were transient unilateral changes which resolved intraoperatively over an average of 17.2 minutes (range 3 to 59 minutes), whereas one was a persistent SSEP change (table 2). Of the 15 cases monitored with BAEPs, three (20%) showed a significant change in the BAEP ipsilateral to the side of surgery (two transient, one permanent). In the two procedures with transient BAEP changes, these changes resolved in 60 and 16 minutes. Twelve (80%) of the patients monitored with BAEPs showed no significant changes.

For the series in total, transient significant changes were noted in 14 cases (12 cases with SSEP changes and two cases with BAEP changes). The average time from precipitating event to electrophysiological change was 8.9 minutes (range 3–32 minutes). The average time for recovery of potentials in patients with transient electrophysiological changes was 20.2 minutes (range 3–60 minutes).

INTRAOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

All significant changes in either SSEPs or BAEPs were immediately relayed to the operating surgeon. In the 14 cases of transient electrophysiological changes, the evoked potential deficit resolved with adjustment of clips (nine patients) (figs 1–3), raising the mean arterial pressure (four patients) (fig 4), or adjustment of the retractor (one patient). In the two persistent cases of SSEP and BAEP changes, no precipitating event could be identified, and increases in MAP resulted in no significant improvement in the evoked potential.

CLINICAL RESULTS

Preoperative neurological examinations were performed by a neurologist 24 hours before surgery. Postoperative examinations were performed by the same neurologist within 24 hours of surgery. All patients with transient SSEP changes intraoperatively had no new neurological deficit postoperatively (table 2). The one patient with a persistent SSEP change had a complete loss of bilateral cortical SSEPs after a temporary clip was quickly placed on the basilar artery after rupture of a 2 cm basilar tip aneurysm. The aneurysm was successfully clipped, but both SSEP potentials only returned to 50% of their baseline levels; there were no changes in BAEP. The patient was obtunded postoperatively and expired 2 weeks after surgery. The two patients with transient intraoperative BAEP changes had no new postoperative deficits. The one patient with a persistent intraoperative BAEP change (persistent wave V delay occurring late in the case) emerged slowly from anesthesia and initially appeared to have no postoperative deficit. However, 2 hours later she required an emergent craniotomy for evacuation of a remote cerebellar hemorrhage with compression of the brainstem. Overall, patient clinical outcome was excellent in 39 patients, good in five, and poor in three. Two patients died during the follow-up period (table 1). Clinical outcome was largely related to pretreatment grade.

Discussion

ELECTROPHYSIOLOGICAL MONITORING FOR INTRACRANIAL SURGERY

Electrophysiological monitoring in the form of SSEPs and BAEPs has been used to evaluate cerebral function in intracranial aneurysm and tumor operative procedures, and a well established correlation exists between cerebral ischemia or injury and decreased electrophysiological function. The vascular distributions of the MCA, ACA, and ICA can be monitored with SSEPs, as the somatosensory cortex and internal capsule are supplied by branches of these vessels. In addition, thalamic subcortical activity, supplied by the posterior cerebral artery (PCA), can also be monitored using median nerve SSEPs. BAEPs are useful in monitoring the posterior circulation, as a
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results. BAEPs is useful, as their combined use resulted in significant SSEP or BAEP changes, usually within several minutes. Rapid removal and/or adjustment of clip position resolved the SSEP and BAEP changes in all these cases. In four cases, transient hypotension caused SSEP and BAEP changes (bilateral in two patients), generally with a critical threshold of 55–60 mm Hg. Increases in MAP by the anaesthesia team resolved these changes. Additionally, adjustment of retractors resolved electrophysiological changes in one patient.

Two patients had persistent electrophysiological changes. In the patient with persistent intraoperative SSEP changes (bilateral) they occurred as a result of emergent basilar artery clipping after intraoperative rupture. Bilateral thalamic ischaemia is the likely cause of these changes. The one patient with persistent intraoperative BAEP changes emerged from surgery for a right MCA aneurysm neurologically intact, but expired from a posterior fossa haemorrhage several hours later. This haemorrhage may have occurred during the aneurysm surgery, accounting for the change in BAEP, which was ipsilateral to the posterior fossa haemorrhage.

CLINICAL RESULTS

The clinical results largely paralleled the electrophysiological results. All patients with transient evoked potential changes had these potentials return to baseline levels by the conclusion of the procedure. None of these patients had postoperative deficits. By contrast, both patients with persistent electrophysiological changes had poor neurological outcomes and expired early in the postoperative course. Many of the patients with transient electrophysiological changes, particularly those secondary to clip placement, may have had clinical neurological deficits prevented as a direct result of the early warnings from changes in SSEPs or BAEPs.

OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING EVOKED POTENTIALS

All of the aneurysms clipped in this series were performed under mild hypothermia (mean temperature 32.6°C). This hypothermia usually caused a generalised slowing of conduction time and a decrease in evoked potential amplitude. We have, however, seen several cases of intracranial aneurysm surgery at our institution in which more severe hypothermia (28–29°C) was associated with severe bilateral changes in the evoked potential amplitudes which corrected on rewarming of the patient. Systemic hypotension causes bilateral decreases in evoked potential amplitude and delay of the onset latencies due to secondary hypoperfusion of neural structures. Anaesthesia can also alter evoked potentials through various mechanisms including a direct effect on monitoring modality, effects on cerebral blood flow, and systemic hypotension. We have noted significant changes in evoked potentials with higher levels of neural structure.
of inhaled anaesthetics such as isoflurane and desflurane, and barbiturates. For this reason, we employ a strict anaesthesia regimen consisting of a maximum of 0.6% isoflurane and 5% nitrous oxide; doses above 0.6% isoflurane interfere with electrophysiological monitoring. Fentanyl is administered during induction, but during the actual surgery, only very short acting remifentanyl is administered if needed to supplement the inhaled agents. Finally, technical difficulties with equipment, although rare, can occur. In two cases of electrophysiological monitoring during resection of vascular malformation at our institution, technical interference between operating room and evoked potential equipment resulted in non-continuous monitoring, and subsequent bilateral changes in evoked potentials (SSEPs) were noted once monitoring was resumed.

Summary
Electrophysiological monitoring has been shown, in this series, to be a useful intraoperative surgical adjunct during surgery for intracranial aneurysms. Evoked potential changes correlated with clinical outcome, and significant clinical deficits were predicted by electrophysiological changes. Furthermore, posterior circulation aneurysms were optimally monitored with dual SSEP and BAEP recordings in an attempt to minimise false negative results. Based on these findings, we think that rapid response to events precipitating electrophysiological changes may improve patient outcome. In this way, SSEPs and BAEPs become an important intraoperative tool for aneurysm surgery.

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