An unusual phenotype of McLeod syndrome with late onset axonal neuropathy

McLeod syndrome is a rare multisystem disorder defined by weak expression of the Kell glycoprotein antigens and the absence of a red blood cell surface antigen, Kx. The gene responsible for McLeod syndrome, XK, was cloned in 1994. The XK protein contains the Kx antigen missing in patients with McLeod syndrome. Mutation analysis of the XK gene has shown different deletions or point mutations in families with this condition.

Clinical features of McLeod syndrome are reported to be heterogeneous. Clinical manifestations include acanthocytosis, an increased level of serum creatine kinase (CK), progressive muscular atrophy, seizures, and involuntary movement. As the symptoms and signs of this syndrome seem to be variable even among siblings, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the condition from other neuromuscular disorders by clinical features and conventional examination.

We report here two cases of McLeod syndrome in brothers and emphasise the variable features of the disease. Phenotypic variability was obvious in the two patients, and one case was unusual because the clinical features greatly resembled an axonal form of Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease.

Case reports

Case 1
A 50 year old man had been complaining of weakness and paraesthesiae in both legs. He first noted weakness in the right leg at the age of 37. Subsequently, the symptom extended to both legs, and he began to be unsteady on his feet. At age 47, he noticed muscular atrophy in his legs. There was no consanguinity in the family. A neurological examination in August 2000 revealed sensorimotor neuropathy with severe weakness and atrophy in both calves and shins (fig 1A). Deep tendon reflexes were diminished in the lower limbs. The ability to sense pinprick and light touch was mildly impaired in the distal parts of the lower extremities. Vibration sense was impaired in both feet. Abnormal involuntary movement was not seen.

Laboratory investigations were unremarkable except for a raised serum CK concentration (1510 IU/L, normal <255). Serum levels of thyroid hormones, vitamin B-12, vitamin E, antinuclear antibody, anti-DNA antibody, and anti-SS-A/SS-B antibodies were normal. In nerve conduction studies, neither compound motor action potentials (CMAP) nor sensory nerve action potentials (SNAP) were elicited in the patient’s lower extremities.

Histopathological features of a sural nerve biopsy specimen showed moderate myelinated fibre loss and abundant axonal sprouting in residual myelinated fibres (fig 1B), while onion bulb formation was absent. No apparent amyloid deposits or inflammatory cell infiltrates were seen in the epineurial and endoneurial tissues. An axonal form of Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease was strongly suspected from the clinical features and pathological findings. Although mutation analysis available for the peripheral myelin protein zero and connexin-32 was done, no mutation was detectable in these genes.

Case 2
A 62 year old man, an elder brother of case 1, was admitted for evaluation of a progressive movement disorder in December 2001. On neurological examination, he had choreic involuntary movement of the extremities, mild weakness in the thighs, and hyporeflexia in all limbs. Pathological reflexes were not elicited, and he showed no sensory disturbance. No personality change or cognitive impairment was seen.

A peripheral blood smear showed acanthocytes in 4% of the red blood cells by May-Giemsa staining. Serum CK was raised to 1710 U/l, with predominant MM isozyme. Brain magnetic resonance imaging showed mild atrophy of the bilateral frontal lobes and caudate nuclei (fig 1C). Nerve conduction studies of the lower limbs suggested mild sensory neuropathy, showing reduced SNAP in the sural nerves (left 2.3 μV, right 3.6 μV).

A muscle biopsy specimen taken from the left biceps brachii showed increased variability in fibre diameter. The most striking findings were some scattered necrotic fibres, several basophilic fibres, and an increased number of central nuclei (fig 1D).

An evaluation of Kell antigen expression was subsequently undertaken. Expression of Kell antigens (K2, K4, and K7) on red blood cells was reduced, a result consistent with McLeod syndrome.
Molecular analysis
After informed consent had been obtained from the brothers, genomic DNA was extracted from peripheral blood by standard procedure. Exons of the XK gene were subsequently amplified by polymerase chain reaction as described by Ho et al. This analysis showed a five base deletion in exon 3 at nt positions 938 to 942 from the 5' end of the cDNA. This mutation results in a frame shift at codon 296 and the premature stopping of translation at codon 301, as reported previously. This mutation was found in both cases 1 and 2, whose clinical phenotypes were extremely different.

Further mutation analysis of the XK gene, we confirmed the presence of acanthocytes in a peripheral blood smear of case 1.

Comment
To date, the clinical features of McLeod syndrome have been reported to be heterogeneous. The clinical features and conventional pathological findings in this condition are sometimes difficult to distinguish from other neuromuscular disorders because the expression of symptoms and signs seems to be variable, even among siblings. In many cases, chorea, seizures, or muscular atrophy are the most frequently presented symptoms. Danek et al recently reported clinical features of 22 affected patients with mutation analysis of the XK gene. In their investigations, limb chorea—which reflects CNS involvement in McLeod syndrome—was described in all patients. It is extremely difficult to make a diagnosis of this disease where the symptoms and signs are restricted to the peripheral nervous system.

In the present investigation, case 2 was characterized clinically by choreic movement and mild muscular atrophy, frequently seen in the reported cases of McLeod syndrome. In contrast, the symptoms in case 1 were extremely rare. Case 1 showed late onset of symptoms, slow progression of weakness and atrophy of the lower extremities, areflexia, gloss areflexia, and slow stocking-type sensory impairment, an increased level of serum CK, and pathological features with axonal degeneration of the nerve biopsy specimen. He showed a typical central nervous system involvement 14 years from onset. Our case 1 was clinically and pathologically indistinguishable from an axonal form of Charcot–Marie–Tooth disease without McLeod serology.

McLeod syndrome should be considered in patients with axonal sensorimotor neuropathy and high CK activity. Abnormal red cell morphology may be a clue to the diagnosis.

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NHS Direct for headache
NHS Direct is a government-sponsored, nurse-led, telephone helpline available throughout the United Kingdom, offering confidential medical advice without recourse to a doctor by using computerised assessment systems based on clinical algorithms. As algorithms for the management of headache have been formulated, this might be construed as a condition for which NHS Direct would be well suited to offer an appropriate service. Following a protocol used in previous studies of the use of NHS Direct by patients attending neurology outpatient clinics, patients with headache were specifically asked about their use of this service.

Of 1080 consecutive unselected patients seen in 119 general neurology outpatient clinics over a period of approximately 10 months by one consultant neurologist, headache was the principal reason for referral or patient complaint during consultation in 208 (21%), a frequency similar to that previously reported by others. The neurologist’s diagnoses, using standard diagnostic criteria, were: chronic daily headache of tension type (157), drug overuse headache (12), episodic tension type (13), and migraine (34); one patient had a cerebral neoplasm, with typical postural features and visual obsessions, and one had coital cephalalgia. Of these 208 patients, 120 (58%) had heard of the NHS Direct telephone helpline. Of the remaining 120 patients, 36 (30%; or 17% of all headache patients) had used the service; only three patients volunteered this information spontaneously. Fifteen percent of the use of NHS Direct by patients attending neurology outpatient clinics, patients with headache were specifically asked about their use of this service.

Isolated total tongue paralysis as a manifestation of bilateral medullary infarction
Isolated acute bilateral hypoglossal nerve (cranial XII) paralysis is a very rare clinical condition which has been described in the context of traumatic mechanical injuries to the nerves. The two nuclei of CXII, located at the tegmentum of the medulla oblongata, are in close proximity and may be damaged at the same time. However, isolated bilateral CXII paralysis has not been described in cases of medullary infarction. We report a patient presenting with isolated complete tongue paralysis and a small ischaemic area in the medulla affecting both CXII nuclei exclusively.

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Isolated total tongue paralysis as a manifestation of bilateral medullary infarction
Isolated acute bilateral hypoglossal nerve (cranial XII) paralysis is a very rare clinical condition which has been described in the context of traumatic mechanical injuries to the nerves. The two nuclei of CXII, located at the tegmentum of the medulla oblongata, are in close proximity and may be damaged at the same time. However, isolated bilateral CXII paralysis has not been described in cases of medullary infarction. We report a patient presenting with isolated complete tongue paralysis and a small ischaemic area in the medulla affecting both CXII nuclei exclusively.
CASE REPORT

A 49 year old woman with a history of primary biliary cirrhosis presented to the emergency room with acute dysarthria, swallowing difficulty, and inability to protrude her tongue. She was unable to eat, drink, or handle saliva. She denied vertigo, dizziness, nausea, unsteadiness, numbness, or weakness.

Examination showed that she was alert and responsive but was dysarthric and unable to initiate a swallow. Pupils were 3 mm in diameter, equal, and reactive to light and accommodation. Extraocular movements were full. There was no ptosis and the corneal reflex was present bilaterally. Sensation was intact to light touch and pin prick. There was no spontaneous or gaze nystagmus, saccadic pursuit, or ocular dysmetria. Facial symmetry was noted, with no signs of weakness. The gag reflex was present with symmetric palatal elevation. Her tongue had limited ability to protrude but there was side to side movement. No tongue atrophy was noted. Five months later, she presented with acute diplopia and right facial weakness which lasted for 14 days. Examination showed a right lateral rectus nerve paralysis along with a right peripheral facial nerve paralysis. Further cranial MRI showed no new lesions apart from the previous evidence of brain stem ischaemia. The patient was then switched to warfarin.

A two year follow up examination showed that her tongue mobility had returned to normal. The tongue had full side to side movement and full protrusion. No further strokes occurred and she continued taking warfarin.

COMMENT

Medial medullary infarcts represents less than 0.5% of all cerebral infarcts. They may be unilateral or, rarely, bilateral. The clinical features of bilateral medial medullary infarctions are flaccid quadriplegia sparing the face, bilateral disturbance of deep sensation, weakness of the tongue, and respiratory ischaemia. The patient was then switched to warfarin.

In conclusion, this case shows that an isolated complete tongue paralysis can be produced by bilateral medullary infarction, a finding that broadens our understanding of the spectrum of medial medullary syndrome.

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