A patient with a history of pituitary tumour treated with yttrium 29 years before presented with an asymmetrical chiasmal neuropathy. Magnetic resonance imaging showed a partially thrombosed giant aneurysm of the right internal carotid artery, with enhancement of the chiasm and right optic tract adjacent to the aneurysm. It was thought that, in addition to the effects of compression, a peri-aneurysmal inflammatory reaction had developed, causing breakdown of the blood–brain barrier and consequent inflammatory changes in the optic chiasm. High dose steroid treatment led to significant improvement in vision within two weeks. Steroids may have a role in the acute preservation of vision in similar cases, as well as in cases of deterioration following coiling or embolisation of aneurysms where thrombosis within the aneurysm has been induced.

CASE REPORT

A 60 year old woman was admitted urgently with a four month history of gradual blurring of vision affecting the left eye. There was no pain and there were no other neurological problems.

In 1974, the patient had been treated for a growth hormone secreting pituitary adenoma with yttrium implants and bromocriptine and had maintained low growth hormone levels since then. There was no visual compromise from the original tumour but we were not able to retrieve any neuro-ophthalmic assessment from that time. She was taking hydrocortisone as steroid replacement therapy and a diphosphonate for osteoporosis. She was also treated for hypertension and diabetes. In 1967 she had a mastectomy for breast cancer.

On examination she had prognathism and prominent supraorbital ridges, characteristic of acromegaly. Corrected visual acuity was 6/6 on the right, with normal colour vision (Ishihara plates). On the left, acuity was 2/60 and she was only able to read the first (control) Ishihara plate when viewed in the nasal hemifield. Confrontational field testing with a light source showed a temporal hemianopia on the left, and Goldman perimetry showed a generally depressed field with temporal loss respecting the vertical meridian on the right. There was a left relative afferent pupillary defect. There was improvement in vision, with acuity on the left improving to 6/18 and substantial improvement in both visual fields (fig 2). There was no deterioration in either acuity or visual fields when steroids were discontinued.

DISCUSSION

The high signal and enhancement of the chiasm and optic tract and the response to steroids in our patient make an inflammatory chiasmal neuropathy the most likely explanation for her visual symptoms. There have been no other reports of reversible inflammatory lesions of the anterior visual pathway linked to internal carotid artery aneurysms other than in association with muslin wrapping.

Various mechanisms may be postulated to explain the chiasmal inflammation. These include a direct effect of chiasmal displacement (mass effect), ischaemia from compression of the blood supply to the chiasm, radiation damage, and an inflammatory reaction around the thrombosed aneurysm.

Optic tract oedema manifesting as high signal on magnetic resonance imaging has been reported in association with intracranial tumours, but compression alone seems an unlikely cause of this, and additional mechanisms have been postulated such as tumour related cytokines and physical obstruction to drainage of Virchow-Robin spaces. Certainly, the oedema does not appear to be related to compression per se as it is not seen with the commonest cause of chiasmal compression, pituitary adenoma (personal observation).
Thrombosis of an aneurysm, either spontaneous or following treatment, may cause neurological deterioration probably because of an increase in aneurysm size, and this was a possible cause of deterioration in our patient. The time elapsed since maximum irradiation from yttrium in this case, and the response to steroids, make a radiation induced optic neuropathy unlikely, although it is probable that the aneurysm itself was a secondary effect of radiation. Damage to the carotid arteries by yttrium implants was noted half a century ago and aneurysms of the cavernous internal carotid artery are now well recognised, though rare.

Intra-aneurysmal thrombosis may have induced perianeurysmal inflammation. Vasoactive factors such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) are released during platelet aggregation and have an active role in endothelial permeability; corticosteroids have been shown to reduce the release of VEGF.

Whether the visual deterioration and enhancing optic chiasm and tract in our case reflected compression or perianeurysmal inflammation, there was a clear response to steroids. Although susceptibility to such pathology in our patient may have been modified by long standing radiation effects on the chiasm, anti-inflammatory treatment could play a role in the acute preservation of vision in similar circumstances. This might also apply to acute deterioration occurring during the monitoring of known giant aneurysms, and extend to deterioration following coiling or embolisation of aneurysms, where thrombosis within the aneurysm has been induced.

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HISTORICAL NOTE

The Argyll Robertson pupil

In 1869 Douglas Moray Cooper Lamb Argyll Robertson described his famous pupillary sign in two papers:

I could not observe any contraction of either pupil under the influence of light, but, on accommodating the eyes for a near object, both pupils contracted.1,2

Argyll Robertson was one of the first surgeons to specialise in ophthalmology. Pupillary miosis, inequality, and irregularity, without reaction to light, had been known in cases of tabes dorsalis and dementia paralytica (GPI) since the end of the 18th century.

Ernst Julius Remak had shown the pupillary signs of tabes to Argyll Robertson,3 whose later famous reports of 1869 acknowledged Remak’s observation of the miotic pupil, its defective reaction to light, and preserved contraction on accommodation. Romberg (1839) also gave an earlier description.4

The Argyll Robertson pupil soon became a “pathognomonic sign” in tabes dorsalis, dementia paralytica, and meningo-vascular syphilis. However, the role of syphilis in causing these disorders was hotly debated. Jean Alfred Fournier and Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (1828–1913) favoured a syphilitic aetiology, but not until the 20th century was it generally accepted as the cause. Crucial to this were the discoveries by Schaudinn and Hoffmann of the treponema pallidum in 1905 and the serologic test in 1906 of August H. von Wassermann (1866–1925). Argyll Robertson was also the first to describe a trepanning method of operation for certain cases of glaucoma. He became chairman of the ophthalmologic society of England, 1886, held office in the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and was honorary eye physician to Queen Victoria and King Edward VII. In 1904, for health reasons, he moved to the Jersey. While on holiday in India in 1908 he became ill in Gondal near Bombay, and died. His biographer noted

His handsome features and his tall, athletic frame made him the cynosure of all female eyes in his youth and in his later years, clad in a grey frock-coat and top hat, his dignified manner combined with his genial old-world courtesy made him conspicuous in any assembly and a magnificent ambassador of Scotland.5

A keen golfer, he won the gold medal of the Royal and Ancient Club, St Andrews, five times.

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