Dystonia, tremor, and parkinsonism in a 54 year old man with 2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria

Glutaric aciduria is often considered to be a rapidly progressing dementia-like illness with only occasional extrapyramidal symptoms, usually described as dystonia. We present a case of late onset 2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria and slowly progressive dystonia and parkinsonism.

Case report

A 54 year old man was referred to the University of Florida movement disorders center for management of “end stage Parkinson’s disease”. He was diagnosed with developmental delay and mild cerebral palsy by his paediatrician, for a failure to meet motor age milestones. He had below average grades in school and graduated high school two years behind his age matched peers. At age 26, he noticed a mild intention tremor in his right hand, a mild head tremor, and mild unsteadiness in walking. These were assumed to be potentially parkinsonian features, and later in his 30s he was given the assumed diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. He was treated with levodopa, dopamine agonists, a monoamine oxidase inhibitor, and anticholinergics, which all failed to help his symptoms. He was gainfully employed by the city in a maintenance department until being fired in his mid-30s for incompetence. At the time of his clinic appointment, his mother noted progressive difficulty with swallowing, balance difficulties, and aggressive behaviour. There was no history of exposure to neurotoxins, and he did not smoke or drink alcohol. His brother also had a tremor.

On neurological examination he was alert and oriented to person and place. His memory was tested (3/3 registration and 1/3 recall after five minutes). He had a hypo-phonetic dysarthria with pallilalia. Gerstmann features (right/left confusion, finger anomia, acalculia, and agraphia) were all impaired. He had frontal release signs including a root, agraphia, agraphia, and agraphia. Ataxia was present on heel and toe walking. Tone was increased in the left upper extremity. His speech was slow and monotonous. He had a masked face, palilalia, and severe micrographia. His off medication Unified Parkinson’s Disease motor scale (UPDRS) examination was 55. After taking his usual medications (trihexphenidyl and selegiline) he was re-examined one hour later and his UPDRS score was unchanged (55). He had more dystonia in his hands while on his medications. His previous diagnostic evaluation included serum chloride testing that had revealed a normal thyroid stimulating hormone concentration, normal liver function tests, normal ammonia concentration, and normal reactive plasma reagent. Head magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) had been performed one year before presentation and the flair images revealed prominent white matter hyperintensities in the frontal and parietal regions, with posterior ex vacuo dilatation of his lateral ventricles (fig 1), and mild cerebellar atrophy. Urine organic acids were sent and revealed 2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria.

Discussion

This case demonstrates that older patients with parkinsonism may have inborn errors of metabolism. Our patient was unique in that until his mid-20s and later when he lost his job in his mid-30s, he was assumed to have mild cerebral palsy, and only after developing other parkinsonian features was he later misdiagnosed as having Parkinson’s disease. The important lesson to be learned from this case was that in this patient were the developmental delay, the progression of symptoms leading to a mental incapacity to hold his job, and the parkinsonian features that were unresponsive to levodopa and other agents. In addition, his MRI, which was carried with him to the appointment, had changes indicative of glutaric aciduria. A differential diagnosis in this case should have included other non-levodopa responsive disorders that can present with movement disorders, such as proprionic acidemia, methylmalonic aciduria, glutaric aciduria, and leucodystrophy. Given his relatively benign course, he probably has L-2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria and not D-2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria. Our patient unfortunately died as a result of an accident shortly after his evaluation, making confirmation of the L isomorph impossible.

2-Hydroxyglutaric aciduria is a rare inborn error of metabolism that was first recognised in the L isomorph by Duran and colleagues and later defined clinically by Barth et al. There is less known about the molecular biology and underlying biochemical defect in other amino acidurias. Further cases presented with neonatal or early infantile developmental delay and mild cerebral palsy, and only after developing other parkinsonian features was he later misdiagnosed as having Parkinson’s disease. This case demonstrates that older patients with parkinsonism may have inborn errors of metabolism.

The diagnosis of 2-hydroxyglutaric aciduria is made by analysing urine samples with gas chromatography. The L isomer reveals a solitary peak of 2-hydroxyglutaric acid, whereas the D isomer may have other citric acid cycle intermediates present in addition to D-2-hydroxyglutaric acid. In the USA, testing is available for the urinary detection of 2-hydroxyglutaric acid, but unfortunately American laboratories are unable to distinguish between the L and the D isomer. This case reminds us that inborn errors of metabolism can be a cause of parkinsonism, and in selected cases an investigation should not be overlooked.

Figure 1 Flair magnetic resonance images revealed prominent white matter hyperintensities in the frontal and parietal regions with posterior ex vacuo dilatation of his lateral ventricles.
be performed with urine organic acids so that this diagnosis can be quickly made. With the emergence of new genetic therapies for biochemical diseases it may be important in the future to make this diagnosis early in the course of the disease.

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Transient myasthenia gravis in an elderly woman

Myasthenia gravis is usually a chronic disorder, although remission rates of 25–30% can be expected with judicious interventions such as thymectomy and immunosuppression in appropriate cases. Spontaneous remission is rarely observed. Oosterhuis found a remission rate of only 1% per annum over 17 years among 180 patients with generalised myasthenia gravis treated with anticholinesterase medication.1 We describe a case of ocular and bulbar myasthenia in which there was complete recovery over a matter of weeks without immunosuppressive agents. The patient, a 78 year old woman, developed acute, painless left sided ptosis in October 2000 while on holiday abroad. There was no diplopia. She had developed acute, painless left sided ptosis in October 2000, while on holiday abroad. There was no family history of autoimmune disease, while thymomas are more common. It is said that late onset disease is more severe and less likely to remit, and that bulbar involvement is more common.4 Response to conventional treatment is also less satisfactory than in young patients.5 To our knowledge, transient myasthenia gravis is an inborn error of metabolism.


"Doctor, I can hear my eyes": report of two cases with different mechanisms

An unusual but fascinating symptom is the one described by patients complaining that they can hear their own eye movements. We report two cases, with different postulated mechanisms.

Case reports

Patient 1
A 53 year old woman presented with a tendency to fall to the left. She did not experience hearing difficulties or tinnitus. Clinical examination was unremarkable other than increased sway on Romberg. Pure tone audiometry was normal other than bilaterally mildly elevated thresholds of 30 dBHL at 8 kHz. However left sided ipsi- and contra-lateral stapedial reflexes were elevated, and auditory brain-stem evoked responses, while normal on the right, showed increased latency of wave V on the left. Serial MRI scans demonstrated an enlarging left vestibular schwannoma. Trans-labyrinthine resection of the tumour was complicated by a left cerebellar infarct and hydrocephalus, and subsequently the patient continued to experience imbalance. Two years post-operatively, direct questioning about tinnitus led to the patient describing tinnitus in the left ear on looking to the left, in which up-gaze increased the pitch, while down-gaze lowered the pitch. Notably she said “I feel I could play a tune with my eyes”.

Patient 2
A 32 year old man presented with visual instability and a tendency to fall forward and to the left provoked by loud sounds such as...
the telephone ringing in his left ear. His auditory symptoms included being able to hear his heart beats, bone taps, and footsteps. Additionally he complained of a soft low pitched sound in his left ear “rather like moving a hard-pressed finger across a clean, wet china dinner plate’ when he moved his eyes. These symptoms could be reduced if the patient tensed his abdominal muscles. Pure tone audiometry showed normal air conduction hearing thresholds bilaterally other than a mild elevation of 35 dBHL at 0.25 kHz on the left. Bone conduction hearing levels were normal, perhaps even supra-normal, with thresholds of 10 dBHL at 0.5 and 1 kHz bilaterally, giving rise to an “air-bone gap” at these frequencies. Clinical examination and three-dimensional video oculography demonstrated left beating torsional nystagmus provoked by the patient humming, and CT scanning of the petrous temporal bones revealed bilateral dehiscence of the superior semicircular canals (fig 1).

Discussion

Patient 1 has gaze-evoked tinnitus, a phenomenon first described in 1982 that was initially thought to be rare, but subsequently reported to be surprisingly common (prevalence 19–36%) in one study of patients post vestibular schwannoma resection. It has also been described in patients with cerebellar pontine angle meningioma, meningeval metastases of malignant melanoma, and sudden sensorineural hearing loss. It may develop months post-operatively, and is usually heard in, and caused by moving the eyes towards, the diseased ear. The exact mechanism is not known, but it has been postulated that neural plasticity mechanisms activated by unilateral deafferentation result in cross-talk between neural elements controlling eye movements and the central auditory system. Indeed, functional imaging studies of patients with gaze-evoked tinnitus have shown anomalous activation of the auditory lateral pons and auditory cortex, enhanced by failure of cross-modality inhibitory mechanisms.1

Patient 2 has Tullio phenomenon, a condition in which sound and/or pressure stimulates the vestibular system. These patients often complain of abnormal auditory sensations such as “hearing footsteps vibrating through the body”, and finding the noise of chewing loud enough to make understanding of conversations at mealtimes difficult. Supra-normal bone conduction thresholds, or so-called conductive hyperacusis, has been reported in other patients with Tullio phenomenon, and dehiscence of the superior semi-circular canals is thought to be the commonest associated pathology. It is postulated that the dehiscence may act as an alternative lower impedance pathway for sound energy, enabling these patients to hear the movements of their eyelids within the bony sockets, these sounds being conducted through the skull. It is interesting to note that although our patient had dehiscence of both superior semi-circular canals, he was only symptomatic on the left side. This could be explained by the Tullio phenomenon being multi-factorial in nature, and additional factors such as trauma or bone remodelling need to be present as well as the dehiscence before the clinical features become manifest.7

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Translunese computerised tomography image showing bilateral dehiscence of the superior semi-circular canals (indicated by arrows).

CASE REPORT

A 52 year old man complained of diplopia, dizziness, vertigo, decrease of consciousness, memory impairment, and hyperphagia. These symptoms occurred abruptly while he was painting the gate in his garden.

The diplopia and vertigo disappeared in about 15 minutes, while hyperphagia and memory impairment lasted for about 24 hours and completely disappeared the following day on awakening. Instead, amnesia concerning the event is still present.

The decrease of consciousness consisted of slight hypersomnolence (the patient could easily be awakened by auditory and verbal stimulation) and was present only at the onset, while memory impairment was noted only later. The patient’s wife reported that he kept repeating the same questions to her, and painted the garden gate incorrectly (using inappropriate colours). The patient was completely unaware of these symptoms, which were reported only by his wife.

Regarding the hyperphagia, his wife reported that the patient compulsively ate all the food he found in the refrigerator and in the kitchen. Apart from the fact that he was eating continuously all day long, when it was time for his lunch and evening meal, he always felt hungry and ready to eat, as his main concern was food, and his attention could not be diverted during his meals. The following day his wife took him to the hospital. Neurological examination on admission revealed only retrograde amnesia about the events that had occurred in the previous 24 hours, along with fatuous behaviour. The medical history was not significant. Cranial computed tomography and extracranial Duplex ultrasonography were normal. Days later, brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed an ischaemic lesion involving the medial portion of the left thalamus in the territory of the tubero-thalamic perforating artery (fig 1). MRI-angiography of extracranial and intracranial cerebral arteries was normal.

A transthoracic echocardiogram was normal, while a transoesophageal echocardiogram revealed an atrial septal defect without a patent foramen ovale. Conventional vascular risk factors (hypertension, diabetes, hypercholesterolaemia, and smoking) were absent. Routine laboratory studies including coagulation profiles were normal.

During the hospital admission, the patient’s clinical condition progressively improved and he was discharged eight days later without any neurological symptoms.

Two weeks later he was submitted to a neuropsychological test battery to assess reasoning (Raven PM47), short term memory (verbal and spatial span), learning (paired associate and Corsi spatial learning), attention (visual search), and frontal executive functions (Nelson card sorting test, trial making B, category, and literal fluency). Anxiety and depression were investigated by the state-trait anxiety inventory and the Beck depression inventory. Results were within the normal range (<1 SD) for all the tests.

COMMENT

The anatomical substrates of eating disorders are conventionally the basal ganglia and the cortico-limbic areas. In our patient compulsive hyperphagia was associated with the clinical features of medial thalamic ischemia. The patient presented with signs and symptoms of the so called “top of the basilar
syndrome" and of thalamic perforating artery infarction.

Thalamo-perforating arteries usually arise from the posterior cerebral artery and supply the posteromedial thalamus (PMT), which contains the rostral intermediate nucleus of the medial longitudinal fasciculus, the posterior inferior portion of the dorsomedial nucleus, the nucleus parafascicularis, the intralaminar nuclei, and sometimes the mammillothalamic tract. Unilateral infarcts of the PMT may cause a decrease in consciousness and neuropsychological disturbance (patients will be disoriented, unconcerned, apathetic, and may engage in behaviour involving the compulsive use of objects out of the behavioural context). A visual deficit (diplopia and vertical gaze functional impairment with up gape palsy or combined up and down gape palsy) are often reported because of the involvement of the upper mesencephalon. Neuropsychological disturbances are more marked and long lasting in patients with bilateral PMT infarction. Except for visual dysfunction, similar features are reported in anteromedial thalamic infarction.

In diencephalic lesions hyperphagia may result from hypothalamic, thalamo-cortical, or limbic dysfunction. Lesions involving the ventromesial hypothalamus, the amygdala, and the fibre bundle from the substantia nigra to the basal ganglia alter the signal of satiation and food intake. Eating disorders caused by hypothalamic dysfunction are characterised by dysregulation of hunger and satiation signals and are associated with other endocrine dysregulations. Cortical lesions may cause eating disorders if they involve the temporal and frontal association areas connected to the basal and diencephalic systems. Moreover, clinical observations and animal studies suggest that the limbic structures and their connections are strongly involved in the regulation of appetite.

In our patient the acute occurrence of compulsive eating was part of a complex behavioural and neuropsychological disturbance typical of medial thalamic dysfunction. Behavioural abnormalities may be more easily explained by bilateral involvement of the medial thalamic region. Indeed an embolic occlusion of the distal portion of the basilar artery may have caused a transient bilateral thalamic ischaemia. The definite infarct involved the left thalamus and was completely asymptomatic.

In our patient we believe that transient thalamo-cortical dysfunction because of impairment of the connection between the medial thalamic nuclei and the frontal or temporal lobes may have been the determinant of the compulsive hyperphagia. This compulsive hyperphagia may be the equivalent of the utilisation behaviour described in bilateral PMT infarction, in which patients automatically and inappropriately handle and use objects placed before them, even though told not to use them.

Figure 1  Magnetic resonance imaging of the brain. (A) Coronal view, T2 weighted (time of repetition/time of echo/excitations: 3800/120/2). (B) Axial view, T2 weighted (3800/120/2). A round hyperintense lesion is located in the paramedian portion of the left thalamus (A). The ischaemic lesion involves the medial thalamus (B) in the territory of the thalamo-perforating branches of the posterior cerebral artery.

Case report: cerebrovascular parkinsonism with levodopa addiction

Levodopa (L-dopa), the mainstay of treatment for idiopathic Parkinson's disease (IPD), has a mild stimulant effect and may cause agitation, restlessness, and euphoria even in normal subjects. It is associated with a well documented withdrawal syndrome consisting of confusion, muscular pain, and rigidity. This can progress to involve symptoms comparable with neuroleptic malignant syndrome, including pyrexia and increased creatine kinase. There is now good evidence that L-dopa is addictive, and there are many case reports of patients with IPD who seek to increase their L-dopa dose to high levels because of psychological dependence rather than therapeutic benefit. The largest series of such patients suggested that L-dopa dependence results in paranoia, hypomania, hyposexuality, and euphoria associated with weight loss and severe dyskinesias. Many of the behavioural changes are similar to those seen in amphetamine or cocaine abusers and have been termed "hedonistic homeostatic dysregulation".

An 81 year old woman had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease 10 years before. She reported a five year history of extremely frequent but intermittent severe pain and stiffness in all her muscles, resulting in severe disability and distress. Her general practitioner had tried amitriptyline and baclofen with no effect. The only effective treatment was Madopar, a combination of benserazide hydrochloride, which she took in large doses every two hours. She admitted taking in excess of 2.3 g every 24 hours. She even woke in the night to take Madopar tablets. She was obsessed about her drug regimen and would not allow even minor changes. Her husband said that she was hostile, paranoid, and very demanding. She had never suffered from hallucinations or dyskinesias.

Her previous records indicated ongoing problems with weight loss, investigated over several years but with no apparent cause. She had undergone computed tomography of the brain in 2001, which showed multiple white matter lesions secondary to chronic ischaemic damage.

She presented as a cachectic, frail, elderly woman bent over in a wheelchair. She weighed 34 kg. She was unable to stand or walk owing to pain and stiffness. She was slightly confused, with a mini-mental state examination (MMSE) score of 24/30. She was slightly apathetic, unconcerned, and disoriented, with a firm belief that she was unable to talk and walk owing to pain and stiffness. She was only able to sit up in bed and was not allowed to use a wheelchair.

The patient had no history of amphetamine or cocaine abuse. She had been taking L-dopa for 8 years for Parkinson's disease. She was consuming large doses every two hours, taking in excess of 2.3 g every 24 hours. She had been prescribed Madopar tablets because of pain and stiffness in all her muscles, resulting in severe disability and distress.

The patient had never suffered from hallucinations or dyskinesias. Her previous records indicated ongoing problems with weight loss, investigated over several years but with no apparent cause. She had undergone computed tomography of the brain in 2001, which showed multiple white matter lesions secondary to chronic ischaemic damage.

She presented as a cachectic, frail, elderly woman bent over in a wheelchair. She weighed 34 kg. She was unable to stand or walk owing to pain and stiffness. She was slightly confused, with a mini-mental state examination (MMSE) score of 24/30. She appeared to be in constant pain and was uncomfortable with examination. Despite this, she had no evidence of tremor, rigidity, or bradykinesia. There were no other significant neurological findings.

She was admitted to hospital for slow supervised withdrawal of her Madopar. Blood tests including blood count, electrolytes, creatine kinase, thyroid function, and inflammatory markers were all in the normal range. She refused further investigation by magnetic resonance imaging or single photon emission computed tomography. She was only able to tolerate a very slow withdrawal of L-dopa owing to severe muscular pain, and it took two separate admissions over five months to complete the withdrawal.

It was possible to keep her off L-dopa for a period of four weeks, during which she regained her appetite and weighed 40 kg. She was clear in her mind and her MMSE score was 30/30. She was no longer arthritic and no longer wanted to take L-dopa treatment. She became pain-free. Her
handwriting was large and legible. She was able to walk with a Zimmer-frame, but had a wide based shuffling gait compatible with a diagnosis of small vessel cerebrovascular disease.

Following that period she became depressed and withdrawn. Paroxetine did not help but the reintroduction of Madopar, in a dose of 62.5 mg three times daily, helped to alleviate the depression. After one year of follow up she remained mobile with help. She had not developed tremor, extrapyramidal rigidity, or significant bradykinesia. Her appetite and alertness continued to be good. She refused any further reduction in the dose of L-dopa.

**COMMENT**

Despite its high prevalence, IPD is often a challenging diagnosis. Up to 25% of patients considered to have this condition by a neurologist may have an alternative diagnosis. In the community, the diagnosis may be wrong in nearly 50% of cases. Where there is difficulty in making a diagnosis, a trial of L-dopa is often useful. However, it is possible that L-dopa dependency can occur even in patients without IPD. They can develop withdrawal symptoms of muscular aching and stiffness, which superficially resemble worsening parkinsonism and obviously respond well to L-dopa, giving the impression of a helpful treatment. In our patient’s case, larger and larger doses of L-dopa were prescribed over many years, leading to physical and psychiatric effects compatible with “hedonistic homeostatic dysregulation.” She became profoundly disabled as a result of L-dopa dependence, the manifestations of which were much worse than the symptoms with which she had initially presented.

The psychiatric effects of L-dopa dependence are well documented, including severe depression after withdrawal. However, the characteristic severe muscle pain suffered by our patient has not been reported before. We speculate that long term L-dopa treatment causes changes in the expression of central dopamine receptors such that withdrawal leads to unpleasant symptoms, even in people without Parkinson’s disease. A similar mechanism may underlie the development of “dopaminergic malignant syndrome”.

It is our suspicion that there may be other patients without IPD who are dependent on L-dopa. It is important that L-dopa is not considered a benign medication, and trials of treatment with this agent should be carefully supervised. Any patient taking L-dopa in large doses without dyskinesias should have the diagnosis reconsidered. Any patient with IPD in whom muscular pain is a prominent symptom, especially associated with weight loss and psychiatric problems, should have their use of L-dopa investigated. In our patient’s case, Madopar was withdrawn only with her informed cooperation and that of her husband, who had given her drug treatment for many years. Other patients simply refuse to comply with drug changes and may even change specialists to secure an L-dopa supply. The successful outcome in this case is probably the exception rather than the rule.

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Case study: cerebrovascular parkinsonism with levodopa addiction

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