Triphasic spike-wave stupor in portal-systemic encephalopathy: a case report.

Sir: Lennox¹ originally described prolonged stupor associated with bilaterally synchronous spike-wave discharges in the electroencephalogram (EEG). Though many authors described this condition in "petit mal status", Niedermeyer and Khalifeh² proposed the term "ictal stupor" or "spike-wave stupor". Most of the cases of spike-wave stupor have been observed in epilepsy. A few cases have been reported as spike-wave stupor in nonepileptic patients.³ We report a case observed in portal-systemic encephalopathy.

A 59-year-old woman was admitted to Kagawa Central Hospital on 13 April 1983, because of bizarre abnormal behaviour. That morning she had been disoriented and mentally dull. Prior to this episode, a similar episode which lasted for 2-3 hours occurred in January 1983. During examination she was cooperative, but her attention span was short. She could give her name, the time and the place, her husband's name, but not calculate "100 – 7 × 13". There was amnesia about that morning's events. She appeared to be in a slightly stuporous state. Neurological examination revealed hyperreflexia of extremities and flapping tremor. On admission, EEG examination was performed immediately, and showed continuous bilaterally synchronous spike-wave discharges (fig) which took the wave form of blunt spike-wave complexes. This was not altered by photic stimulation, nor by opening and closing the eyes. Her plasma ammonia level was 188 µg/dl (normal; 30–86 µg/dl). During her admission, lactulose and kanamycin were orally administered. By the next day her spike-wave stupor and flapping tremor had disappeared, although the ammonia level was still high (149 µg/dl). These high levels of ammonia remained high during admission. Her EEG recording in a non-stuporous state showed slow alpha activities mixed with sporadic theta waves.

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References


Y KURODA
K ODA
H SHIBASAKI
Division of Neurology,
Department of Internal Medicine,
Saga Medical School,
Nabeshima, Saga 840–01,
Japan

Fig. EMG recordings of arm-mouth reflex. Surface electrodes were placed on the chin and the right forearm (FA). Faster flexions (A and B) of the FA elicited reflex opening of the mouth (indicated by solid lines), whereas very slow flexion (C) of the FA did not result the response.
Laboratory and radiological examinations revealed liver cirrhosis. Thus she was diagnosed as being in a spike-wave stupor due to portal-systemic encephalopathy. Six months after the episode, her EEG showed almost a normal pattern.

"Spike-wave stupor" have been used to describe an extraordinary state in epilepsy. However a similar state described as a combination of spike-wave continuity and prolonged stuporous symptom is, rarely, recognised in non-epileptic patients. Lion et al.3 reported a case after trauma. Hosokawa et al.4 described also the same state in two patients with cerebrovascular and Vogt-Koyanagi's disease. Hosokawa et al.4 reported a case almost identical to ours, with portal-systemic encephalopathy. Poser et al.5 described continuous bilaterally synchronous triphasic waves in hepatic coma. This EEG was similar to a spike-wave complex in ordinary epileptics. Bickford and Butt6 recognised that triphasic waves usually represent semicoma or complete unresponsiveness. In hepatic encephalopathy, the state of consciousness is not usually associated with the level of ammonia.6 Our case was clinically stuporous, but not comatose, with hyperammonaemia. Her initial EEG showed continuous bilaterally synchronous atypical spike-wave discharges of an epileptic nature. On the next day, her spike-wave stupor subsided, although she had partial amnesia about the previous day, and hyperammonaemia was still observed. Many metabolites seem to play important roles in hepatic coma.6 Other metabolic factors besides hyperammonaemia are considered to act together on the diencephalon, mesencephalon and ascending reticular formation of the brain stem,3,4,5 and might have produced a spike-wave stupor. It would help in the understanding of the mechanism of spike-wave stupor to investigate non-epileptic patients and it is therefore important to remember that a spike-wave stupor can be observed in non-epileptic disorders.

MITSUTOSHI YAMAMOTO,*
KIYOSHI HOSOKAWA,†
Department of Neurology,*
Kagawa Central Hospital,
Department of Neuropsychiatry,†
Kagawa Medical School
Takamatsu 760, Japan.

Address for reprint requests: Dr Yamamoto, Department of Neurology, Kagawa Central Hospital, 5-4-16, Bancho, Takamatsu 760, Japan.

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