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GIOVANNI MASE
MARINO ZORZON
EMANUELE BIASSUTI
BARBARA VITIANI
GIUSEPPE CAZZATO
Istituto di Clinica Neurologica dell’Università degli Studi di Trieste
FLAVIA URBAN
MARIO FREZZA
Servizio di Gastroenterologia e Endoscopia Digestiva

Correspondence to: Dr Marino Zorzon, Istituto di Clinica Neurologica, Ospedale di Catunara—Strada di Fiume 447—34149 Trieste, Italy

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Respiratory chain complex I deficiency in an infant with infantile spasms

Infantile spasms are a common epileptic disorder that should be considered in the diagnosis of a great variety of brain diseases of metabolic, developmental, chromosomal, perinatal anoxic, and postnatal origin. The number of metabolic disorders associated with infantile spasms is restricted to peroxisomopathies, syndromes, phytoketonuria, non-ketotic hyperglycaemia, and pyridoxine dependency.1 We report an infant with a complex I deficiency of the respiratory chain whose presenting and most conspicuous symptom was infantile spasms. On reviewing the literature the association of these two conditions seems to be extremely rare.

A 7-month-old male infant whose prena
tal, neonatal, and postnatal history was irres
evant, began to have episodes of spasms several times daily. Developmental milestones were within the normal range. Examination showed mild mental retardation, but was otherwise normal. Frequent typical flexor spasms on awakening and in the first stage of sleep were seen. An EEG showed diffuse continuous abnormalities compatible with diffuse brain damage. Interferon alfa was used with ACTH for six weeks. Both the spasms and the hypsarrhythmia disappeared after the first week of treatment and did not recur. Brain CT was normal. Several blood lactate determinations disclosed a consistent hyperlactacidemia (60–80 mg/dl) together with normal blood pyruvate. The 24 hour urinary excretion of succinate, fumarate, glutarate, α-ketoglutarate, and lactic acid was greatly increased. The activities of pyruvate dehydrogenase complex, pyruvate carboxylase, and Krebs’ cycle enzymes in fibroblasts were within normal limits. The activities of the respiratory chain complexes in muscle mitochondria (corrected for the activity of citrate synthase) were within the normal range, except for NADH-cytochrome C reductase, which was very much reduced. This finding was compatible with complex I defi
 ciency. The infant was given oral coenzyme Q10, carnitine, riboflavin, and succinate for the next three years. Lactate concentrations have remained mildly increased (40–50 mg/dl), but he has not had further seizures. At four years of age he showed a mild muscle wasting of proximal distribution, and developmental dysphasia. A muscle biopsy at this age disclosed no definitive pathological abnormalities; respiratory chain metabolism in muscle yielded similar results to the previous study.

Seizures, typically partial or myclonic, are a recognised feature in patients with certain mitochondrial disorders. However, we are only aware of two previous reports of the association of infantile spasms with a presumed mitochondrial disease. Kamoshita et al were the first to describe the appearance of infantile spasms in a patient with a previously logically established base nurotic encephalomyelitis.2 This disease may be associated with errors of metabolism affecting the respiratory chain or other pathways, but the authors did not provide any biochemical study to suggest a specific metabolic disorder. On the other hand Mäkelä-Bengt et al have recently described a mitochondrial DNA 8993 T→G point mutation in several members of a family, two of whom had infantile spasms as the presenting symptom and mental retardation thereafter.3 Our case adds an uncommon disease as the cause of infantile spasms. Furthermore, we are not aware of any previous report on the association of infantile spasms and a respiratory chain deficiency. This does not necessarily mean that this association is exceptional as the biochemical abnormalities have been underdiagnosed. The case reported also shows a rare phenotype for complex I deficiency, but the clinical range of mitochondrial diseases is expanding.4 Despite the few cases reported infantile spasms should be considered as one of the forms of presentations of mitochondrial diseases. It also seems advisable to suspect a respiratory chain disorder in infants with the so-called crypto
genic West syndrome.

A VERDU
LA ALONSO
Neurupediatric Unit, Hospital Virgen de la Salud, Toledo, Spain
1 JARENAS
Centro de Investigación, Hospital "12 de Octubre", Madrid, Spain

Correspondence to: Dr A Verdu, Neurupediatric Unit, Hospital Virgen de la Salud, Avda Barber 30, 45004 Toledo, Spain.


3 Kamoshita S, Mizutani I, Fukuyama Y, Leigh’s subacute necrotizing encepha


Semantic neglect

An aphasic woman with a left posterior hemisphere stroke showed a decreased ability to cancel right sided stimuli when the cancellation was based on matching a picture with a verbal name and description. She showed normal performance on traditional cancellation and cancellation by pictures when the object was shown to her visually.

This 49 year old right handed woman was admitted for “decreased speech.” For one day she had spoken only in short, automatic phrases. Commands were obeyed inconsistently, she did not repeat, and her comprehension was impaired. She had been reading The Western aphasia battery given 12 days after her ictus, showed an aphasia quotient of 22-8, with the pattern of Wernicke’s aphasia. The remainder of the general neurological examination was normal.

A remote right posterior parietal infarction and an acute left posterior temporal-parietal infarction seen on MRI was thought to be secondary to an autoimmune hypercoagulable state. Routine laboratory results were normal, the patient had a prestroke history of an autoimmune haemolytic anaemia, myasthenia gravis, and lupus anticoagulant.

The patient only identified named pictures on her left but was able to cancel objects well on the right and left sides in a routine cancellation task. To test the impression that the patient was neglecting semantic material on her right a series of cancellation tasks were given.

At the first examination (one week after the stroke) the patient was given two vari
eties of cancellation task: a routine version and a semantic version. This was similar to the standard method developed for assessing neglect in aphasic patients.2 For the semantic version the patient was asked to cross out specific objects by name and description (for example—Where is the pen
cil? The item that you would use to write on a piece of paper?).

On the routine cancellation task the patient cancelled a total of 42 of 45 right sided targets and 42 of 45 left sided targets. There was no difference when the paper was placed to the left or right. Pool all the semantic task trials 56 of 80 left sided items and 56 of 80 right sided items (P = 0.004, Yates’ correction χ2 = 8-32, df = 1). Placing the entire page to the patient’s left or right did not change performance. Of the 30 semantic items used 12 were detected more often when they were on the left, three when they were on the right, and 15 were detected equally regardless of side (P = 0-02, χ2 = 7-8, df = 2).

Was the patient’s performance due to different attentional demands for the two versions of the task? In the traditional cancellation task the patient was simply finding any object on the page. In the second version of the task she had to find a specific individual object. To evaluate if this mechanism explained the patient’s performance, the patient was retested 12 weeks after the stroke. The mechanics of testing were simi
lar to the first examination.

In the routine task the patient was asked to cancel all the objects on a page regardless of identity or location. In the pictorial version she was shown a picture of the object she had to cancel. In the first session the task the patient was told which object to cancel.

The patient’s performance had improved in the three months since her stroke and was consistent on the routine of cancellation task. She showed a disproportionate number of errors in the identification of objects on the right side of the page when they were named verbally when they were presented visually or when they were cancelled regardless of their identity (χ2 = 14-9, df = 5, P = 0-01). When the patient was asked to cancel objects on a page and focus on a specific object, there was a significantly greater risk of omission if the object to be cancelled was located to the patient’s right. Her performance was not due to an inability to see or attend to the