Benefit of folic acid supplementation in parkinsonian patients treated with levodopa

We read with interest the recent excellent review by Reynolds on the role of folic acid and the risks and benefits of its supplementation in the nervous system. It emphasises the beneficial importance of folic on the numerous methylation processes in combination with S-adenosylmethionine (SAM), which donates its methyl group to prevent hyperhomocysteinaemia. However SAM deficiency, which is associated with, for example, cognitive decline and/or mood disturbances, and increased total homocysteine levels, which support onset of vascular disease, may also cause by drugs, for example, levodopa. Levodopa is administered with dopa decarboxylase inhibitors (DDI) to prevent its peripheral degradation. This increases conversion of levodopa to 3-O-methyldopa (3-OMD) by the ubiquitous enzyme catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) in blood, peripheral tissues and in nigrostriatal neurons. COMT requires Mg2+ as cofactor and SAM as methyl donor. Thus O-methylation of levodopa to 3-OMD is associated with conversion of SAM to S-adenosylhomocysteine and subsequently homocysteine. We already demonstrated this association between homocysteine, SAM and 3-OMD in treated Parkinson’s disease (PD) patients, who often suffer from depression and bradyphrenia in the course of the disease and show an increased mortality risk of vascular disease. The objective of our follow up study was to determine total plasma homocysteine in 212 levodopa treated and 29 previously untreated PD patients and 110 controls. Standardised measurement of total homocysteine plasma concentrations with high performance liquid chromatography was only performed in subjects with no metabolic disturbances, like diabetes mellitus, hypertension, reduced levels of vitamin B6, cobalamin and/or folic acid or neurological diseases other than PD. Each PD patient fasted and was withdrawn from drug treatment for at least 12 hours before taking of blood samples in the morning. All participants gave informed consent, the local ethical committee approved this study. Homocysteine levels were significantly (analysis of covariance, F(1, 122, = 17.5, p = 5.9E-08; post hoc analysis (Tukey’s HSD test); levodopa treated PD patients compared with controls: p = 2.2E-05, previously untreated compared with levodopa treated PD patients: p = 0.005; previously untreated PD patients with controls: p = 0.92) increased in levodopa/DDI treated PD patients (17.3 (8.2) μmol/L (mean (SD)) compared with previously untreated PD patients (11.4 (5.8) μmol/L) and controls (12.2 (5.3) μmol/L). There was no significant impact of controls age, sex, daily levodopa dose and Hoehn and Yahr Stage (data not shown). An effective therapeutic approach for reduction of homocysteine levels is additional folic acid supplementation, as folic acid and cobalamin catalyse and increase metabolism of homocysteine to methionine, or, hypothetically, application of peripherally acting COMT inhibitors as adjunct to levodopa/DDI treatment. Methionine acts in combination with pyridoxalphosphate or S- methyl-α-keto-butyric acid as a __________ strong scavenger for free radicals, which in turn induce endothelial dysfunction. Homocysteine induced endothelial dysfunction may further promote atherothrombotic disease in striatal cerebral vessels with subsequent onset of differential susceptibility to impaired energy metabolism, oxidative stress, and basal ganglia dysfunction. Endothelial response to homocysteine depends on the synthesis of nitric oxide. Exposure of the endothelium to homocysteine induces release of nitric oxide, a further excitotoxic compound under suspicion for the contribution of the ensuing neuronal degeneration in PD. Nitric oxide and reduced methionine levels support increased appearance of free radicals, in particular superoxide. Superoxide and nitric oxide generate peroxynitrite. Peroxynitrite mediates tyrosine nitration, which further impacts activity of a variety of enzymes and inactivates tyrosine kinase substrates. These kinases are used by a variety of neuroprotective and neurorestorative growth factors, for instance glial cell line derived neurotrophic factor. Accordingly in vitro trials showed neurotoxic effects of homocysteine and its oxidation product homocysteic acid on various types of cultured human neuronal cell lines and their excitotoxic activity partially via N-methyl-D-aspartate agonistic and mimicking properties. In conclusion, additional folic acid supplementation with concomitant lowering of total homocysteine levels in levodopa/DDI treated PD patients will hypothetically reduce progress of PD and increased hazard ratios for both ischaemic heart— and cerebrovascular disease in treated PD patients.

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Dysphagia due to Chiari I malformation mimicking ALS

We read with interest the article by Paulig and Prosiegel concerning a patient initially diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), who had suffered from progressive swallowing difficulties, fibrillations, and tongue atrophy for a year, in the context of a flaccid bulbar palsy. Brain and spinal MRI showed a Chiari I malformation with descent of the cerebellar tonsils. The authors accompany their article with an illustration of the patient, showing extensive bilateral paresis and atrophy of the tongue. The article notes the importance of carrying out an MRI examination on those patients who show bulbar palsy mimicking bulbar onset type ALS in order to rule out Chiari I malformation.

Chiari I malformation has also reportedly been described as being associated with bulbar onset ALS. Nevertheless, the marked improvement in the dysphagia after neurosurgery suggests that Chiari I was the cause of the patient’s bulbar palsy.

Dysphagia with predominant signs of lower motor neurone disease as the sole manifestation of adult Chiari I malformation is unusual. Pressure exerted by the cerebellar tonsils on the hypoglossal, vagal, glossopharyngeal, facial, and trigeminal motor cranial nerves.

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of ALS. The symptom that may be misinterpreted as a sign of ALS is the clinical manifestation of dysphagia, which was not present in our patient. Indeed, in those patients signs of lower motor neuron damage were not reported. Obviously, dysphagia as a manifestation of a Chiari malformation can develop from different mechanisms—“central” damage to the medullary pattern generators for swallowing and/or to the (subpial) descending corticobulbar pathways in the lower brain stem (that is, dysphagia without tongue atrophy); and “peripheral” damage to the motor neurons of the hypoglossal nerves sited in the dorsal medulla oblongata, possibly accompanied by central damage mentioned above (that is, dysphagia with tongue atrophy).

In our paper our main aim was to emphasise the second mechanism, which clinically mimics a bulbar onset of ALS and may lead to a wrong diagnosis. The period of one year after the first onset of dysphagic symptoms may appear relatively short with regard to the marked tongue atrophy. However, it is very likely that the chronic process of pressure in the medulla oblongata triggers neuronal destruction in the hypoglossal nuclei preceding the clinical manifestation of dysphagia due to compensation of incomplete axonal loss.

With regard to asymmetry of the face, which was very well identified in our picture by Gamez and his colleagues, there were no clinical signs suggesting involvement of the facial nerve. The latter is situated in the mid portion of the pons, and pressure exerted on pontine structures would have been expected to cause other signs of involvement of this part of the brain stem, but this was not the case. We would prefer an alternative explanation—that is, the patient had difficulty in protruding her tongue, which was asymmetrically impaired (right more than left, as can be seen in the picture)—and she tried to overcome this by (unconscious) asymmetrical coactivation of the jaw muscles.

Concerning the question of speech abnormalities raised by Dr Gamez, our patient did indeed have slightly slurred speech, another symptom that may be misinterpreted as a sign of ALS.

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High dose intravenous immune globulin in the treatment of hereditary recurrent brachial plexus neuropathy

We read with interest the article by Klein et al1 providing pathological evidence that the neuropathic attacks in hereditary brachial plexus neuropathy (HBPN) are secondary to an inflammatory process. As a possible pathogenetic mechanism the authors suggest altered immune modulation. In the absence of controlled clinical trials they treated patients with intravenous methyl prednisolone. This treatment—in their patient's experience—relieved the symptoms, particularly the pain, for a brief time, but as they tapered the corticosteroid dose the signs and symptoms reappeared. The authors concluded that in some cases of HBPN an inflammatory response leading to neuronal loss might be involved in the pathogenesis of HBPN. Among others, possible mechanisms underlying the efficacy of IVIg in HBPN include attenuation of complement mediated damage, induction of anti-inflammatory cytokines, inhibition of endothelial cell activation, regulation of helper T cell cytokine production, and neutralisation of T cell superantigens.2 Secondly, individual episodes of HBPN are undistinguishable from Parsonage-Turner syndrome and pain can be very severe for weeks. Complete recovery from each episode is frequent although cumulative disability may develop.3 Although Klein et al4 proposed corticosteroid treatment, others reported that this treatment produces no definite improvement.5 Also our patient in a previous episode had no benefit from corticosteroid treatment. The rapid benefit and the long term efficacy of IVIg in our patient suggest that episodes may be short enough to be treated with this drug. To our knowledge this is the first report of a patient treated with IVIg. The encouraging results prompt controlled therapeutic trials at least for patients with severe forms of HBPN and, possibly even for those with Parsonage-Turner syndrome.

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1 Klein et al5
2 Kazatchkine MD, Kaveri SV
3 Donaghy M
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Authors’ reply

The patient described by Ardolino and colleagues provides an example of a hereditary episode of HBPN. We have provided evidence that viral infections may cause or contribute to HBPN attacks. In addition, we have provided histological evidence of an inflammatory process. As a possible pathogenetic mechanism the authors suggest altered immune modulation. In the absence of controlled clinical trials they treated patients with intravenous methyl prednisolone. This treatment—in their patient's experience—relieved the symptoms, particularly the pain, for a brief time, but as they tapered the corticosteroid dose the signs and symptoms reappeared. The authors concluded that in some cases of HBPN an inflammatory response leading to neuronal loss might be involved in the pathogenesis of HBPN. Among others, possible mechanisms underlying the efficacy of IVIg in HBPN include attenuation of complement mediated damage, induction of anti-inflammatory cytokines, inhibition of endothelial cell activation, regulation of helper T cell cytokine production, and neutralisation of T cell superantigens. Secondly, individual episodes of HBPN are undistinguishable from Parsonage-Turner syndrome and pain can be very severe for weeks. Complete recovery from each episode is frequent although cumulative disability may develop. Although Klein et al proposed corticosteroid treatment, others reported that this treatment produces no definite improvement. Also our patient in a previous episode had no benefit from corticosteroid treatment. The rapid benefit and the long term efficacy of IVIg in our patient suggest that episodes may be short enough to be treated with this drug. To our knowledge this is the first report of a patient treated with IVIg. The encouraging results prompt controlled therapeutic trials at least for patients with severe forms of HBPN and, possibly even for those with Parsonage-Turner syndrome.

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noted in our patients that low dose oral corticosteroids were not as effective as high dose 1.0 g/treatment IV methylprednisolone.1 Because our pathological studies of nerve during episodes showed features characteristic of microvasculitis we elected to use methylprednisolone 20 mg/kg IV. As with all anecdotal reports their patient's improvements must be interpreted cautiously. This is especially true in disorders such as HBPN where individual episodes have a considerably varied course.7 The morbidity of this disorder, the pathological observations, and the results of open trials with IV methylprednisolone and possibly IV Ig warrant clinical trials. It will be necessary to carefully distinguishe inherited from cryptoagenic variants to ensure that a potentially non-responsive group does not interfere with recognition of a responding group. We believe this condition is more common then appreciated and therefore clinical trials are feasible. Knowing if such treatments are beneficial is important as corollation of the underlying gene(s) defect is currently not possible.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Autonomic failure. A textbook of clinical disorders of the autonomic nervous system, 4th edition
Edited by Christopher J Mathias and Sir Roger Bannister (Pp 562, £70.00). Published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002. ISBN 0 19 262850 X

The concept of autonomic disorders or dysfunction is an uncomfortable one for neurologists and as such remains poorly understood and managed within neurology. Part of this problem is because autonomic dysfunction spans several specialties of medicine, is largely based on good understanding of basic human physiology and anatomy, and interpretation of autonomic function testing is difficult. The 4th edition of the well known textbook of autonomic dysfunction, “Autonomic failure. A textbook of clinical disorders of the autonomic nervous system” aims to do this and much more. A huge collection of internationally renowned authorities contribute to this book.

However, the thread of continuity is sometimes lost or repeated in this book. For example, it would be difficult to find a “user friendly” table/diagram of how to interpret blood pressure and heart rate changes following head up tilting. There is considerable repetition of information. Chapters on autonomic and neurohumoral control of cerebral circulation is followed in part II of the book by a chapter on autoregulation and autonomic control of cerebral circulation. Similarly, most neurologists would find chapters on cardiovascular autonomic regulation and control of blood pressure and circulation in man rather difficult to understand. It is also questionable if many messages contained within “Clinical autonomic testing” (Part III) is clinically applicable. Most investigation related chapters such as chapters 21 and 24 appear to be largely research based and information in these and other chapters shifts between research studies and clinically established observations. However, chapters on postprandial hypotension, sleep dysfunction, and sudomotor function are outstanding although the lack of mention of postprandial hypotension and its clinical significance in Parkinson’s disease is surprising.

Part IV of the book concentrates on the relatively common autonomic syndrome of multiple system atrophy (MSA) and the exceedingly rare pure autonomic failure (Part IV). Bannister and Mathias contribute a most useful and clinically relevant chapter on clinical features and evaluation of the primary chronic autonomic failure syndromes. A more detailed discussion on the rather controversial notion of Parkinsonism with autonomic failure and its differentiation from MSA with manifest dysautonomia is lacking and would be useful. There is also confusion in terminology. According to the recent consensus committee definition, MSA is now subdivided in MSA-P and MSA-C subtypes, older terms such as striatogniral degeneration and olivopontocerebellar atrophy being obsolete.

However, such terms keep on appearing both in the chapter by Bannister and Mathias and also in the chapter by S Daniel on neuropathology, which is nevertheless very informative. The following chapter by Matthews revisits much of the information already contained in previous sections of the book, such as a repetitive and confusing classification of autonomic dysfunction followed by a detailed neuropathological description of changes in ganglia and preganglionic neurones in dysautonomia. It seems this chapter is possibly better suited in the basic pathology introductory section of the book. The continuity and flow of this section is thus hampered by the order of chapters. Chapters dealing complex neuro-pathology, largely of research interest, follow chapters on clinically relevant tests of autonomic function. There is an excellent and clinically relevant chapter on management of postural hypotension, a clinical issue that perhapes a large number of neurologists and physicians for the care of the elderly. The latter chapter could have been enhanced by the inclusion of a flow chart outlining a step by step guide to treatment of postural hypotension, progressing from “first line treatment” to adjunctive treatment strategies. Furthermore, in the current climate of clinical governance and evidence based medicine, inclusion of evidence base for the use of the various treatment strategies mentioned in this chapter would have been useful. There are other omissions, such as the lack of mention of cardiac sympathetic neuromabology in MSA and Parkinson’s disease, a technique that is increasingly being recognised as an important tool to help differentiate between early Parkinson’s disease and MSA.

Part V of the book concentrates on peripheral autonomic neuropathies and there is an excellent chapter on diabetic autonomic failure. However, a chapter is devoted to dopamine beta hydroxylase deficiency, which resembles a series of case reports of a condition few will encounter. A shorter, clinically relevant account of this condition could easily be accommodated under genetic causes of dysautonomia. In part VI, other important aspects of dysautonomia are discussed, notably syncope and ageing related changes. A simple diagrammatic representation of various haemodynamic changes following head-up tilting test would have been very useful for most neurologists who use this test clinically. In clinical practice, syncope is often confused with epileptic seizure. However, surprisingly little is mentioned about clinical differentiation and aspects of syncope and seizure. Once again, chapters on hypertension and cardiac failure overlap with previous chapters and are of questionable clinical significance.

The book is clearly written, although sometimes the chapters vary in preparation, practical value, and clarity. The quality of illustrations is high and there are few, if any, frank errors. In summary, this is an essential book for its target audience and would be useful in most medical libraries and to researchers working in the area of autonomic dysfunction.

Ray Chaudhuri

Functional rehabilitation in neurosurgery and neurotraumatology

This volume is Acta Neurochirurgica (Suppl 79), archiving the proceedings of the First International Conference on Neurosurgical Rehabilitation, held in Münster in 2000, together with some abstracts presented at a Conference on Early Rehabilitation held in Maribor in 2001. It is of some interest. As is usually the case in collations of this sort, the contributions cover a wide range of aspects of acute and post-acute rehabilitation of neurological and neurotrauma patients. Some broader topics covered include service organisation, outcome predictors, uniform dataset development, long term psychosocial outcomes, and problems in healthcare management. These chapters are necessarily short and sketchy, and largely serve to highlight the gaps in the evidence base, as well as the gaps in the service coverage! Nevertheless, there is an undercurrent theme here, to the effect that brain injury rehabilitation services are a hot potato in many countries. The reason for this is that their cost is potentially vast. Adequate brain injury rehabilitation is a heavy, prolonged consumer of skilled professional time. Patient numbers are much larger than those for spinal injury, which forms the closest analogy in the health service. To set up a comprehensive regional brain injury rehabilitation service, comparable to that for spinal injury, would be an enormous commitment, which public and private health providers the world over have been shamefully unwilling to fulfil.

Perhaps the more readable contributions, however, are that briefly outline the current status of specific interventions, such as the neuromuscular management of pain, botulinum toxin treatment for spasticity, or sensory stimulation programmes in PVS. There are several chapters on various specialist emergent forms of therapeutic and functional electrical stimulation, such as
motor cortex stimulation for pain and movement disorder; deep-brain stimulation for pain; functional implanted stimulators for standing and walking in paraplegia; peroneal nerve stimulator implantation for central drop-foot; vagus nerve stimulation for epilepsy; and cochlear nucleus stimulation for deafness in NF2. Other contributions, such as that on BTXA for tension headache, are rather far removed from what we would recognise as the field of rehabilitation.

David Rushton

Radiosurgery, volume 4


Radiosurgery is a periodical for papers from the biannual meetings of the International Stereotactic Radiosurgical Society. Volume 4 of the periodical includes selected reports presented at the 4th biannual meeting. The publication is divided into sections on clinical subjects and contributions to physics and radiobiology. There are seven papers on intracranial vascular malformations, five on benign and seven on malignant intracranial tumours, two papers deal with radiosurgery for functional disorders, and eight are devoted to physics and radiobiology. The physics papers deal mainly with quality assurance issues of radiosurgery and are of interest to physicists working in the field.

One paper describes how 3D ultrasound images can be used to realise stereotactic radiation of extracranial targets where movements create a problem. A brief report on the histology of thalamic lesions in the baboon after stereotactic radiosurgery is the only contribution to radiobiology. Two thirds of the book are clinical papers of varying quality. Encouraging results of radiosurgical treatment for arteriovenous malformations are again presented, including a paper specifically devoted to treatment of larger malformations, which until now have eluded this technique. Another paper supports the value of gamma knife surgery for brainstem cavernous angiomas. Three chapters present positive results of gamma knife surgery for hormone secretory pituitary adenomas and the role of radiosurgery and stereotactic radiotherapy in the management of pituitary adenomas are reviewed in another chapter. The section on malignant tumours includes a paper describing the integration of metabolic data from stereotactic PET scanning in dosimetry planning. In the section on radiosurgery for functional disorders an update on the results of gamma knife surgery for mesial temporal lobe epilepsy is given. It is suggested that a therapeutic effect can be achieved even with subcortical radiation doses.

The book is of interest to persons working in the field of radiosurgery and is of limited interest also to neurosurgeons, neurologists, and neuro-oncologists who want to keep up with developments in the field.

Chriser Lindquist

Textbook of neuropsychiatry and clinical neurosciences, 4th edition

Edited by Stuart Yudofsky and Robert Hales (Pp 1375 $219.00) Published by the American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington DC, 2002. ISBN 1 58562 004 1

“Clinical neurosciences” has been added to this well known textbook of neuropsychiatry to acknowledge, if they are to be effective, clinicians need to be conversant with advances in neurosciences. With over 1300 pages, it is a real heavyweight. Physically it’s the same size as Liberman’s more recent edition of Organic Psychiatry. The editors realise that their book is likely to be compared with this classic, and suggest that their book is a dependable American Jeep in contrast to the elegant Rolls Royce of previous “grand European texts”.

They have been able to attract some very authoritative authors and have endeavoured to ensure that each chapter is complete in itself. This works well by and large, but does result in quite a lot of duplication and I could find no attempt to signpost the reader to other relevant parts of the text. The book aims to please quite a wide target audience, from medical students through to specialists. This makes for a book that is easy to read and well presented; plenty of figures, boxes and tables break up the text. But there are some lacunae: for example, I did not find it of much use when investigating the neuropsychiatric sequelae of viral encephalitis. The chapter on cerebrovascular disease was almost entirely limited to a discussion of stroke. As a result there are very little coverage of subarachnoid haemorrhage. I was also disappointed by the rather limited attempts to define the evidence base for some assertions.

There are some excellent review chapters. I particularly recommend “Bedside neuropsychiatry”, “Clinical imaging in neuropsychiatry”, and “The neuropsychological evaluation”; in fact almost all of the early chapters on principles of neuroscience and neuropsychiatric assessment. The last chapter will be invaluable for those of us interested in neuropsychiatric training. The book covers a very large ground to a very high standard. I have a great deal of confidence in the content.

Neurologists and psychiatrists will find it extremely useful; it is dependable, easy to access, and right up to date.

Simon Fleminger

Acquired damage to the developing brain—timing and causation


Brain damage is a major burden to the affected individuals, their families, and to society. When it occurs around the time of birth parents will often question the adequacy of clinical care and seek redress in the courts. This book discusses the causes and timing of neonatal brain injury and is therefore likely to be of great interest to clinicians caring for infants and children, and to parents, and members of the legal profession.

The first few chapters deal with the clinical features and management of cerebral palsy, the epidemiology, aetiology, and genetic causes. The definition of what constitutes cerebral palsy can be confusing, which is probably why the definition is repeated in several of the chapters. Neuroimaging, genetic, and metabolic studies have identified disorders that were previously considered under the umbrella term ‘cerebral palsy’. A recent consensus statement from European cerebral palsy registers is helpful. Even more problematic has been the study of the timing of cerebral injury and the causes of cerebral palsy. Current publications emphasise the importance of prenatal factors in the aetiology of cerebral palsy, and this view is repeated in the book. However, when recognisable developmental and metabolic conditions are excluded, most full term infants who develop encephalopathy after birth have suffered hypoxic ischaemic injury, and the chapters on pathophysiology and pathology deal mainly with this type of injury. The patterns of damage that occur at different developmental ages are clearly described and the illustrative plates are superb. In infants who survive brain injury, the aetiology and timing of the injury must be assessed by clinical examination and investigations. MRI is currently the key technique and this is well described in two chapters with the aid of several images. The final chapter discusses the legal considerations that determine the outcome of litigation and will be of interest to many clinicians.

In summary, this is a useful overview of brain damage in newborn infants. However, brain injury in the preterm is not discussed in sufficient detail and is mainly limited to the classical problems of haemorrhage and severe white matter injury, which are now less common. There is much repetition throughout the book and this gives the impression that the book is a collection of review articles rather than a cohesive account.

Denis Azzopardi