in July 1988, 20 tonnes of aluminium sulphate was discharged by the South West Water Authority into the drinking water supplied to a large region of North Cornwall. Up to 20,000 people were exposed to concentrations of aluminium which were 500–3000 times the acceptable limit under European Union legislation (0.200 mg/l). Although this incident is currently the topic of a government inquiry, nothing is known about its longer-term repercussions on human health. The first neuropathological examination of a person who was exposed and died of an unspecified neurological condition was carried out. A rare form of sporadic early-onset β amyloid angiopathy in cerebral cortical and leptomeningeal vessels, and in leptomeningeal vessels over the cerebellum was identified. In addition, high concentrations of aluminium were found coincident with the severely affected regions of the cortex. Although the presence of aluminium is highly unlikely to be adventitious, determining its role in the observed neuropathology is impossible. A clearer understanding of aluminium’s role in this rare form of Alzheimer’s related disease should be provided by future research on other people from the exposed population as well as similar neuropathologies in people within or outside this group.

In 1988 a woman, then aged 44 years, was exposed, over a number of weeks, to high concentrations of aluminium in the water supply as a consequence of 20 tonnes of aluminium sulphate being accidentally discharged into the local mains supply. This incident, which took place in the vicinity of Camelford, Cornwall, UK, is currently the topic of an inquiry by the Department of Health (http://www.advisorybodies.doh.gov.uk/cotnfood/lowermoor.htm). Fifteen years later, in May 2003 the woman, by then aged 58 years, was referred for investigation of deterioration of her mental state, which extended back over a period of several months. She had developed difficulty in finding words, problems with simple calculations and a heightened tendency to visual hallucinations. She also complained of depression without dementia in an elderly person (1.47 m; 4.33 and 5.71 μg/g dry weight); and (d) a case were analysed and yielded values of 3.24 and 11.01 and 0.5 g.

In the light of the circumstances of this case, the coroner requested analyses of the aluminium content of affected areas of the brain. Tissue samples of frontal cortex of <0.5 g wet weight were dissected, frozen and transported to Keele University on dry ice. Thawed tissues were dried at 37°C to constant weight and, by using screw-lid PTFE phials, digested with concentrated HNO₃ (14 mol/l) and moderate heating on a hot plate. Digests were allowed to cool before dilution to 10% HNO₃ with ultra-pure water. The total aluminium content of each digest was measured by graphite furnace atomic absorption spectrometry, using an adaptation of a programme developed in our laboratory. The first four tissue samples were measured blind and included the following: (a) classical Alzheimer’s disease (aluminium concentration 2.46 μg/g dry weight); (b) neuropathology similar to that in this case, but in a person 22 years older (4.76 μg/g dry weight); (c) this case (23.00 μg/g dry weight); and (d) a case of depression without dementia in an elderly person (1.47 μg/g dry weight). Four further samples of frontal cortex from this case were analysed and yielded values of 3.24 and 11.01 and 4.33 and 5.71 μg/g dry weight for the left and right sides, respectively. One additional measurement of the similar case,
Aluminium is usually found in brain tissue in the range of 0–2 μg/g dry weight. In the brain cortex in this case it ranged from values typical of Alzheimer’s disease, 3–7 μg/g dry weight,7 to one value, 11.01 μg/g dry weight, similar to that found in aluminium-induced encephalopathies5 to a higher value, 23.00 μg/g dry weight, typical of dialysis-associated encephalopathies.4,6

β amyloid congophilic angiopathy of variable extent is almost always found in cases of Alzheimer’s disease, in which β amyloid deposits are also found in cortical plaques with associated neurofibrillary tangles.5 Some β amyloid precursor protein mutations rarely give rise to a familial condition with cerebral haemorrhages and dementia.6 In this condition, however, the amyloid angiopathy affects small arteries more extensively in the brain than in this case, and there are usually macroscopically visible haemorrhages, which were not seen here. No family history of cerebral neurological or psychiatric disease was evident. Thus, this case presents a very unusual pattern of severe, sporadic β amyloid angiopathy, a condition that has been described only occasionally.5 We also noted the presence of Lewy bodies, as has been described previously in Alzheimer’s disease and, in particular, in early-onset forms of the disease.18 Inheritance of APOE e4/4 is a risk factor for the deposition of β amyloid in the walls of cortical and leptomeningeal blood vessels,11 as well as an earlier age of onset of Alzheimer’s disease,12 and this genotype may have contributed to the neuropathology observed in this case.

We are not aware of any other determinations of aluminium content in the brain in similar cases. To our knowledge, aluminium content in the brain has not hitherto been measured in any case of presenile dementia, nor has it previously been associated with the APOE genotype. The range of high aluminium content measured in the brain in this case may reflect focal deposits of aluminium, as has been observed previously in Alzheimer’s disease—11—for example, aluminium may be co-deposited with β amyloid.14 Aluminium, along with iron, is implicated in the aggregation of β amyloid in β sheets7 and this may explain their possible co-localisation in this case. Despite both aluminium and β amyloid being implicated in Alzheimer’s disease, we can only speculate about their individual or joint roles in this case, although their association with the observed neuropathology is unlikely to be wholly adventitious. It is possible that the high content of aluminium in the brain is a consequence of a previous exposure to extremely high concentrations of aluminium in drinking water (approximately 500–3000 times the maximum allowable concentration for potable water), although this remains to be confirmed in other people from the exposed population. It is not possible to say on the basis of this evidence whether aluminium had a causative role in this case. Further follow-up to assess cognitive function in survivors of this toxic incident, however, would seem warranted and neuropathological examination of the brains of survivors, if consent is given, should be undertaken whenever the opportunity arises.

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