Incidental Subcortical Lesions Identified on Magnetic Resonance Imaging in the Elderly. I. Correlation With Age and Cerebrovascular Risk Factors

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SUMMARY Patchy subcortical foci of increased signal intensity are frequently identified on magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in the elderly. The incidence and clinical correlates of these lesions remain unknown. In this report, 240 consecutive MRI scans performed over a 6-month period were reviewed (excluding patients with recent brain trauma or known demyelinating disease). Subcortical incidental lesions (ILs) were identified, which could not be accounted for by the patient’s current clinical diagnosis, neurological status, or CT scan. The ILs were graded according to size, multiplicity, and location. The incidence and severity of ILs increased with advancing age (p < 0.0005). Among patients over 50 years of age, the incidence and severity of ILs were correlated with a previous history of ischemic cerebrovascular disease (p < 0.05) and with hypertension (p < 0.05). Multivariable regression analysis identified age, prior brain ischemia, and hypertension as the major predictors of ILs in the elderly. Diabetes, coronary artery diseases, and sex did not play a significant role. With the exception of cerebrovascular disease, there was no association between ILs and any particular clinical entity, including dementia. It is concluded that subcortical parenchymal lesions are frequent incidental findings on MRI in the elderly, and may represent an index of chronic cerebrovascular diseases in such patients.

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Definition and Grading of Incidental MRI Lesions

The MRI scans were reviewed by two investigators blinded to the clinical data. Special attention was directed to focal parenchymal areas of increased signal intensity. These were noted and cataloged to location, size, and multiplicity. The clinical information and other radiologic studies were subsequently analyzed, and incidental MRI lesions were identified. Incidental lesions (ILs) were defined as parenchymal foci of increased signal intensity similar to the cerebrospinal fluid in adjacent spaces (Fig 1). Informed consent was obtained according to institutional guidelines.

Lesion is not visualized on a good quality CT scan.

Lesion has increased signal intensity on T2 weighted images, and is identified by two investigators.

Lesion cannot be directly explained by the patient’s current clinical diagnosis.

Lesion cannot be directly explained by the patient’s current neurologic examination.

Lesion is not visualized on a good quality CT scan.

The ILs were graded according to a scale illustrated in figure 2. MRI scans without ILs were designated grade 0. Scans with focal ILs confined to one lobe of the brain or the posterior fossa were designated grade 1. Scans with multiple ILs involving more than one lobe of the brain were designated grade 2. MRI scans with multiple confluent ILs forming large patches were designated grade 3. An MRI study which was borderline between two grades was automatically assigned the lower grade.

Clinical Correlations and Multivariable Regression Analysis

The prevalence and severity of ILs were correlated with age and sex in the whole sample (N = 240) using four age categories and four MRI categories (grades 0–3). For the purpose of risk factor analysis, elderly patients were defined as those over 50 years of age. This subsample (N = 82) was further divided into three age categories (51–60, 61–70, and over 70). The prevalence and severity of ILs in these three age categories were compared. Additional correlations were performed examining the effects of a previous history of cerebrovascular disease (prior TIAs, RINDs, or strokes), hypertension (systolic over 160 mm Hg or requiring pharmacologic therapy), diagnosed diabetes mellitus, symptomatic coronary artery disease, and overt dementia (formal diagnosis by the referring neurologist) on the prevalence and severity of ILs in the elderly subsample. Statistical analysis was performed using Chi-Square tests with Yate’s continuity correction. A P value was calculated for each comparison using the tail end analysis and standard statistical formulae.

A multivariable linear regression analysis was performed on the whole sample assessing the relative contribution of each factor to the presence and severity of ILs. The SSPS statistical software package (SSPS Inc., Chicago, Illinois) designed for the IBM-PC computer was used. The Stepwise/Text protocol designed for examining interdependent variables was applied, assigning a standardized score to each variable. An equation was derived predicting the grade of incidental MRI lesions (0–3) from age and other significant variables (including unknown factors).

Results

Correlation of Incidental MRI Lesions with Age and Sex

Ages ranged from 5 to 82 years, with all age groups well represented (mean age = 49.2; median age =

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Criteria for an Incidental Lesion on Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Brain</th>
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Figure 2. Grading of incidental MRI lesions. Grade 0: no incidental lesions. Grade 1: focal incidental lesions limited to one lobe of the brain or the posterior fossa. Grade 2: multiple incidental lesions extending beyond one lobe of the brain or the posterior fossa. Grade 3: confluent incidental lesions forming multiple large patches.

Figure 3. Frequency and severity of incidental MRI lesions in various age groups.

Interestingly, none of 22 patients under 40 years of age with previous brain tumor and no radiation therapy had an IL. Also, none of 48 patients with headache and no other neurologic disease had an IL. Because of the relatively small number of patients with ILs under 40 years of age, and the myriad of clinical presentations, no statistically significant associations emerged.

Among 134 patients over 40 years of age, ILs occurred with increasing frequency and severity with advancing age (fig. 4). In this age group, ILs were identified among patients in every clinical setting, including patients with headache and patients with brain tumors without previous radiation therapy. With the exception of cerebrovascular disease, no definite relationship with any particular clinical presentation could be demonstrated.

Correlation of Incidental MRI Lesions with Risk Factors for Cerebrovascular Disease

Prior history of brain ischemia among patients over 50 years of age was associated with an increase in the incidence of ILs \( p < 0.05 \). This increase was manifested almost exclusively by a shift to multiple bilateral confluent lesions (grade 3) (fig. 4). This increase was not an effect of age, since the two groups were matched for age.

Prior history of hypertension (as defined) was associated with a similar increase in the frequency of ILs \( p < 0.05 \). However, this increase was manifested almost exclusively by a shift to multiple nonconfluent lesions (grade 2) (fig. 5). Again, this increase was not an effect of age.

Diabetes mellitus and coronary artery disease were both associated with trends toward more frequent ILs. These trends were not statistically significant, and disappeared after correction for hypertension and age respectively. The frequency of ILs among 14 elderly patients with the overt diagnosis of dementia was identical to that among 68 elderly patients without this diagnosis.

Finally, age was correlated with the incidence and severity of ILs in the 33 elderly patients without prior history of cerebrovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, coronary artery disease, or dementia. There was a consistent trend toward more frequent and more severe ILs with advancing age among these oth-
MRI IN THE ELDERLY: I. CLINICAL CORRELATIONS

Correlation of incidental subcortical MRI lesions with previous history of brain ischemia in 82 consecutive patients over 50 years of age.

Figure 4. Correlation of a prior history of ischemic cerebrovascular disease with incidental MRI lesions in patients over 50 years of age. Lesions which correspond clinically to previous infarcts, and lesions visualized on CT are not considered incidental.

Correlation of hypertension (> 160 mm Hg systolic, or requiring pharmacologic therapy) with incidental MRI lesions in patients over 50 years of age.

Figure 5. Correlation of hypertension (> 160 mm Hg systolic, or requiring pharmacologic therapy) with incidental MRI lesions in patients over 50 years of age.

Multivariable Regression Analysis of Incidental MRI Lesions in the Elderly

The relative contribution of age, dementia, and risk factors for cerebrovascular disease to the presence and severity of incidental MRI lesions was assessed (table 2). Age, previous history of brain ischemia, and hypertension significantly and independently correlated with the MRI grade (p < 0.01 in each instance). The standardized correlation coefficients were 0.5, 0.2, and 0.2 for these three variables respectively. Clearly, age was the strongest predictor of the MRI grade, but prior brain ischemia and hypertension both contributed to the process. The predicted grade of incidental MRI lesions (0–3) can be estimated from the following equation:

MRI = 0.46 (Age) + 0.54 (ISCH) + 0.47 (HTN) - 1.4

where MRI is the MRI score (0–3), AGE is the age in decades, ISCH is the presence or absence of prior brain ischemia (0 or 1), and HTN is the presence or absence of hypertension (0 or 1).

Discussion

Patchy foci of increased signal intensity are often identified on MRI of the brain. While some of these lesions occur in conjunction with known or suspected multifocal neurologic disease, similar parenchymal changes are often unexpected or incidental. In some cases, these incidental findings undoubtedly reveal early or less severe forms of occult neurologic disease. In other cases, they represent previously unrecognized alterations in the brain in response to a known systemic or neurologic pathology. In yet other cases, such lesions may be benign markers of normal physiologic processes such as senescence.

The problem of subcortical MRI lesions in the elderly has been addressed in several preliminary reports. However, the populations studied, the scanning techniques, and the definition and grading of lesions were necessarily different from our own. Using a less powerful 0.35 Tesla unit, Bradley, et al. demonstrated patchy confluent white matter lesions (grade 3 by our classification) in 6 of 20 consecutive patients over the age of 60. Using a similar unit, Brant-Zawadzki, et al. described similar lesions in 4 of 5 demented elderly patients, 3 of 5 nondemented elderly patients, and 0 of 5 younger control patients. Kinkel, et al. reported 23 patients with periventricular leukomalacia by CT and...
similar confluent foci on MRI. There was a high incidence of dementia, stroke, and hypertension among these patients. One autopsied case revealed large patches of demyelination surrounding multiple minute lacunar infarctions of various ages. Dougherty, et al. recently reported another 23 patients with similar confluent subcortical foci on MRI. There was a high incidence of multiple white matter lesions on MRI.\textsuperscript{11}

Before embarking on a meaningful analysis of these ILs, we sought to define them precisely and to grade them according to an objective and reproducible scheme. While we suspected that the various grades probably represent an increasing severity of the same process, we did not overlook the possibility of more than one process contributing to these changes. As with all diagnostic techniques, we recognized that the imaging protocol, the equality of the scans, and the magnetic resonance system used may well contribute to the number and severity of visualized ILs.

Despite the above assumptions and limitations, interesting trends were uncovered. As implied by previous scattered reports, ILs were infrequent below the age of 40. In this age group, they often occurred in the setting of a seizure disorder, and may have represented otherwise occult lesions causing epilepsy (i.e. hamartomas, occult neoplasms, cortical sclerosis, etc). Alternatively, the lesions may have reflected changes in brain parenchyma resulting from long standing seizures. Both possibilities are intriguing and should be investigated further. MRI lesions were prevalent in another clinical setting in this age group: the previous operated and radiated tumor. In such cases, ILs may have represented subtle parenchymal changes resulting from radiation therapy to the brain. Undoubtedly, other patients with ILs may eventually prove to have demyelinating disease.\textsuperscript{5, 16}

Incidental MRI lesions were common above the age of 40 and increased in frequency and severity with advancing age. They occurred in a wide variety of clinical settings. With the exception of cerebrovascular disease, no significant association with any particular clinical presentation was demonstrated. Age, a priori history of brain ischemia, and hypertension were the most significant predictors of the incidence and severity of ILs. Diabetes mellitus, heart disease, and unknown factors played a less important role. While this study was not designed to specifically address the effect of dementia, elderly patients with the overt diagnosis of dementia did not have more frequent or more severe ILs than age matched controls. Even though all cases were referred by a neurologist or neurosurgeon,

\begin{table}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Age & Sex & Previous brain ischemia & Hypertension & Diabetes mellitus & Coronary artery disease & Dementia & Other & unknown factors \\
\hline
B & 0.461 & 0.057 & 0.545 & 0.471 & 0.370 & -0.190 & -0.157 & -1.41 \\
SEB & 0.069 & 0.154 & 0.179 & 0.174 & 0.261 & 0.340 & 0.239 & 0.361 \\
Beta & 0.508$^*$ & 0.026 & 0.222$^*$ & 0.206$^*$ & 0.010 & -0.040 & -0.470 & \\
T & 6.7 & 0.714 & 0.003 & 2.70 & 1.42 & -0.546 & -0.658 & -3.91 \\
p & 0.000 & 0.714 & 0.003 & 0.008 & 0.158 & 0.586 & 0.556 & 0.0002 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Multi-variable Linear Regression Analysis of Incidental MRI Lesions in 240 Consecutive Patients}
\end{table}

B: the partial regression correlation coefficient for each variable. 
SEB: the standard error of B. 
T: the t value (measure of variance) partitioned to each variable. 
p: the significance level for the correlation of each variable. 
$^*$: significant correlation at the 0.05 level.

Incidence of multiple white matter lesions on MRI.\textsuperscript{12, 14, 15, 18}
many patients without overt dementia may have demonstrated subtle abnormalities on formal neuropsychological testing. This issue would best be resolved by a prospective study on normal elderly patients, including neuropsychological testing and control for cerebrovascular risk factors. Such a study is already in progress at this institution.

Much remains to be learned about the clinical significance of incidental MRI lesions. However, it is clear from these findings and from previous reports that subcortical MRI lesions in the elderly may reflect an index of chronic cerebrovascular disease. Occult subcortical infarctions are known to occur in the elderly, and can appear as foci of increased signal intensity on MRI. Extensive lacunar degenerations are seen in cases of Binswanger’s disease and may explain the MRI findings in that setting. However, it seems unlikely that multiple infarctions can afflict large areas of subcortical white matter and nuclei without overt neurological symptoms. Changes within the brain parenchyma other than frank infarction must be postulated to explain the majority of incidental MRI lesions. Such changes must be more frequent with advancing age and more prevalent with risk factors for cerebrovascular disease.

The vulnerability of deep areas of the brain to ischemia has been discussed in several reports. The periventricular regions can be viewed as watershed zones of circulation between cortical penetrating vessels and deep perforating vessels. Long-standing cerebrovascular disease, including arteriosclerosis and lipohyalinosis may result in chronic parenchymal alterations in these areas. Such “wear and tear” was recently proposed by Ewing, et al. to explain the chronic decrease in regional cerebral blood flow which accompanies aging and cerebrovascular risk factors. The precise histopathological correlates of such “wear and tear” remain to be elucidated. In part II of this report, we present a pathological study of subcortical MRI lesions in the elderly, and propose an etiological hypothesis which accounts for their clinical and pathological associations.

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