Early Stroke: A Dynamic Process

Gudrun Boysen, MD, MDSc; Hanne Christensen, MD

In the acutely infarcted brain, cytokines are released into cerebrospinal fluid and blood. Interleukin (IL)-1β, IL-6, and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, among others, may play a role in the acute increases in plasma adrenocorticotropic hormone, cortisol, epinephrine, norepinephrine, and vasopressin.1–6 Increases in cytokines and hormones may in turn induce changes in other variables. When recorded on admission in acute stroke patients, many variables have been found to be associated with poor outcome in acute stroke. Body temperature7 is one such variable, blood glucose another,8–18 and C-reactive protein (CRP)19–22 and white blood cell count (WBC)20,23 serum cortisol and ferritin24 are further examples. Elevated plasma and cerebrospinal fluid levels of glutamate, glycine,25 ferritin,26 and IL-627 were also associated with deteriorating stroke.

It seems plausible that these variables generally are unaffected at stroke onset and then increase in the early hours after onset, depending on the severity of the stroke. We found this to be the case with temperature,28 which in a large series of patients was normal when measured within 2 hours of stroke onset, but which rose at 4 to 6 hours after stroke onset in patients with severe neurological deficits. At 8 to 10 hours after stroke onset, elevated temperature was associated with poor outcome. This association arose several hours after onset of severe stroke. Thus, the initial severity of the stroke preceded the increase in temperature.

Many studies on blood glucose and stroke prognosis share the same kind of problem. In most studies, blood glucose was measured fairly late after stroke onset and may have changed in the interval between onset of stroke and arrival at hospital. Researchers are divided into 2 groups on this question: those who believe that elevated blood sugar is an independent predictor of poor outcome.24 Increased body iron stores were thought to enhance the cytotoxic mechanisms in cerebral ischemia, but the increased ferritin might also reflect an inflammatory reaction to stroke.

A plausible explanation may be that many variables are interrelated: it is likely that severe stroke generates a metabolic as well as an inflammatory response. The inflammatory response may induce fever mediated by IL-1,30 induce systemic inflammation (eg, rise in CRP, WBC, and acute-phase reactants primarily mediated by IL-1, IL-6, and TNF), and enhance excitotoxicity.31,32 The metabolic response may cause an increase in blood sugar, cardiac arrhythmia,33 and a rise in troponins T and I.34 In this hypothesis, all of these variables would be found to be associated with severe stroke and unfavorable outcome; it would only be meaningful to consider them in groups and avoid including them individually in multivariate analysis, because they primarily reflect the size of the inflammatory and the metabolic reactions. Fever, aspiration, elevated blood glucose, and other variables may contribute to worsen the prognosis.

The anatomical brain lesion is usually not fully established before 12 to 24 hours or more after stroke onset. Within this period neuroimaging by MRI, PET and SPECT35–38 may demonstrate penumbral tissue potentially

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From the Department of Neurology, Bispebjerg Hospital, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Correspondence to Gudrun Boysen, MD, Department of Neurology, Bispebjerg Hospital, 2400 Copenhagen, Denmark. E-mail gb01@bbh.hosp.dk

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salvageable or reperfusion of ischemic tissue, which may indicate a fairly good prognosis. The results of such studies are valuable in the acute situation, to guide treatment decision and for information of the patient and the relatives about the outlook. In the majority of patients in whom such studies are not performed, the severity of the neurological deficit, primarily the level of consciousness and the presence of gaze deviation are the immediate, and easily available variables to guide prediction of prognosis. Stroke severity in itself as recorded by one or another of several stroke scales 39–41 is a major predictor of stroke outcome.

Many researchers, in describing a prognostic marker (be it temperature, blood glucose, CRP, WBC, or other), have adjusted for stroke severity and found that the marker was independent thereof. To do so, rating scales for stroke are often used as if they were interval scales, and not nominal scales with large interobserver and intraobserver variation. This may have contributed to erroneous conclusions. In a biological system, it seems unlikely that so many variables can be causal and predict outcome independently. However, if that is the case, we need to develop models for entering stroke severity—MRI, PET, and SPECT data; temperature; blood glucose; CRP; WBC; plasma cortisol; glutamate; glycine; IL-6; ferritin; and a few others, such as age and prestroke modified Rankin scale score—to estimate the prognosis. Before doing so, we have to reexamine the variables within the first 1 to 2 hours after stroke onset and perform serial measurements to better describe the relationship over time between stroke severity and the variables. To investigate the biological relevance of these variables, we should determine whether they increase as reflections of the brain lesion or whether they are elevated in acute ischemia: a study in patients given naloxone. Stroke. 1988;19:455–458.


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