Relationship between Primitive Reflexes in Stroke Patients and Rehabilitation Outcome

JULIE G. BOTVIN, M.D., ROBERT ALLEN KEITH, PH.D., AND MARK V. JOHNSTON, M.A.

SUMMARY  The reappearance of developmental reflexes in the aged has been found to be associated with severe, diffuse cerebral damage. This study examined the relationship between the presence of such reflexes in stroke patients and the outcome of rehabilitation. Tests for the presence of snout, suck, jaw-jerk and palpomental reflexes were tested in 106 consecutive stroke patients admitted for rehabilitation treatment. A mental status test was also included in the usual medical admission examination. Functional status ratings for self-care and mobility at discharge, and the setting to which the patient was discharged, were used as outcome criteria. All of the reflex signs were negatively related to a favorable outcome, but the correlations were not high enough for predictive value. The mental status measures were more highly related to rehabilitation outcome than were the presence of developmental reflexes.

PAULSON AND GOTTLIEB 1 have observed that demented senile patients may exhibit a number of primitive neurological reflexes which are also present in the earliest stages of ontogenetic development. In this group of related responses they examined 7 reflexes seen in aged populations which also occur during normal fetal development. It was their opinion that the reappearance of such reflexes in the aged is almost always attributable to diffuse, bilateral and irreversible CNS disease.

The glabellar tap reflex has been considered a sign of Parkinsonism, but Pearce, Aziz and Gallagher demonstrated the existence of an exaggerated response not only in Parkinsonism but also in a group of patients with other cerebral pathology. They concluded that the reflex was a nonspecific sign of extensive cerebral destruction. Klawans and Goodwin found that a positive glabellar response was reversible with L-dopa therapy in a group of patients with Parkinsonism. The failure of an L-dopa regimen to reverse the reflex in patients with clinical evidence of organic dementia led these authors to conclude also that the exaggerated glabellar response might result from diffuse cortical disease.

While there is some agreement that the presence of developmental reflexes in older adults may be indicative of widespread cortical damage, the utility of such signs for diagnosis is far from settled. One problem in the examination of the aged is whether abnormal neurological signs are the result of pathology or are the consequences of normal aging. Critchley has looked at both sides of the controversy. He cautions that standards of normality are different in the aged from those in adulthood; certain neurological changes of the CNS led these authors to conclude also that the exaggerated glabellar response might result from diffuse cortical disease.

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In an investigation of 800 Japanese individuals, Otomo found the palmar reflex to be present in 53% of a group over age 60 with no other neurological manifestations. In those with hemiplegia or hemiparesis, the occurrence of the reflex was 70%. August and Miller observed that the same reflex was very common in organic cerebral disorders and concluded that it was a reasonably reliable indicator of encephalopathy. While Blake and Kunkle felt that the inconsistency of the palmar reflex restricted its usefulness, they did find the accentuated response was frequently seen in patients with diverse forms of corticobulbospinal tract disease, especially when bilateral. Hildenhagen and Schiffler examined 86 residents from several homes for the aged and found a number of aberrant neurological signs. This population was quite old, with an average age over 86 years. The most frequent developmental reflex was an oral motor response from tactile stimulation, found in 40.7%. The palmar reflex was present in 29.1%. These authors conclude from their results that the presence of primitive reflexes is related to age-dependent changes of the CNS.

The appearance of primitive reflexes in the aged seems to be associated with the lack of inhibitory mechanisms in higher centers. They have been seen frequently in patients with severe, diffuse, cerebral damage. The fact that some responses have also been observed in populations without any other manifestation of neurological abnormality introduces a note of caution about whether all such reflexes should be viewed as a sign of serious CNS pathology. The possibility exists, however, that individuals exhibiting these reflexes may have a diminished capacity for learning. If such were the case, it might be possible to predict a patient's response to rehabilitation treatment. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the presence of developmental reflexes in a group of stroke patients and their progress in rehabilitation.

Method

Four developmental reflexes frequently seen in aged populations were selected for study: snout, suck, jaw-jerk and palpmemoral. Tests for the presence of these responses, along with those routinely performed for left and right extensor-plantar reflexes, were included in the usual medical admission examination for 106 consecutive stroke patients. The reflex response was graded as absent, present or strongly present. The palmmemoral response was graded as absent, present or strongly present. The palmmemoral response was graded as absent, present or strongly present. The palmmemorial response was graded as absent, present or strongly present. The palmmemoral response was graded as absent, present or strongly present.

A simple mental status examination was also administered to all patients without aphasia. Of the 106 patients, there were 29 who were aphasic and 77 who were able to communicate verbally. The mental status test consisted of 2 parts. In the orientation section there was 1 ques-
tion each regarding time, place and person (3 points). In other cognitive tests, there were 2 subtractions of 7’s from 100 (3 points), naming the last 4 presidents (4 points), and interpretation of 2 proverbs (2 points).

Two kinds of data were used as measures of rehabilitation outcome: functional status ratings at discharge and discharge destination. Ratings at admission and discharge for 11 tasks of self-care and mobility were given by physical and occupational therapists working with the patient. The tasks were: eating, personal hygiene, grooming, bowel functioning, bladder functioning, bed activities, dressing, transfers, wheelchair activities, ambulation on level surfaces, and the use of stairs. A rating scale with values from 1 to 4 was used: 1 — completely dependent, 2 — requires physical assistance, 3 — requires supervision only, and 4 — completely independent. The functional status score was the sum of the 11 ratings with a possible maximum of 44.

Discharge destination was ranked according to a hierarchy of independence: 1 — alone in a private residence, 2 — with someone else in a private residence, 3 — in a custodial care facility or boarding home, 4 — in a skilled nursing facility, or 5 — in a hospital.

The sample of 106 patients ranged in age from 30 to 88 years with a mean of 68.7 years. There were 48 males and 58 females. The average length of stay for their rehabilitation program was 35 days, very close to that in a sample of 1,443 stroke patients in 20 rehabilitation hospitals reported by Keith, Breckenridge and O’Neil.

Results

In the distribution of reflexes (Table 1) there was an average of 32.8% graded as present or strongly present. The snout reflex was most common, in 51.5% of the patients. The incidence is very close to that found by Paulson and Gottlieb, although their sample was comprised of patients with senile dementia. The suck reflex, observed by these investigators in 53% of their patients, was present in only 19.4% of stroke patients. The jaw-jerk response was seen somewhat more frequently in the present study 31.0% to 18% in the Paulson and Gottlieb population. The presence of the palmomental reflex was fairly similar in the 2 studies, 25.7% to 21%. Otomo reported a much higher incidence of this response (70%) in a group of hemiplegic and hemiparetic patients. In the present study, an extensor plantar response (Babinski) was present on either side in about a third of the cases.

The relationship between the presence of reflexes and outcome criteria was analyzed by means of Kendall’s tau, a rank order correlation appropriate for ordinal data. Table 2 is a summary of that analysis. It is apparent, first of all, that all of the reflex signs are negatively related to a favorable outcome on either functional status or discharge destination. On the other hand, the sizes of the correlations for any of the reflexes or their total are low. The snout and palmomental reflexes are most strongly related to both criteria, but the magnitude of the relationship is not high enough to be of much predictive value.

Table 3 shows the association between reflexes and the two sets of mental status measures: orientation and other cognitive tests (serial 7s, names of presidents and proverb interpretation). Although the various reflexes are all negatively related to mental status measures, only 2 of the correlations are even weakly significant. In this study there is virtually no relationship between reflex signs and performance on mental status examinations.

In Table 4 the fairly strong correlations between the 2 mental status measures and functional status at discharge are the highest associations of the study. The mental tests are also related to discharge destination but not as well. The
CAROTID ARTERY DISEASE is a common cause of cerebral dysfunction. Pathophysiologically, carotid stenosis, occlusion, ulceration, dissection, inflammation, mural thrombus and trauma have all been implicated.1-4

A large intraluminal carotid artery filling defect shown by arteriography suggests a thrombus.4 The imminent danger of such a clot is either distal embolization or progression to occlusion. The neurologic symptoms and signs may be related to either regional flow insufficiency or embolization or both. Discovery of an intraluminal lesion requires immediate decisions about treatment.

We have recently treated 3 patients with large intraluminal carotid defects and probable distal embolization. Two were treated with anticoagulation and the third had surgical exploration. In all 3 cases the presumed carotid clot was treated surgically. Thus, partially obstructing cervical carotid artery thrombi may lyse either with the use of anticoagulant therapy or else spontaneously.

The etiology of the thrombi may partly be related to underlying atheromatous disease.

**TABLE 4. Relationship between Mental Status Measures and Outcome Criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental status measures</th>
<th>Average functional status at discharge</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Discharge destination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tau</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>Tau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cognitive measures</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphasia</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at the .01 level.

A large intraluminal cervical carotid artery filling defect consistent with mural thrombi were angiographically demonstrated during acute hemispheric neurologicologic evaluation. These thrombi disappeared benignly as shown by serial angiography in 2 patients treated with intravenous heparin and spontaneously in 1 patient treated surgically. Thus, partially obstructing cervical carotid artery thrombi may lyse either with the use of anticoagulant therapy or else spontaneously.

The etiology of the thrombi may partly be related to underlying atheromatous disease.

Several studies have found developmental reflexes in older populations. While some of these groups exhibited severe cerebral pathology, others were composed of individuals without other evidence of neurological abnormality. The present investigation demonstrates that such reflexes are common in those stroke patients who are selected for inpatient rehabilitation. The presence of developmental reflexes was found to be negatively related to favorable treatment outcome. The strength of the relationship was too small to be useful in the selection of patients or the prediction of outcome. A research design which does more than examine the presence of reflexes at one time might better establish their predictive nature in relation to directed motor activity.

**Disappearing Carotid Defects**

**PHILIP YARNELL, M.D., MICHAEL EARNEST, M.D., GLENN KELLY, M.D., AND BOB SANDERS, M.D.**

**SUMMARY** Large intraluminal cervical carotid artery filling defects consistent with mural thrombi were angiographically demonstrated during acute hemispheric neurologicologic evaluation. These thrombi disappeared benignly as shown by serial angiography in 2 patients treated with intravenous heparin and spontaneously in 1 patient.
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