Significance of the T2*-weighted gradient echo brain imaging in patients with infective endocarditis.

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Citation
Clinical neurology and neurosurgery, 112(5), pp.436-440; 2010

Issue Date
2010-04-02

URL
http://hdl.handle.net/10069/23141

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Title: Significance of the T2*-weighted gradient echo brain imaging in patients with infective endocarditis

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Abstract

Background: Although aneurysm formation accompanying parenchymal hemorrhage is one of devastating complications in the central nervous system (CNS), imaging studies of the brain are not routinely warranted in patients with infective endocarditis (IE). To assess the clinical importance for detecting silent lesions in the central nervous system, we investigated hypointense signal spots detected on the brain T2*-weighted MR imaging in patients with IE.

Methods and Results: Eleven patients with IE were retrospectively reviewed. Seven patients (63.6%) showed hypointense signal spots on T2*-weighted MR images. The number of hypointense signal spots increased within only a few weeks in five patients.

Conclusion: The brain T2*-weighted MR imaging in patients with IE may have a potential role to detect CNS lesions with clinical significance of potentially high risk of intracranial hemorrhage. T2*-weighted hypointense signal spots may be specific to brain involvement, and be quite useful in monitoring CNS lesions associated with IE, even if they are asymptomatic.

Key words: Infective endocarditis, intracranial infectious aneurysm, T2*-weighted magnetic resonance imaging
Significance of the T2*-weighted gradient echo brain imaging in patients with infective endocarditis

Infective endocarditis (IE) is a disease accompanying considerable morbidity and mortality[1]. In patients with IE, central nerves system (CNS) involvement has been reported to develop in 20 to 40%[2,3]. Infectious aneurysms (IAs), which are mostly small lesions in the intracranial arteries, manifest a variety of clinical presentations and have a mortality rate as high as 60%[1]. Although some IAs heal with only medical therapy even if they rupture, others may increase in size and number. Although T2*-weighted magnetic resonance (MR) imaging could be sensitive to magnetic susceptibility effect even in small lesions in the CNS, its implications for IE lesions has not yet been fully elucidated [4-8, 22-24]. In this study, we evaluated hypointense signal spots detected on the brain T2*-weighted MR imaging in patients with IE and assessed the clinical importance for detecting silent lesions in the CNS.

Patients and Methods

We retrospectively reviewed consecutive cases of IE treated at the Nagasaki University Hospital from June 2006 to July 2007. All patients were diagnosed as having IE
according to the modified Duke criteria. This study included only patients in whom the brain T2*-weighted MR imaging was performed. The initial and follow-up imaging in all patients were undertaken with the 1.5-T scanner (Signa CV/i; GE Healthcare, Milwaukee, WI) with a standard head coil. T2*-weighted MR imaging used a gradient echo pulse sequence with repetition time: 650 ms; echo time: 23 ms; flip angle: 20°; acquisition matrix: 256 x 224; number of signal averaged: 2; section thickness: 6mm; gap width: 2 mm; field of view: 22 cm². Eleven patients with IE met the inclusion criteria, comprising 7 men and 4 women with mean age of 54 years (range, 23-79 yr.). Clinical presentation, MRI findings, and treatments in the patients were reviewed.

Results

Clinical characteristics and MRI findings of all patients are shown in Table 1. The most common initial symptoms were fever in four (35.5%), and lumbago in three patients. Others had shoulder pain, general fatigue, emotional change, and hemiparesis. The most common predisposing conditions for IE included mitral or aortic valvular incompetence in eight, and a dental procedure in two, and prosthetic heart valve in one patient. The intervals between the clinical manifestation and the diagnosis of IE were relatively long (5 days to 5 months).
Intracranial abnormalities were identified on the brain MR images in eight patients (72.7%) including subarachnoid hemorrhage in three, cerebral infarct in three, intracerebral hemorrhage in two and subdural hematoma in one patient. All patients including nine who had undergone cardiac surgeries for IE were neurologically asymptomatic, but one patient (Case 8) showed right hemiparesis at the time of brain MR imaging. Cerebral angiography (CAG) was performed in four patients, two of whom were found to have IAs and underwent the aneurysm resection. Seven patients (63.6%) showed T2*-weighted hypointense signal spots (Table 1). The number of the hypointense spots had increased within only a few weeks (14-28 days) in five patients with multiple lesions.

Nine patients (81.9%) including two who had undergone surgery for intracranial IAs had good recovery. One patient died following the cardiac surgery because of postoperative disseminated intravascular coagopathy. Another patient presented severe disability because of cerebral infarction.

Illustrative cases

Patient 1

A 23-year-old woman, who had a history of cardiac surgery for the ventricular septal
defect, suffered headache and general fatigue after a dental treatment. She was admitted to a local hospital, and diagnosed as IE. She was transferred to our institute, and underwent the aortic valve replacement. After the procedure, computed tomography (CT) of the brain revealed a parenchymal hematoma in the left frontal lobe (Fig. 1A). Both CT Angiography (CTA) and cerebral angiography (CAG) demonstrated an aneurysm at the distal branch of the left middle cerebral artery (Fig. 1B). She underwent left frontotemporal craniotomy, and the aneurysm was resected. Preoperative T2*-weighted MR imaging demonstrated multiple hypointense signal spots, although the relevant lesions were not demonstrated by either CTA or CAG (Fig. 2).

Patient 2

A 75-year-old man was transferred to our institute because of a fever of unknown origin. Transesophageal echocardiography revealed vegetation at the mitral valve and led to the diagnosis of IE. He had no neurological symptoms, but brain T2*-weighted MR imaging demonstrated several hypointense spots with edema formation (Fig. 3, A and B). MR angiography showed no aneurysms. Interestingly, the number of the T2*-weighted hypointense spots increased asymptomatically, whereas the perifocal edema disappeared following three-week antibiotherapy (Fig. 3, C and D). The patient
underwent the mitral-valve plasty, however his general condition deteriorated
postoperatively because of pneumonia and the renal failure. He was treated intensively,
but he died three months after the cardiac surgery.

Discussion

Intracranial IAs are less common (2-4% of endocarditis cases) but they produce
potentially devastating neurological complications such as intracerebral or subarachnoid
hemorrhage[9-11]. Since IAs can be clinically silent and some of them could resolve by
antibiotic therapy, actual incidence of IAs is considered to be higher than the ones
reported in the literatures[12]. IAs may result from septic embolism of vegetations to
the arterial vasa vasorum or the intraluminal space, and result in subsequent spread of
infection through the intima and outward the vessel wall[12]. Time interval from septic
embolism to aneurysmal dilation can be as short as 24 hours[13]. Regardless of its high
complication rate, at present, conventional CAG remains as gold standard in diagnosing
intracranial IAs [1, 12]. However, intracranial bleeding is not always secondary to
rupture of IAs but often to other situations such as necrotic arteritis [14]. In addition, in
our case 2 with no aneurysm detected on MR angiography, the number of the T2*-weighted hypointense spots increased as the perifocal edema disappeared following
three-week antibiotherapy. These findings suggest that pathological changes other than IA formation or symptomatic hemorrhage could also play a role in CNS involvement in patients with IE. Therefore, less-invasive and repeatable studies such as MR imaging could be indicated in neurologically asymptomatic patients with IE.

The present study demonstrated that the T2*-weighted MR imaging could detect intracranial abnormalities in 63.6% of the patients with IE, and in 60% of patients without any neurological signs, which was higher than we had expected. Brain T2*-weighted MR imaging has been reported to demonstrate various etiologies of hypointense spots, which result from the deposition of hemosiderin (old hemorrhage), ferritin, calcium, the presence of other metallic materials and air[15]. It could also detect remnants of previous cerebral microbleeds (MBs)[16-18], which are usually defined as small, round, foci distinct from vascular flow voids, leptomeningeal hemosiderosis, and nonhemorrhagic subcortical mineralization[19]. MBs are considered as a general marker of microvascular vulnerability with the incidence of 3.1-6.4%[19, 20] in healthy individuals, and 56%[21] in hypertensive patients. There are only two previous reports that refer to the relationship between T2*-weighted hypointense lesions and the presence of IE, and current study is the first case series discussing the clinical significance of the brain T2*-weighted MR imaging associated with IE[22-24].
Even a young patient (Case 1) had multiple T2*-weighted hypointense signal spots, and the number of such lesions increased within only a few weeks in five cases (Case 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8). Most lesions appeared in cortex, subcortex and around sulci, which were anatomically different from MBs as seen in patients with chronic hypertension, cavernomas, and amyloid angiopathy. In which situation, abnormalities detected on T2*-weighted MR imaging of the brain may indicate potentially high risk of intracranial bleeding. Therefore, we recommend T2*-weighted MR imaging in patients with IE, even if they are neurologically asymptomatic, both for routine screening and follow-up procedures.

Our study has limitations because of small number of the patients and short follow-up period. Further studies with large number of patients and a longer follow-up period are required.

Conclusion

The brain T2*-weighted MR imaging in patients with IE may have a potential role to detect minor abnormalities related to IE, with clinical significance of high risk of intracranial hemorrhage. T2*-weighted hypointense signal spots might be specific to brain involvements of IE, and be helpful in diagnosing and monitoring CNS lesions in
patients with IE.

References


Figure Legends:

Figure 1. Plain CT (A) showed a hematoma in the left frontal lobe. Cerebral angiography (B) revealed an aneurysm at the distal branch of the left middle cerebral artery.
Figure 2.  T2*-weighted MR imaging demonstrated multiple hypointense spots (arrowhead) in the cortex, subcortex and around sulci.
Figure 3. Initial T2*-weighted MR imaging (A) and FLAIR imaging (B) demonstrated several hypointense spots with edema formation. Follow-up T2*-weighted MR imaging (C) and FLAIR imaging (D) revealed that the number of T2*-weighted hypointense spots increased asymptotically, whereas the perifocal edema disappeared following three-week antibiotherapy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age (yr) /sex</th>
<th>Initial symptom</th>
<th>Predisposing condition</th>
<th>Interval between onset and diagnosis</th>
<th>Neurological diagnosis</th>
<th>T2* hypointense signal spot (Number)</th>
<th>Increase at FU</th>
<th>Neurosurgical treatment</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>23/F</td>
<td>General fatigue</td>
<td>AR, dental procedure</td>
<td>3m</td>
<td>Cerebral hemorrhage, infectious aneurysm</td>
<td>Multiple (6)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Resection</td>
<td>GR</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>75/M</td>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>MR</td>
<td>2w</td>
<td>SAH</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>60/M</td>
<td>Character change</td>
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<td>3m</td>
<td>SAH, infectious aneurysm</td>
<td>Multiple (5)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Resection</td>
<td>GR</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>AR</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>Cerebral infarction (embolic)</td>
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<td>None</td>
<td>GR</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

AR, aortic regurgitation; MR, mitral regurgitation; MVP, Mitral valve prolapse

m, month; w, week; d, day; SAH, subarachnoid hemorrhage; FU, follow-up; -, no follow-up; GR, good recovery; SD, severe disability