Cerebral Small Vessel Disease in Pseudoxanthoma Elasticum: Three Cases

Aleksandra M. Pavlovic, Jasna Zidverc-Trajkovic, Marija M. Milovic, Dragan M. Pavlovic, Zagorka Jovanovic, Milija Mijajlovic, Mirjana Petrovic, Vladimir S. Kostic, Nada Sternic

ABSTRACT: Background: Cerebral small vessel disease is rarely described in association with pseudoxanthoma elasticum (PXE), a hereditary connective tissue disorder with skin, eye and vascular manifestations. This autosomally inherited elastic tissue disease has been attributed to mutations in the ABCC6 gene located on chromosome 16p13.1. Different stroke mechanisms are suggested in PXE patients, arterial hypertension and accelerated atherosclerosis being the leading ones. Case Descriptions: Case 1: A 49-year-old man with history of mild hypertension presented with recurrent transient ischemic attacks. At the age of 42, evaluation for progressive visual loss and skin changes led to diagnosis of PXE. Brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) disclosed multiple lacunar infarctions and confluent periventricular white matter lesions (WML). Case 2: A 71-year-old woman with history of mild hypertension suffered right-sided stroke. Diagnosis of PXE was made at the age of 48 due to severe visual loss and skin changes. Brain MRI revealed multiple lacunar infarctions and subcortical ischemic leukoencephalopathy. Case 3: A 47-year-old woman with prominent skin changes and bilateral amblyopia developed right-sided weakness. Skin biopsy confirmed PXE. Several lacunar infarcts in deep white matter and pons were revealed on MRI. Discussion: We present three patients with clinical and histopathological features of PXE who presented with multiple lacunar strokes, two with extensive confluent WML. These cases illustrate that PXE is a rare but significant risk factor for small vessel disease and stroke in patients of all age groups. Occlusive small vessel disease and subsequent lacunar infarcts and WML represent important PXE manifestations.

RéSUMÉ: Maladie des petits vaisseaux cérébraux dans le pseudo xanthome élastique : à propos de trois observations. Introduction: Une maladie des petits vaisseaux cérébraux associée au pseudo xanthome élastique (PXE), une maladie héréditaire autosomique du tissus conjonctif impliquant la peau, les yeux et les vaisseaux a rarement été décrite. Elle est due à une mutation du gène ABCC6 qui est situé sur le chromosome 16p13.1. On a suggéré que plusieurs mécanismes différents pouvaient être en cause chez les patients qui ont un PXE et des accidents vasculaires cérébraux, dont l’hypertension artérielle et une athérosclérose accélérée. Observations: Premier cas: Il s’agit d’un homme âgé de 49 ans ayant une histoire d’hypertension légère, qui a consulté pour des accidents ischémiques transitoires. Un diagnostic de PXE a été posé à l’âge de 42 ans suite à une évaluation motivée par une perte de vision progressive et des changements au niveau de la peau. L’imagerie par résonance magnétique (IRM) a montré la présence de multiples infarctus lacunaires et de lésions confluentes de la substance blanche périventriculaire (LSB). Deuxième cas: Une femme âgée de 71 ans ayant une histoire d’hypertension légère, a subi un accident vasculaire cérébral droit. Un diagnostic de PXE avait été posé chez elle à l’âge de 48 ans suite à une perte de vision sévère et à des anomalies de la peau. L’IRM cérébrale a montré de multiples infarctus lacunaires et une leukoencéphalopathie ischémique sous-corticale. Troisième cas: Une femme âgée de 47 ans ayant des anomalies importantes de la peau et une amblyopie bilatérale a présenté une faiblesse du côté droit. Le diagnostic de PXE a été confirmé par une biopsie cutanée. L’IRM a montré la présence de plusieurs infarctus lacunaires dans la substance blanche profonde et le pons. Discussion: Nous présentons les cas de trois patients ayant des manifestations cliniques et anatomopathologiques du PXE qui ont consulté pour de multiples accidents vasculaires cérébraux, dont deux étaient porteurs de LSB confluentes importantes. Ces cas illustrent que le PXE est un facteur de risque rare mais important de maladie des petits vaisseaux et d’accident vasculaire cérébral chez les patients de tous âges. La maladie occlusive des petits vaisseaux, les infarctus lacunaires et les LSB qui s’en suivent sont des manifestations importantes du PXE.
tissue disorder has been attributed to mutations in the ABCC6 gene located on chromosome 16p13.1, with dominant, recessive and sporadic forms.\textsuperscript{3,4} The ABCC6 gene encodes the multidrug-resistance protein 6 (MRP6), a member of the ATP-binding cassette family of proteins. It has been suggested that MRP6 is a transmembrane transporter, which normal function may be crucial for extracellular matrix deposition or turnover of connective tissue at specific sites in the body.\textsuperscript{5}

There is 3.6-fold increase of stroke risk in PXE patients.\textsuperscript{6} Exclusive involvement of cerebral small vessel and WML in PXE has been described before\textsuperscript{6-8} but these cases are rarely reported. Stroke cases have never been reported in Serbian PXE population before. We describe three patients with typical skin and ocular PXE features presenting with cerebral small vessel disease and strokes.

**CASE REPORTS**

**Case 1**

A 49-year-old man was admitted to our department after repeated transient ischemic attacks (TIAs) with recurrent right-sided weakness, paresthesias and dysarthria. Each episode lasted up to 30 minutes. Mild oscillatory arterial hypertension with maximal values of 160/100 mmHg had been registered two months earlier. At the age of 42 evaluation for progressive amblyopia and skin changes had led to the diagnosis of PXE confirmed by skin biopsy. Family history was unremarkable. On admission, mild right hemiparesis and yellow papules and hyperelastosis of the face and neck skin were noted. Fundoscopy disclosed pronounced degenerative retinal changes with striae angioides and macular scars. Neuropsychological evaluation showed normal findings. Plasma lipid profile, fasting glucose level, oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT), fibrinogen, hematocrit and erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) were normal. Electroencephalography, serum immunology, coagulation tests, cerebrospinal fluid cytobiochemical and immunological examinations, cardiological evaluation with transthoracic echocardiography revealed normal results. Carotid duplex ultrasonography showed 50% stenosis of the right internal carotid artery with fibrous plaques on both bifurcations. Brain MRI revealed multiple lacunar infarctions in frontal, parietal, and occipital subcortical white matter bilaterally, in left thalamus and pons, with severe confluent periventricular white matter changes and mild cortical and subcortical cerebral atrophy (Figure 1). Cerebral magnetic resonance angiography (MRA) was unremarkable. The patient was given a small dose of Aspirin (50 mg daily) and, during two-year follow-up, TIAs did not reoccur.

**Case 2**

A 71-year-old woman with history of mild oscillatory hypertension with maximal values of 140/100 mmHg and stabile angina pectoris suffered acute right-sided hemiparesis and mild dysarthria. On admission neurological examination revealed bilateral amblyopia, right-sided hemiparesis with wide-based gait and mild dysarthria. Yellow papules on loose skin of the neck and axillae were observed. Her progressively poor vision suddenly deteriorated further at the age of 48 after a car accident, when ophthalmological and dermatological examinations, including skin biopsy, confirmed diagnosis of PXE. Family history for PXE and stroke was negative. Routine blood analyses disclosed elevated levels of total cholesterol (7.84 mmol/L; 303.17 mg/dL) and LDL cholesterol (5.36 mmol/L; 207.27 mg/dL). Fasting glucose level, OGTT, fibrinogen, hematocrit, ESR, serum immunology, coagulation tests and cardiological examination with echocardiography were normal. Carotid duplex ultrasonography showed intima-media thickness of 1.4 mm and diffuse small fibrous plaques. Neuropsychological testing showed normal finding. Cerebral MRI revealed multiple subcortical lacunar infarctions with subcortical ischemic leukoencephalopathy and moderate cortical and subcortical atrophy (Figure 2). Brain MRA was normal. The patient recovered completely. One year later she complained of progressive memory

---

**Figure 1:** MRI T2-weighted: cerebral white matter lesions – Case 1

**Figure 2:** MRI T2-weighted: cerebral white matter lesions – Case 2
These PXE manifestations, that also
Intracranial aneurysms are infrequent in PXE,
We decided to give a small dose of
Family occurrence of PXE
Patients with PXE present with multiple
reported
The Cochrane
5, 6, 8
of 14 nicergoline studies showed some, although not
Usual
Cerebral small vessel involvement in PXE can result in
subcortical infarcts and leukoaraiosis. The relative risk of
ischemic stroke due to small-vessel disease in PXE patients
under 65 years is estimated to be 3.6 compared with the general
population.6 Intracranial aneurysms are infrequent in PXE,7 and
we did not find them in our patients either.
White matter changes are rarely very extensive,7 as it was
found in our Cases 1 and 2. Hirano and colleagues8 reported
three PXE patients with multiple lacunar strokes and cerebral
angiography excluding large vessel involvement. Multiple silent
lacunar infaracts were evident on MRI examinations in all our
patients. Silent strokes in PXE are probably not rare but are
underdiagnosed. Mayer and co-workers7 described two women
with PXE, hypertension, strokes and progressive cognitive
deterioration with lacunar infaracts and diffuse WML. Compared
to these cases, our patients had relatively mild clinical course,
with good functional recovery and normal baseline cognitive
status, in spite of extensive WML. Patient 2, however, showed
signs of progressive cognitive decline consistent with vascular
cognitive impairment after one-year follow-up. Patients 1 and 2
had negative family history, probably representing sporadic
cases, which are often seen in PXE.3 Family occurrence of PXE
could not be confirmed in Patient 3 because relatives were not
available for examination. The association of PXE and some
particular race has not been established yet, but two of our
patients were of Gypsy origin (Cases 1 and 3).
None of our patients had gastrointestinal bleeding, which can
affect up to 15% of cases. Since this PXE manifestation can be
life threatening, use of antithrombotic drugs in this setting is an
important dilemma.6,11 We decided to give a small dose of
Aspirin (50 mg daily) to Patient 1 because of recurrent TIAs, and
strict control of other stroke risk factors was aimed at in all
patients.
We considered nicergoline 30 mg b.i.d. a good choice for
Patient 2, since it attenuated the cognitive deterioration in elderly
hypertensive patients with WML in a 24-month double-blind
placebo-controlled multicentric pilot study.12 The Cochrane
review11 of 14 nicergoline studies showed some, although not
clear, evidence of positive effects of nicergoline in older patients
with mild to moderate cognitive impairment including chronic
cerebrovascular disorders. Our patient did not have any side
effects during six months of follow-up and was cognitively
stable.
The pathogenesis of vascular lesions in PXE is still not
completely elucidated, and is probably multifactorial.

Figure 3: MRI fluid-attenuated inversion recovery (FLAIR)
image: cerebral white matter lesions – Case 3

difficulties. Neuropsychological testing was repeated and there was a
significant decline in delayed verbal recall on Ray Auditory Verbal
Learning Test.9 Diagnosis of vascular cognitive impairment was made
and nicergoline 30 mg b.i.d. was administered.

Case 3

A 47-year-old woman presented with sudden onset of right-side
hemiparesis and hemihypeaesthesia that resolved in 24 hours. On
examination, loose skin at the sides of the neck and in the flexural areas
of the body was noted, as well as severe ambylophia. Neurological
assessment revealed only right limbs hyperreflexia. Dermatological and
ophthalmological examination, supported by skin biopsy and fluorescein
angiography, confirmed the diagnosis of PXE. There was a mild
hypertension (maximal values of 150/100 mmHg) and history of 30
years smoking of 20 cigarettes per day on average, but other stroke risk
factors were lacking. The patient’s mother, sister and son had similar
skin changes, and the mother had progressive vision loss; however, they
were unavailable for evaluation. Plasma fasting glucose, OGTT, lipid
profile, fibrinogen, hematocrit, ESR, as well as serum immunology,
coagulation tests, cerebrospinal fluid cytobiochemical and
immunological examination, cardiological assessment with
echoangiography and neuropsychological testing showed normal
findings. Carotid duplex ultrasonography revealed diffuse
atherosclerosis. Brain MRI disclosed several lacunar infarcts in frontal
deep white matter bilaterally and in the left pons (Figure 3). Cerebral
MRA was normal.

Discussion

We report three patients with PXE, a rare disease with
estimated prevalence in the general population of 1:70,000 to
1:100,000 live births.5 Patients with PXE present with multiple
systemic manifestations, including typical skin, ocular and
vascular changes. All of our patients had typical PXE clinical
features, which was confirmed by skin biopsy and pathohistological analysis. Unfortunately, we were not able to
perform the genetic analysis.

The most important vascular PXE complication is accelerated
arteriosclerosis occurring mostly in small arteries.5,6,8 Usual
cardiovascular manifestations include premature ischemic heart
disease, renovascular hypertension and atherosclerotic
peripheral vascular disease.5 These PXE manifestations, that also
increase the risk of stroke, were detected in our patients as well.

Our patients presented with TIAs and strokes. Cerebrovascular lesions in PXE are not frequently described.10
Strokes in PXE occur at an adult age with single or multiple
vessels occlusions or intracranial and subarachnoid hemorrhage.
Cerebral small vessel involvement in PXE can result in
subcortical infaracts and leukoaraiosis. The relative risk of
ischemic stroke due to small-vessel disease in PXE patients
under 65 years is estimated to be 3.6 compared with the general
population.6 Intracranial aneurysms are infrequent in PXE,7 and
we did not find them in our patients either.

White matter changes are rarely very extensive,7 as it was
found in our Cases 1 and 2. Hirano and colleagues8 reported
three PXE patients with multiple lacunar strokes and cerebral
angiography excluding large vessel involvement. Multiple silent
lacunar infaracts were evident on MRI examinations in all our
patients. Silent strokes in PXE are probably not rare but are
underdiagnosed. Mayer and co-workers7 described two women
with PXE, hypertension, strokes and progressive cognitive
deterioration with lacunar infaracts and diffuse WML. Compared
to these cases, our patients had relatively mild clinical course,
with good functional recovery and normal baseline cognitive
status, in spite of extensive WML. Patient 2, however, showed
signs of progressive cognitive decline consistent with vascular
cognitive impairment after one-year follow-up. Patients 1 and 2
had negative family history, probably representing sporadic
cases, which are often seen in PXE.3 Family occurrence of PXE
could not be confirmed in Patient 3 because relatives were not
available for examination. The association of PXE and some
particular race has not been established yet, but two of our
patients were of Gypsy origin (Cases 1 and 3).

None of our patients had gastrointestinal bleeding, which can
affect up to 15% of cases. Since this PXE manifestation can be
life threatening, use of antithrombotic drugs in this setting is an
important dilemma.6,11 We decided to give a small dose of
Aspirin (50 mg daily) to Patient 1 because of recurrent TIAs, and
strict control of other stroke risk factors was aimed at in all
patients.

We considered nicergoline 30 mg b.i.d. a good choice for
Patient 2, since it attenuated the cognitive deterioration in elderly
hypertensive patients with WML in a 24-month double-blind
placebo-controlled multicentric pilot study.12 The Cochrane
review11 of 14 nicergoline studies showed some, although not
clear, evidence of positive effects of nicergoline in older patients
with mild to moderate cognitive impairment including chronic
cerebrovascular disorders. Our patient did not have any side
effects during six months of follow-up and was cognitively
stable.

The pathogenesis of vascular lesions in PXE is still not
completely elucidated, and is probably multifactorial.
Accelerated arteriolosclerosis and hypertension from an early age are the most important factors acting jointly. Patients with beta-thalassemia, sickle-cell disease and sickle-thalassemia may have similar histopathological and clinical manifestations, including strokes and intracranial hemorrhage, but without ABCC6 mutation.\textsuperscript{11,14}

The diagnosis of PXE can be difficult. A consensus PXE meeting criteria for PXE diagnosis was formulated in 1992,\textsuperscript{15} but since cardiovascular manifestations were not included nor are the sensitivity and specificity of the clinical signs clearly determined, new criteria are needed.\textsuperscript{5} Nevertheless, our patients met presently defined clinical criteria.

Although PXE is a rare disorder, and small vessel disease in PXE cases is seldom described, three patients came to our attention within a two-year period. There is a considerable variation in disease phenotype and inheritance pattern. It can be presumed that PXE occurrence in the general population is underestimated, possibly in WML patients as well, regardless of age and risk factor profile. We suggest that neurologists should consider PXE as an etiological possibility in both younger and older patients with recurrent TIAs, stroke and progressive neurological and vascular cognitive impairment, especially with cerebral small vessel involvement. These are the first PXE patients with stroke and WML reported in Serbia.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was supported in part by the Ministry of Science, Technologies and Development of Republic of Serbia as part of scientific project 1979.

**References**