The Significance of White Matter Lucencies on CT Scan in Relation to Cognitive Impairment

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ABSTRACT: As part of a prospective clinicopathological study a cohort of “normal” elderly volunteers (n = 110) has been investigated with CT scans, psychometric testing (Extended Scale for Dementia) and neurological examination. CT scans were evaluated by a neuroradiologist for the presence or absence of white matter lucencies (WML). WML were defined as patchy or diffuse areas of decreased attenuation involving only white matter and with no change in adjacent ventricles or sulci.

The 12 subjects with WML had lower scores on the ESD than the 98 subjects without WML (mean ESD with WML 229.5±14; without WML 236.7±8.6, t-test p<.01) and the difference remains significant even after adjusting for the possible confounding effects of age (ANCOVA, P<.043).

Evidence of a relationship between the computed tomography (CT) finding of diffuse attenuation in the deep white matter and cognitive impairment is somewhat conflicting. The presence of white matter lucencies has been attributed to watershed infarction, hydrocephalus, Binswanger’s encephalopathy and “normal” aging. Although studies have reported an increased prevalence of white matter lucencies in the elderly controversy remains about the significance of this finding in relation to cognitive impairment. Comparisons across studies are further complicated by the lack of explicit criteria for CT diagnosis of white matter lucencies.

The term leuko-araiosis (LA) will be used in this paper to denote the patchy white matter lucencies identified on CT. The focus of this paper is to delineate criteria used to differentiate LA from infarcts and to compare the results of psychometric assessment performed on putatively normal elderly volunteers with and without LA.

METHOD AND RESULTS

As part of a prospective clinicopathological study a cohort of elderly volunteers (n = 105) has been investigated with CT scans, neurological examination and psychometric testing utilizing the Extended Scale for Dementia. Subjects were excluded if there was evidence of dementia or if there was a diagnosis of stroke. CT scans were evaluated for the presence or absence of LA using the criteria listed in Table 1.

The 9 subjects with LA had lower scores on the ESD than the 96 subjects without LA (mean ESD with LA 227.1±14; without LA 237.1±8, t test, p<.02).

The sex distribution, educational attainments and other CT findings were not significantly different in subjects with and without LA. However, the subjects with LA had a mean age of 75.3±8.2 which was significantly older than the mean age of 70.8±5.4 for those without LA (t test, p<.025). The lower
Table 1: CT interpretation — criteria for distinguishing infarcts and leuko-araiosis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infarct</th>
<th>LA</th>
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<tr>
<td>— well demarcated</td>
<td>— ill defined, patchy, diffuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>— wedge shaped</td>
<td>— white matter only without extension to cortex</td>
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<tr>
<td>— usually cortical extension</td>
<td>— ventricle and sulcus unchanged locally</td>
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<tr>
<td>— follows specific vascular territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>— internal capsule, basal ganglia or thalamus may be involved</td>
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<td>— enlargement of ipsilateral ventricle or sulcus</td>
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scores on the ESD in subjects with LA when compared to subjects without LA remains significant even after adjusting for the possible confounding effects of age, sex, education and infarct on CT (ANCOVA, p<.013).

CONCLUSION

LA is a relatively common finding on the CT of non-demented elderly subjects. We found a prevalence of 8.6% in subjects selected for absence of dementia and without a history of stroke. The other major finding of this study is the demonstration that the presence of LA is associated with a measurable decline in cognitive function. The decline in ESD scores remains significant even after the results are adjusted for the potentially confounding effects of age, sex, education and coexisting infarct on CT.

LA may represent a marker for early vascular dementia. Our results suggest that white matter abnormalities play a role in the development of intellectual decline in the elderly.

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