Cerebral vasculitis
a practical approach

INTRODUCTION
The range and breadth of diseases of the nervous system caused by immunological or inflammatory disturbances is enormous (Table 1). ‘Primary’ or idiopathic neuroimmune disorders may affect any part of the neuraxis and they are, of course, very familiar to neurologists. ‘Secondary’ disorders, where the neurological disturbance reflects involvement of the nervous system in a systemic inflammatory disease, are often no less common than idiopathic neuroimmune disorders, but most neurologists are rather less familiar and possibly less comfortable in dealing with them. Here we confine ourselves to the vasculitic disorders, and concentrate only on cerebral disease.

The vasculitides are a heterogeneous group of diseases characterised by blood vessel inflammation, with different but frequently overlapping clinical and pathological manifestations (Watts et al. 1997). The classical histopathological change is modified in characteristic ways in specific syndromes (see below), but essentially consists of an inflammatory infiltrate within the vessel wall associated with destructive changes ('fibrinoid necrosis'), occlusion and infarction – microscopic or macroscopic – leading to the clinical manifestations. The vasculitides may be classified according to the clinical presentation, histological characteristics (including the presence or absence of granulomata), or the size of the vessel implicated (Table 2).

The central or peripheral nervous system can be involved in virtually all of the systemic vasculitides, but primary or ‘isolated angiitis’, affecting either the central or the peripheral nervous system is also recognised, where there is little or no evidence of generalised inflammation. Cerebral vasculitis is a rare but serious, if not potentially life-threatening condition, with an annual incidence of 1–2 per million compared...

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<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Primary disease</th>
<th>Secondary disease</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brain (and spinal cord)</td>
<td>Multiple sclerosis</td>
<td>Vasculitides</td>
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<td>Lupus, rheumatoid disease; other connective tissue diseases,</td>
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<td>anticardiolipin syndromes</td>
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<td>Spinal cord</td>
<td>Inflammatory myelitides</td>
<td>Behçet’s disease</td>
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<td>Stiff man syndrome</td>
<td>Sarcoïd</td>
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<td>Peripheral nerve</td>
<td>Guillain–Barré syndrome and variants</td>
<td>Paraneoplasia</td>
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<td>Chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyradiculopathy</td>
<td>Organ-specific autoimmune disease (e.g. coeliac, Hashimoto’s disease, etc.)</td>
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<td>Multifocal motor neuropathy with conduction block</td>
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<td>Neuromuscular junction</td>
<td>Myasthenia gravis</td>
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<td>Muscle</td>
<td>Polymyositis</td>
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<td>Dermatomyositis</td>
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to 39 per million for systemic vasculitis (Watts et al. 1997).

MECHANISMS OF TISSUE DAMAGE

In both primary and secondary CNS vasculitis, ischaemia is the cause of neurological loss of function. This results from three consequences of inflammation within the vascular wall: obstruction of the vessel lumen, increased coagulation from the effects of proinflammatory cytokines on the endothelial surface, and alterations in vasomotor tone. The development of a vasculitic process depends on interplay between cellular and humoral factors, although most authorities agree that the latter appears to be more important (Jennette et al. 1994).

Antibody-dependent mechanisms

Three main pathways of vascular injury are commonly invoked: direct antibody attack, immune complex mediated, and antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody (ANCA)-related vasculitis.

Direct antibody attack

In some systemic vasculitides, a pathogenic role for antiendothelial cell antibodies in either injuring or activating endothelial cells has been proposed (Salojin et al. 1996), though their lack of specificity and variable rates of detection raise doubts about their importance. As they are more frequently-reported in medium and large vessel vasculitis than small vessel disease, they are in any case unlikely to be of relevance in cerebral disease.

Immune complex mediated vasculitis

Immune complex deposition in the blood vessel wall triggers activation of the complement cascade with recruitment of polymorphs and macrophages, amplification of inflammation, and the generation of lytic and injurious membrane attack complexes. Hepatitis B- and C-associated vasculitis are good examples of this process, the latter underlying many cases of cryoglobulinaemic vasculitis (Cacoub et al. 2001).

Antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody-related vasculitis

ANCAs represent a family of antibodies directed against constituents of the neutrophil azurophil granules (Mohan & Kerr 2001; Niles 1996). Based on immunofluorescence patterns, a distinction is made between cytoplasmic ANCA (c-ANCA) that targets proteinase-3 (PR-3), associated with nearly 95% specificity for Wegener’s granulomatosis, and perinuclear ANCA (p-ANCA) directed at myeloperoxidase, less specifically found in microscopic polyangiitis and the Churg–Strauss syndrome (Mohan & Kerr 2001; Niles 1996).

Cell-mediated damage

Evidence for cell-mediated involvement in tissue injury in vasculitis comes in part from studying microscopic polyarteritis nodosa and Wegener’s granulomatosis (Mathieson & Oliveira 1995). In both disorders, circulating T-cells responsive to PR-3 are found, and vascular lesions contain activated T-cells and antigen-presenting MHC class II positive dendritic cells. In primary CNS and peripheral nerve vasculitic lesions, the predominant infiltrate is one of CD4-positive and CD8-positive T-lymphocytes and monocytes (Lie 1997).

THE CLINICAL FEATURES OF CEREBRAL VASCULITIS

A myriad of neurological symptoms, signs or syndromes can occur in CNS vasculitis, reflecting the potential for infarction and ischaemia,
which may be micro- or macroscopic, focal, multifocal or diffuse, and affect any part of the brain. (Table 3.) Most accounts of the disorder describe headaches, focal or generalized seizures, stroke-like episodes with hemispheric or brainstem deficits, acute or subacute encephalopathies, progressive cognitive changes, chorea, myoclonus and other movement disorders, and optic and other cranial neuropathies — in short, there are few neurological syndromes that are not consistent with a vasculitic aetiology. Systemic features such as fever, night sweats, livedo reticularis, or oligoarthropathy may also be present but often are only revealed by direct questioning of the patient. The course is commonly acute or subacute, but chronic progressive presentations are also well described, as are spontaneous relapses and remissions.

Despite the diversity of clinical presentations, three broad categories have been defined in a small study (Scolding et al. 1997), and these may help to improve recognition of the condition:

• acute or subacute encephalopathy, commonly presenting as an acute confusional state, progressing to drowsiness and coma;
• superficially resembling atypical multiple sclerosis (‘MS-plus’) in phenotype, with a relapsing–remitting course, and features such as optic neuropathy and brain stem episodes, but also accompanied by other features less common in multiple sclerosis, such as seizures, severe and persisting headaches, encephalopathic episodes, or hemispheric stroke-like episodes;
• intracranial mass lesions with headache, drowsiness, focal signs and often raised intracranial pressure.

### Table 3  Clinical features of cerebral vasculitis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>CNS features</th>
<th>Systemic features*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>Fever &amp; night sweats</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seizures (focal/generalized)</td>
<td>Rash, especially livedo reticularis</td>
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<td>Stroke-like events</td>
<td>Weight loss, anorexia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encephalopathy</td>
<td>Oligoarthropathy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Progressive cognitive change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Movement disorders — especially chorea, myoclonus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stroke-like events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-acute</td>
<td>Optic nerve disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chronic</td>
<td>Cranial neuropathies</td>
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<td>Relapsing-remitting</td>
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*These systemic features are rather easily missed by neurologists — they must be specifically looked for.

### Figure 1  Suggested investigation of suspected cerebral vasculitis

**INVESTIGATION AND DIAGNOSIS**

The whole host of possible neurological symptoms and signs makes cerebral vasculitis notoriously difficult to diagnose: innumerable disorders may cause a pleomorphic combination of headache, encephalopathy, strokes, seizures and focal deficits of acute or subacute onset (Table 4). A high index of suspicion along with a detailed history and physical examination, which
entertains a broad differential diagnosis and excludes imitators of vasculitis, is imperative. No single simple investigation is universally useful in making the correct diagnosis of cerebral vasculitis, but the relevant tests are discussed below.

**Blood tests and serology**

Routine blood tests are generally unhelpful in terms of specificity, though they can help point towards or away from the possibility of cerebral vasculitis (Calabrese & Mallek 1988; Hankey 1991; Scolding 1999a,b). Anaemia is an infrequent finding and a leukocytosis without eosinophilia is present in about 50% of patients. The ESR and C-reactive protein levels are often abnormal, especially in cases secondary to systemic disease, but of course lack specificity – some include a normal ESR as a defining feature of primary angiitis of the CNS, others report moderately elevated values in two-thirds of patients (Calabrese & Mallek 1988). Serological testing is important in excluding suspected neuropsychiatric lupus or in helping to define the systemic origin of an established intracranial vasculitis, but is of little value in confirming or refuting cerebral vasculitis. ANCA assays are now routinely requested in screening for systemic vasculitides, but positivity is sometimes seen in connective tissue disorders such as lupus,

**Table 4** Some neurological and systemic disorders that may mimic cerebral vasculitis.

Systemic features such as fever, night sweats, livedo reticularis, or oligoarthropathy may be present but often are only revealed by direct questioning of the patient.

Other vasculopathies
Susac’s syndrome
Hemocysteinurias
Ehlers–Danlos syndrome
Radiation vasculopathy
Köhlmeyer-Degos disease
Fibromuscular dysplasia
Fabry’s disease
Moyamoya syndrome
Amyloid angiopathy
CADASIL*
Marfan’s syndrome
Pseudoxanthoma elasticum
Viral or fungal vasculitis
Infections
Lyme disease
AIDS
Endocarditis
Whipple’s disease
Viral encephalitis
Legionella/mycoplasma pneumonia
Other immune/inflammatory diseases
Sarcoidosis
Lupus and anti–phospholipid syndrome
Behçet’s disease
Multiple sclerosis/acute disseminated encephalomyelopathy
Thyroid encephalopathy
Tumours and malignancy
Atrial myxoma
Multifocal glioma
Cerebral lymphoma
Paraneoplastic syndromes
Cholesterol embolization syndrome
Thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura
Intracranial venous thrombosis
Mitochondrial cytopathies
*Cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy.
Cerebral biopsy may provide unequivocal histopathological proof of vasculitis, with the potential advantage of distinguishing between primary and secondary vasculitides, and of course disclosing alternative diagnoses and rarely in individuals without any apparent vasculitic disorder (Merkel et al. 1997).

Spinal fluid examination
Cerebrospinal fluid abnormalities are non-specific, but again useful in implicating an inflammatory process within the CNS and excluding infection and malignant diseases that may present similarly. Pooled case reviews suggest a raised cell count (mainly a lymphocytosis) and protein in 50–80% (Calabrese & Mallek 1988; Hankey 1991; Scolding 1999a,b). The CSF opening pressure is raised in almost half the cases of primary angiitis of the CNS. Oligoclonal immunoglobulin bands in the CSF have been studied infrequently, but are found consistently enough (perhaps in up to 40–50%) to make their analysis worthwhile (Scolding et al. 1997). Oligoclonal band patterns, which vary substantially, perhaps even disappearing altogether during the course of disease, do help point away from multiple sclerosis when this is part of the differential diagnosis.

Electroencephalography
This is neither specific nor sensitive but is abnormal in 80% of cases, often with slow-wave activity. It may provide some supportive clues in the small-vessel vasculitides affecting the brain, in excluding alternative causes, and possibly for monitoring therapy.

Imaging
Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a sensitive but not specific detector of vascular disease, disclosing of course the results of vascular inflammation, not inflammation itself (Harris et al. 1994). Such changes should however, prompt further studies, and MRI is certainly valuable in excluding other conditions. There may be poor correlation between MRI and angiographic findings: in one study of 50 territories affected by vasculitis on contrast angiography, at least one third were normal on MRI (Cloft et al. 1999). Other studies confirm this imperfect sensitivity, and there are (unfortunately) reported cases of proven cerebral vasculitis with normal MR imaging (Alhalabi & Moore 1994; Vanderzant et al. 1988).

Single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) appears to be a useful but nonspecific imaging tool, again mirroring but not defining a vasculitic process (Scolding et al. 1997). The value of position emission tomography (PET) scanning in this context is unclear.

Magnetic resonance angiography (MRA) is finding a niche in imaging of large vessel vasculitides such as Takayasu’s arteritis, with potential to supplant conventional catheter angiography (Atalay & Bluemke 2001), but it does not have sufficient resolution to display medium or small vessel cerebral vasculitis.

Establishing the diagnostic value of contrast catheter angiography is complicated by the many studies that have used this as the ‘gold standard’ for confirmation. Publications with pathological evidence indicate a false negative rate for angiography of 30–40% (Calabrese & Mallek 1988; Hankey 1991), and there have been examples of patients with histologically-proven primary angiitis of the CNS and completely normal angiograms (Vanderzant et al. 1988). This
may be because the affected vessels are beyond the resolution of conventional imaging.

When abnormalities are present, they include segmental (often multifocal) narrowing with areas of localized dilatation or beading. Single stenotic areas in multiple vessels are more frequent than multiple stenotic areas along a single vessel segment in primary angiitis of the CNS. Retrospective series suggest a sensitivity of only 24–33% (Hankey 1991; Koo & Massey 1988; Vollmer et al. 1993; Alrawi et al. 1999), with a specificity of a similar order – an enormous number of inflammatory, metabolic, malignant or other vasculopathies mimic angiitis on angiograms.

It has been suggested that clinical and angiographic features may correlate, supporting the hypothesis that segmental narrowing initially results from reversible inflammation and vasospasm, with the later irreversible changes secondary to scarring; and in consequence, that serial angiography may be useful in monitoring treatment (Alhalabi & Moore 1994). However, the procedure does carry the risk of transient (10%) or permanent neurological deficits (1%) (Helmann et al. 1992). Although its importance has been overemphasized, it is still a valuable investigative tool with a sensitivity comparable to that of biopsy.

**Indium-labelled white cell nuclear scanning** has a role in disclosing areas of (sometimes unsuspected) systemic inflammation. The sparse evidence supporting its use in cerebral vasculitis suggests that it is unsuccessful in identifying the majority of cases, but may usefully disclose clinically silent foci of systemic inflammation (Scolding et al. 1997).

**Ophthalmological examination**
Dynamic recording of erythrocyte flow using video slit lamp microscopic recording and low-dose fluorescein angiography to examine the vasculature of the anterior ocular chamber can be a useful additional investigation. In a small study, four out of five patients had abnormal findings (Scolding et al. 1997). Typical abnormalities are marked slowing of flow, multifocal attenuation of arterioles, and erythrocyte aggregates. Fluorescein studies may confirm these changes, and demonstrate areas of small vessel infarction along with postcapillary leakage.

**Histopathology**
Cerebral biopsy may provide unequivocal histopathological proof of vasculitis, with the potential advantage of distinguishing between primary and secondary vasculitides, and of course disclosing alternative diagnoses. The practicalities of achieving this are, however, difficult. Ideally an affected area in the nondominant hemisphere, or a ‘blind biopsy’ from the nondominant temporal tip (most likely to include longitudinally orientated surface vessels; Moore 1989) should be sampled. Cortical sampling alone appears to be insufficient and uninformative, with failure to obtain leptomeningeal vessels further increasing the false negative rate. It is not surprising (considering the difficulty in obtaining affected tissue) that the sensitivity is limited to (at best) approximately 70% (Calabrese & Allek 1988; Hankey 1991; Alrawi et al. 1999). Morbidity from this invasive procedure has been estimated at 0.5–2%, though current rates may be lower. Nevertheless, the significant risk means that up to 75% of reported cases are diagnosed without histopathology (Lie 1997).

A recent retrospective study of some 61 patients biopsied for suspected cerebral vasculitis has usefully illuminated this topic (Alrawi et al. 1999). No patient suffered any significant morbidity as a result of the procedure. 36% of patients were confirmed as having cerebral vasculitis, but no less usefully, and importantly, 39% biopsies showed an alternative, unsuspected diagnosis: lymphoma (6 cases), multiple sclerosis (2 cases), and infection (7 cases, including toxoplasmosis, herpes, and also two cases of cerebral abscess). Many of these nonvasculitic disorders are treatable, often indeed curable, while inappropriate treatment with steroids alone, or with more potent immunosuppressive agents would at best have no useful effect, and very often, serious adverse consequences. Biopsy failed to yield a clear diagnosis in 25% of patients in this study, though even here, biopsy arguably might not be described as ‘noncontributory’, at least decreasing the likelihood of the alternative diagnoses mentioned above. The decision not to biopsy must be balanced against anecdotal case reports where patients have been exposed to potentially harmful immunosuppressive drugs unnecessarily.

**CAUSES OF THE VASCULITIC PROCESS**

**Primary (isolated) angitis of the CNS**
This curious and uncommon vasculitis was first recorded amongst ‘unknown forms of
Most authorities now recognize the nonspecificity of angiographic changes, and we believe a certain diagnosis of primary CNS angiitis depends on a positive biopsy.
Cerebral small-vessel vasculitis is rare, but when it does occur it is usually responsible for encephalopathies, seizures, and pituitary abnormalities - but may be indistinguishable from any other form of intracranial vasculitis. More likely is the unique contiguous extension of erosive granulomata from the sinuses or from remote metastatic granulomata to the CNS. There is a high c-ANCA (proteinase-3) titre.

Table 5 Wegener's granulomatosis: American College of Rheumatology criteria (Leavitt et al. 1990)

<table>
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<th>The diagnosis should be based on at least two of the following:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bloody or purulent nasal discharge</td>
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<td>Nodules, cavities or infiltrates on chest X-ray</td>
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<td>Microscopic haematuria or red cell casts</td>
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<td>Granulomatous inflammation on biopsy</td>
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Microscopic polyangiitis has many similarities to Wegener’s granulomatosis, including pulmonary haemorrhage, but differs in that upper respiratory tract involvement is rare and granuloma formation is not seen. Patients usually have glomerulonephritis and indeed this vasculitis is occasionally confined to the kidney. One study found mononeuritis multiplex in 55% (Guillevin et al. 1999); in this study, the brain was seldom affected (11%) and CNS disease did not contribute to mortality. There are, however, infrequent reports of p-ANCA positive rapidly progressive glomerulonephritis associated with cerebral vasculitis, requiring aggressive therapy.

Classical polyarteritis nodosa may cause medium and small-sized muscular artery involvement in multiple organs, with the notable exception of the lungs and spleen. Patients often present with renal failure and hypertension (80%). Gastrointestinal involvement occurs in up to 50% of patients, with abdominal pain due to visceral infarcts. Heart failure and myocardial infarction reflect cardiac involvement. Neurological abnormalities are prominent (50–60%), but again mostly confined to the peripheral nervous system. CNS involvement is usually only seen in established disease. It is thought that damage is initiated by immune complex deposition; fibrinoid necrosis is typical though not diagnostic. Although there are no specific serological tests, about 20–30% have hepatitis B antigen or antibody in the serum. Visceral angiography showing aneurysms or occlusions of the visceral arteries, with biopsy proven peripheral nerve vasculitis and evidence of systemic inflammation, are usually sufficient for diagnosis.

Churg-Strauss syndrome is a disorder characterized by a (diagnostically valuable) hypersensitivity and systemic vasculitis, occurring in individuals with recently-developed atopic features. Asthma and mononeuritis multiplex are undoubtedly the two most frequent manifestations of this disease. Rashes, with purpura, urticaria, and subcutaneous nodules, are common. Glomerulonephritis may develop. It may also affect coronary, splanchic and cerebral circulations. CNS involvement is evident in only about 7% (Sehgal et al. 1995; Guillevin et al. 1999). About 50% of patients are positive for pANCA, 25% positive for cANCA, and 25% have no antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies.

Giant cell arteritis includes two histologically-similar but clinically-distinct diseases: temporal arteritis and Takayasu’s arteritis.

Temporal arteritis is a chronic inflammatory disorder affecting large and medium-sized arteries, which predominantly affects postmenopausal women (Huston et al. 1978). A genetic predisposition is suggested by a high incidence in populations with Scandinavian lineage, some familial accumulation, and the association with the HLA-DR4 haplotype. It has an annual incidence of 17.4 per 100 000 in the over 50-year-old population, so that new onset unilateral or bilateral headache in this age group should alert the physician.

Classically it manifests as temporal headache with tender, pulseless, nodular temporal arteries, and (usually only on direct enquiry) symptoms of general malaise, jaw claudication and features of polymyalgia rheumatica. Neuro-opthalmological symptoms are the most widely recognized, with blindness occurring in one sixth of treated patients with the condition (Caselli & Hunder 1994). Traditionally, the inflammatory process is thought simply to involve the extracranial vessels and rarely to extend beyond the point of penetration of the dura. A large study of 166 patients with biopsy proven temporal arteritis demonstrated neurological involvement in 31%, describing the usual comprehensive range of neurological manifestation: neuropsychiatric syndromes, peripheral
neuropathies, mononeuropathies, spinal cord lesions, neuro-otological syndromes, various pain syndromes, transient ischaemic attacks and stroke - although most authorities find almost all these pictures outside their common experience (Caselli & Hunder 1994). Infarction within the vertebrobasilar territory is relatively uncommon, but there have been isolated reports of temporal arteritis presenting as lateral medullary syndrome. The expected greater incidence of cerebrovascular disease in this group of older people may, however, be confounding.

The ESR is usually significantly raised and may be used to monitor the response to steroid treatment. However, it has recently been pointed out that a 'normal' ESR in active disease is not excessively rare, and may perhaps be explained by an inability to mount an acute phase response, or by very localized arteritis (Salvarani & Hunder 2001). Measuring serum interleukin-6 levels is a promising alternative to the ESR. Recent work has also emphasized that a raised platelet count is a risk factor for permanent visual loss in temporal arteritis and should emphasize the need for urgent treatment (Liozon et al. 2001; Lincoff et al. 2000).

Takayasu's arteritis was originally described in young oriental women but is now globally recognized. It is alternatively named 'pulseless disease', because 98% of affected individuals have at least one major arterial pulse absent, as a result of the characteristic involvement of the aorta and its large branches. The disease process is initially inflammatory, and later occlusive; during this phase most of the neurological abnormalities occur. Syncope is reported in at least 50% of patients, but strokes, transient ischaemic attacks, and visual abnormalities are also seen. You should suspect this illness in a patient under the age of 40 years with symptoms of limb claudication, one or more absent pulses, systolic blood pressure difference of > 10 mmHg between each arm, and arterial bruits. Early histological features of the disease include granulomatous changes in the media and adventitia of the aorta and its branches, later followed by intimal hyperplasia, medial degeneration, and sclerotic adventitial fibrosis.

Henoch-Schonlein purpura is an immunologically-mediated small vessel systemic vasculitis of children, affecting predominantly the skin, gastrointestinal tract, joints and kidneys. Neurological involvement, including headache and behavioural change, is well-described. More severe CNS involvement is usually explained by hypertensive or uraemic encephalopathy, steroid or cytotoxic drug therapy or electrolyte imbalance. Suspected cerebral vasculitis, manifesting mainly as headache, disturbance of consciousness, and tonic-clonic seizures, has rarely been reported after careful exclusion of alternative causes of neurological decline.

Kawasaki disease, otherwise known as 'muco-cutaneous lymph node syndrome', usually affects children under the age of 12 years. It has an annual incidence of less than 5/100 000 in the United Kingdom, but is at least 20 times as common in Japan where it was first described in 1967 (Table 6).

Coronary artery aneurysms occur in one-fifth of untreated cases, which may result in the most dreaded complication - myocardial infarction. Neurologically there is commonly an aseptic meningitis, but hemiplegic strokes, encephalopathy and facial palsy are also described. Pathologically, an acute systemic inflammatory vasculitis, with little or no fibrinoid necrosis, underlies the disease. Anti-endothelial cell antibodies may be involved in the pathogenesis.

Skin involvement with purpura and urticaria is the most common manifestation of small vessel or cutaneous leukocytoclastic vasculitis. This is essentially a consequence of polymorphonuclear and mononuclear cell infiltration in postcapillary venules. It is also known as hypersensitivity vasculitis because of the common presence of an allergic precipitant. Peripheral neuropathy is occasionally reported, and transient ischaemic attacks, strokes and encephalopathy only rarely.

**Table 6 Diagnosing Kawasaki disease**

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<th>Feature</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fever for &gt; 5 days</td>
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<td>Conjunctival congestion</td>
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<td>Changes to lips and oral cavity (dryness, fissuring and erythema)</td>
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<td>Changes of peripheral extremities: red palms and soles; indurative oedema; desquamation of finger tips during convalescence</td>
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<td>Macular polymorphous rash on trunk</td>
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<td>Swollen cervical lymph nodes</td>
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Cerebral vasculitis complicating 'nonvasculitic' systemic disorders

Neurological or psychiatric symptoms in systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) are common (40–50%) (Scolding 1999a, b; West 1996), but the most frequent neuropathological finding is that of a non-inflammatory vasculopathy of small arterioles and capillaries, with resulting
The diagnosis can be difficult to make. Serum angiotensin converting enzyme and calcium levels are not always raised. CSF abnormalities are seen in 80%, usually with a raised protein and pleocytosis, and oligoclonal bands are positive in about 45% (Mclean et al. 1995). Brain MRI shows nonspecific multiple white matter lesions or meningeal enhancement. Wholebody gallium scanning can be more useful, demonstrating a characteristic pattern of uptake (particularly affecting the parotid glands and lungs). Histological diagnosis by Kveim test (where still available), or better still, biopsy of cerebral or meningeal tissue, provides the most reliable basis for treatment.

Sarcoidosis is a well-recognized precipitant of cerebral vasculitis (Scolding 1999a, b), though skin involvement and mononeuritis multiplex are more typical manifestations. There are a few reports of cerebral vasculitis in the context of systemic sclerosis, Sjogren’s syndrome and mixed connective tissue disease, even (though rarely) without a preceding history of systemic symptoms.

Cryoglobulinemia can trigger immune-complex deposition-triggered vasculitis (especially in association with hepatitis C infection), particularly common in mixed cryoglobulinemia. Renal, joint and skin involvement with purpura progressing to necrotic ulceration is often seen. Peripheral neuropathy occurs in 22–32% of patients, in particular as mononeuritis multiplex, with leukocytoclastic vasculitis on biopsy. The CNS is rarely affected. Diagnosis depends on blood being collected into a plain tube and promptly transported in a vacuum flask at body temperature to the laboratory for analysis.

**Behçet’s disease** is predominantly caused by vasculitis affecting small and medium-sized vessels. For diagnostic purposes, recurrent aphthous stomatitis (at least three times in one year) is essential (International Study Group for Behçet’s Disease). This should be accompanied by any two of recurrent genital ulcers; anterior or posterior uveitis or retinal vasculitis; skin lesions (erythema nodosum, acneform nodules, pseudofolliculitis, papular lesions); and, a positive pathergy test (nodules after pricking the skin). Neurological abnormalities occur in up to one-third of patients. Intracranial venous thrombosis, meningoencephalitis, rhomboencephalitis, and focal CNS abnormalities are typical (Akman-Demir et al. 1999). Variable clinical manifestations are noted, including those resembling multiple sclerosis. Confusion with the latter can be exacerbated by consistently abnormal but non-specific MR brain scans and evidence of intrathecal immunoglobulin synthesis. CSF analysis in neuro-Behçet’s may show increased levels of beta(2)-microglobulin, which may be a good marker of disease activity.

As mentioned above, numerous infectious agents have been implicated in cerebral vasculitis (Lie 1996). At least three mechanisms may mediate microbe-related vascular damage: direct invasion, immune complex deposition, and secondary cryoglobulinemia.

An infection that deserves particular attention in this context is **herpes zoster ophthalmicus**. This usually affects the cerebral hemisphere ipsilateral to the eye and face involvement, probably by direct viral invasion of blood vessels (Hilt et al. 1983), producing single or multiple smooth-tapered segmental narrowing on angiography. The typical clinical picture is of a monophasic illness with gradual resolution of cutaneous zoster, followed after a delay by an acute contralateral hemiparesis, hemisensory disturbance, or aphasia. The latent period may last from days to months, but is usually of the order of a few weeks. A CSF mononuclear pleocytosis and raised varicella-zoster antibody titre aid the diagnosis.

Complications of shingles may affect children similarly, though there have been less frequent reports of chickenpox triggering cerebral vasculitis. Occasionally, only the spinal cord is involved in herpetic disease. On rare occasions a more generalized vasculitis may occur with ophthalmic or remote zoster infection.

Chronic viral infection with parvovirus B19 has been implicated in polyarteritis nodosa, Ka-
The relationship between Hodgkin vasculitis and malignancy and cerebral vasculitis can all cause vasculitis by a similar mechanism, while in coccidiomycosis, vascular in cangal virus, Lyme disease, syphilis and malaria can all cause vasculitis by a similar mechanism, while in coccidiomycosis, vascular inflammation is either direct or via cryoglobulinaemia.

Spores of the dimorphic fungus Coccidioides immitis, endemic to the south-western United States and Northern Mexico, can be inhaled with subsequent haematogenous spread, often to the meninges. Vasculitis involving the small penetrating branches of the major cerebral vessels, and consequent deep ischaemic infarction, has been observed in up to 40% of these cases, and on rare occasion subarachnoid haemorrhage has been observed. Other implicated organisms (causing primary invasion of the vascular wall) are histoplasma and aspergillus fungi, and the protozoan toxoplasma gondii. These usually occur in immune suppressed patients, and infections such as HIV can directly trigger a cerebral vasculitis.

Malignancy and cerebral vasculitis

There is sufficient literature to suggest that some illicit and therapeutic drugs can result in cerebral vasculitis. The most persuasive evidence for a direct association is for amphetamines. Citron et al. described 14 patients, all of whom had abused amphetamines, with clinical and histological evidence of multisystem necrotizing vasculitis (Citron et al. 1970). Animal studies provide further support, with immediate angiographic changes after exposure to this drug. In humans, vasculitis may follow only a single dose of amphetamine but repeated exposure in young adults is the usual history (Buxton & McConachie 2000). Various other sympathomimetic agents such as ephedrine, and long-term oral methylphenidate use (chemically and pharmacologically similar to amphetamine) are also implicated.

However, in many of these reports there is no tissue confirmation, and the diagnosis of ‘vasculitis’ is based on angiography – despite the fact that vasospasm can cause identical angiographic changes to those of vasculitis. This is exemplified in cocaine abuse, in which the significantly increased risk of ischaemic stroke is known to result from vasospasm affecting the large cranial arteries or those within the cortical microvasculature, and very seldom from any form of vasculitic process (Aggarwal et al. 1996). The causal mechanism is uncertain, but increased catecholamine release precipitating cerebral vasoconstriction is most likely. In cases of intravenous abuse, there is a suggestion that co-injected contaminants such as hepatitis C may be the actual perpetrator, but this would not explain the same effect after administration of therapeutic drugs by other routes.

Drug-induced cerebral vasculitis

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THE TREATMENT OF CEREBRAL VASCULITIS

Notwithstanding the problems in recognition and diagnosis, cerebral vasculitis is a highly treatable condition for which prompt management can radically improve the outcome. Prospective randomised controlled trials are understandably difficult because of the rarity of the condition and the lack of unifying diagnostic criteria. Retrospective analyses have been our main tool, and from this has emerged significant support for the use of steroids with cyclophosphamide in confirmed cases (Scolding 2001).

A reasonable induction regime is high dose steroids – probably best as intravenous methyl
prednisolone, 1 g daily for 3 days – followed by oral prednisolone 60 mg/day, decreasing by 10 mg at weekly intervals to 10 mg/day if possible. This should be coupled with cyclophosphamide 2.5 mg/kg (lower dose in the elderly, or in renal failure) per day. This induction combination is suggested for 9–12 weeks, though some doctors recommend 4–6 months. Pulsed weekly intravenous cyclophosphamide appears to differ insignificantly in efficacy from daily oral treatment, and it may have fewer adverse effects. Careful monitoring of the blood count for bone marrow suppression should force a reduction of the cyclophosphamide dose if there is leucopaenia (total white count falling below \(4.0 \times 10^9\)) or neutropaenia (below \(2.0 \times 10^9\)).

Cyclophosphamide is associated with haemorrhagic cystitis (a complication reduced by adequate hydration and mesna cover), a 33-fold increase in bladder cancer, other malignancies, infertility, cardiotoxicity and pulmonary fibrosis. In a study of 145 patients treated with this agent for Wegener’s granulomatosis (not necessarily neurological), and followed for a total of 1333 patient years, nonglomerular haematuria occurred in approximately 50%, the majority of whom had macroscopic changes consistent with cyclophosphamide-induced bladder injury on cystoscopy. Seven of these (and none without preceding haematuria) developed transitional cell bladder carcinoma; six had had a total cumulative dose in excess of 100 g cyclophosphamide, and a duration of oral treatment exceeding 2.7 years (Talar-Williams et al. 1996).

The maintenance phase of treatment, converting to a regime of alternate day steroids (10–20 mg prednisolone), and substituting azathioprine (2 mg/kg/day) for cyclophosphamide, is commenced after induction, and continued for a further 10 months; it is then gradually withdrawn. Azathioprine is thought to be less toxic, but reversible bone marrow suppression can occur, hepatotoxicity is rare, and there is a small increased risk of malignancies.

Deterioration, failure to respond initially, or intolerance of the above regime may require the use of alternative agents. Methotrexate, 10–25 mg on a weekly basis, may be used in conjunction with steroids, either during induction or maintenance. Intravenous immunoglobulin (0.4 mg/kg/day for 5 days), with its good safety record, has been found useful in cases of systemic vasculitis, though may induce only partial remission (Jayne et al. 2000; Pritchard & Hughes 2001).

Plasmapheresis may be valuable in cryoglobulinaemia. It is now generally used in severe life threatening disease (e.g. pulmonary haemorrhage and severe glomerulonephritis) with 7–10 treatments over 14 days (Gaskin & Pusey 2001). Although there is little experience in patients with intracranial disease, there is evidence of significant improvement when used in combination with steroids in cerebral disease associated with Henoch–Schönlein purpura.

Campath-1H is a humanized monoclonal antibody directed against the CD52 antigen present on most lymphocytes. When used in combination with a second humanized monoclonal antibody against CD4, it has demonstrable long-term benefits in systemic vasculitis (Mathieson et al. 1990). Interferon-\(\alpha\) can control not only hepatitis C associated hepatitis, but also cryoglobulinaemia, and vasculitis. Unfortunately, there is regular relapse within months of treatment withdrawal (Table 7).

Although complicated immunosuppressive therapy is unavoidable in many vasculitides, temporal arteritis remains a condition where steroid-resistance is extremely rare. The role of **Table 7 Cerebral vasculitis – a common treatment regime**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Induction Regime: 9–12 weeks (some suggest 4–6 months)</th>
<th>Maintenance Regime: continued for a further 10 months</th>
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<td>high dose steroids – e.g. intravenous methyl prednisolone, 1 g/day for 3 days together with oral cyclophosphamide 2.5 mg/kg* then oral prednisolone 60 mg/day after i/v methyl prednisolone; decreasing at weekly intervals by 10 mg decrements to 10 mg/day if possible.</td>
<td>alternate day corticosteroids (10–20 mg prednisolone) azathioprine (2 mg/kg/day) substituted for cyclophosphamide. Methotrexate (10–25 mg once weekly) is a reasonable alternative for maintaining remission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Cyclophosphamide starting dose usually rounded down, not up, to the nearest 50 mg; lower doses are required in older patients and in renal failure; dose must be reduced if leucopaenia (total white count falling below (4.0 \times 10^9)) or neutropaenia (below (2.0 \times 10^9)) occur. A total cumulative dose in excess of 100 g of cyclophosphamide, and duration of oral treatment exceeding 2.7 years are strongly associated with the development of bladder cancer. Consider gastric and bone protection, and fungal and Pneumocystis carinii prophylaxis.</td>
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azathioprine here is usually as a steroid-sparing agent. Fear of permanent blindness encourages most doctors to prescribe an immediate starting dose of 60–80 mg of oral prednisolone daily, although prospective studies have shown that lower doses (20 mg) may be just as effective. After 4–7 days on a high dose, gradual reduction by perhaps 5 mg weekly should be attempted to a maintenance dose of approximately 10 mg daily, using the clinical response and ESR (or plasma viscosity) as a guide. Most authorities recommend continuing steroids for 12–24 months; some patients still require steroids 2–5 years later.

The importance of preventing long-term consequences of corticosteroids, in particular bone protection for osteoporosis, must be stressed.

Systemic and neurological features in Behçet’s disease often respond to steroids and azathioprine, but there remains a place for thalidomide in unresponsive cases. Good results have also been reported with cyclosporin, cyclophosphamide, chlorambucil, and interferon-α, though less favourably in neuro-Behçet’s (Kaklamani & Kaklamani 2001). For the management of intracranial venous thrombosis in this context, most advocate steroids with heparin and later warfarin.

The problems posed by cerebral vasculitis remain daunting. We need a clearer understanding of the pathogenic mechanisms; we have no reliable diagnostic markers with adequate sensitivity and specificity, and we need noninvasive tools for clinical monitoring; new, safe, therapies are also required. Whether the advent of biological agents to target cytokines (such as tumour necrosis factor, interleukins, interferon-gamma) and costimulatory molecules (including B7-1 and B7-2) (Levine & Stone 2001) truly herald a new era in vasculitis treatment will be hard to assess unless we are able more reliably to recognize and diagnose cerebral involvement.

CONCLUSIONS

Cerebral vasculitis is rare and not uncommonly fatal condition. Primary angiitis of the central nervous system is recognized where there is little or no evidence of inflammation elsewhere, but most cases are complications of systemic vasculitides and often display their individual disease characteristics. Cerebral vasculitis may also be associated with certain connective tissue disorders, various infectious diseases, or specific drugs. Interaction between antibody-dependent and cell-mediated mechanisms result in vascular injury with focal or multifocal infarction, or diffuse ischaemia affecting any part of the brain. This therefore explains the occurrence of almost any clinical picture with an acute, subacute, chronic, or relapsing and remitting course. The diagnosis is often difficult as there is no specific laboratory or imaging test. Cerebral biopsy is often regarded as definitive but is seldom performed, carries risks, and has a significant false negative rate. Angiography is more widely employed but may be non-specific and at times insensitive to small vessel vasculitis. Despite these problems, cerebral vasculitis is a highly treatable condition and prompt management can radically improve the outcome. There have been no randomised controlled trials but cyclophosphamide with steroids is usually recommended, with alternative immunosuppressant regimes in resistant cases.

REFERENCES


Cloft HJ, Phillips GD, Dixie J, McNulty BC, Zagardo MT

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