Tumefactive Demyelination of the Spinal Cord

Shadi YAGHI1, Murat GOKDIN2, Hartej SETH1
1Department of Neurology, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences; 2Assistant Professor of Neuropathology, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Summary

Demyelinating lesions of the brain have been frequently reported to mimic tumors, whereas very few cases of tumefactive demyelination of the spine have been reported. We report a patient with tumefactive demyelination of the spinal cord who was clinically, by MRI, and by frozen section diagnosed with tumor and had complete surgical resection. Hence patients with spinal cord lesions suspicious of tumor should be biopsied before complete surgical resection to rule out demyelination.

Key words: Tumefactive demyelination; Spinal Cord; Tumor; Multiple Sclerosis.

Case

We report on a 49 year-old man who presented with four months history of worsening bilateral lower extremity weakness with bowel and bladder urgency. He had no history of back pain. On neurological examination he had bilateral lower extremity spasticity, clonus, hyperreflexia, and moderate weakness of proximal and distal muscle groups. Sensory examination showed a T12 sensory level and moderate decrease in sensing vibration at the ankles. Review of system was negative and routine labs were within normal limits. MRI of the spine with gadolinium revealed a T2 hyperintense signal with cord swelling involving the thoracic cord at T11 and T12 levels with enhancement along the left half of the thecal sac at T11 level, which was suggestive of a neoplastic lesion like glioma (Fig. 1). Head MRI with contrast was normal. CSF studies were not done initially due to high suspicion of malignancy based on MRI results and were declined by the patient later on. After the tissue frozen section revealed gliosis and leukomalacia and was negative for inflammation, the mass was completely resected. Later immunostaining revealed a considerable inflammatory component with gliosis and axonal loss suggestive of a subacute/chronic demyelination. On 3 month follow up after surgical resection and intravenous steroid treatment (methylprednisolone, 1 gram intravenously daily for 5 days), the patient had no improvement in his neurological symptoms. After 1 year, the patient had no new neurological symptoms, neurological exam was unchanged, and repeat brain MRI with contrast remained normal. Although it might have been useful to do an MRI of the spine at 1 year follow up, it was felt unnecessary at that time as the cord lesion the patient previously had was completely resected and the patient had no
new neurological symptoms to suspect a new spinal cord lesion.

**Discussion**

Demyelinating diseases of the central nervous system is a spectrum of conditions that include multiple sclerosis, acute disseminated encephalomyelitis, neuromyelitis optica, and acute hemorrhagic leukoencephalopathy. These conditions rarely present as TDL involving the spinal cord, hence they can be mistaken on MRI by other more common entities such as tumors or infections. Since non invasive tests could not provide definitive diagnosis and frozen section results may miss the diagnosis, and resection based solely on these results may worsen the outcome, a biopsy of the lesion for tissue histology and immunostaining to provide definitive diagnosis should be performed prior to any further treatment.

Our patient is one of the very few reported cases of TDL of the spinal cord having normal brain MRI. It is also the only case in the literature of tumefactive demyelination of the lower spinal cord since these
lesions usually involve the cervical cord (Lei et al., 2009). In addition to a normal brain MRI, our patient’s spinal lesion had significant edema on MRI which makes the diagnosis of TDL less likely on MRI basis. Moreover, the frozen section of the lesion was negative for inflammation. Although the frozen section was negative for malignancy, the high radiological suspicion of the lesion being a neoplasm and since no other diagnosis was established on frozen section, complete surgical resection was performed. However, the immunohistochemical staining done later on for histiocytes (CD68), the LFB/PAS/CV (Luxol fast blue/ periodic acid-Schiff /cresyl violet) stain showing extensive myelin loss, and the neurofilament stain showing some degree of myelin loss with relative preservation of axons as compared to myelin provided the definitive diagnosis of TDL rather than tumor (Fig. 1).

Although an uncommon condition, TDL of the spinal cord should always be on the differential diagnosis of spinal cord tumors and thus a biopsy with immunostaining should be performed for all suspicious cord lesions to confirm the diagnosis before any treatment. Since the prognosis of TDL is the same as that for population based MS, medical treatment of TDL usually improves the neurological symptoms of these patients (Scott et al., 2005); hence it is very important to distinguish between TDL and glioma early before surgery since this has a major impact on the patient’s outcome.

REFERENCES