Case Report

MRI and pathological findings of rheumatoid meningitis

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Abstract

Rheumatoid meningitis (RM) is one of the severest complications of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and the mortality rate is relatively high. RM diagnosis is sometimes very difficult. We present the case of an 80-year-old woman who was diagnosed with microscopic findings of RM from the biopsy specimens from a brain lesion. MRI revealed meningeal enhancement in the brain, and the pathological findings were meningeal lymphocytic infiltration, vasculitis, and rheumatoid nodules.

RM is a treatable disease and this is an important RM case that was diagnosed on the basis of biopsy findings.

Key words: rheumatoid arthritis; meningitis; MRI; treatment; pathology
Introduction

Neurological manifestations of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) are rare (1); however, there are some reports on central nervous system involvement in RA. Rheumatoid meningitis (RM) is one of the severest complications of RA and the mortality rate is relatively high (2). An ante mortem diagnosis of RM is often difficult; some case reports describe its diagnosis at autopsy. Here, we report an important case of RM along with the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) findings; RM was diagnosed on the basis of biopsy findings and treated with steroid therapy.

Case report

An 80-year-old woman with a 20-year history of RA was admitted to our hospital for repeated attacks of intermittent weakness and numbness in the right extremities for 2 months. The condition was classified as stage 4 and class 2 according to Steinbrocker Criteria for RA (3). On admission, her neck, hands, and knees were operated for RA. The low-dose steroid, anti-inflammatory drugs salazosulfapyridine, bucillamine, and etanercept had been already prescribed for RA when she was admitted. Laboratory data, including the levels of the rheumatoid factor and other autoimmune antibodies, showed no significant abnormalities. The cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) test revealed a slightly increased white blood cell count (18 cells/mm³; 93% mononuclear cells), protein level (55 mg/dl), IgG index (1.38), and interleukin (IL)-6 level (4.6 pg/ml). The brain MRI revealed
hyperintense lesions in the cortex of the left parietal lobe on T2-weighted (T2W) and fast fluid-attenuated inversion-recovery (FLAIR) MRI images (Fig.1-A) and meningeal thickening with abnormal enhancement on the surface of the left parietal lobe (Fig.1-B). Examination of the brain biopsy specimens from the left parietal lesion revealed inflammatory cell infiltration in the dura, suppurative granuloma formation with macrophages and polymorphonuclear giant cells on the surface of the leptomeninges, and extension of the inflammation along the vessels in the cortex (Fig.2-A, B). No infection or tumor was observed in the other immunostainings and cultures of the biopsy specimens, and microscopic findings were consistent with RM. The patient received pulsed therapy with methylprednisolone at a dosage of 1000 mg/d for 3 days, followed by oral prednisolone at a dose of 60 mg/day. The symptoms improved gradually, and the attacks disappeared. CSF abnormalities also improved. The hyperintense lesions were not observed on the T2W and FLAIR MRI images (Fig.1-C), and meningeal enhancement decreased (Fig.1-D). The dose of prednisolone was tapered gradually, and other immunosuppressive treatments were not administered. The patient did not show any recurrence of symptoms or MRI findings for 1 year.

Discussion

Thus far, there are 17 reports on RM diagnosed by biopsy or autopsy listed in Table 1 (1, 2, 4–17). Half of them had severe long standing RA. RM sometimes cannot be distinguished from other
diseases, especially tumors, without a pathological procedure because there are no specific RM
markers in the blood or CSF. In one case, a marked increase of CSF IL-6 level was reported (2); our
patient also showed a slight increase in CSF IL-6. CSF analysis also shows nonspecific findings with
pleocytosis and an elevated protein level. For RM diagnosis, MRI and biopsy are critical. Meningeal
enhancement in the brain MRI scan is the key feature of RM (1, 2, 4, 7–9, 11, 16). Pathological
findings of RM are characterized by meningeal lymphocytic infiltration, vasculitis, and rheumatoid
nodules (2, 11). Although meningeal infiltration is often noted, the presence of all the 3 typical
findings in a single patient is rare (11). In our case, all the findings were observed; this was quite
helpful in diagnosing RM. RM treatment has not yet been established; however, steroid therapy is
considered the first choice according to previous reports (4, 8, 16). Monotherapy with steroid is
insufficient in some cases (1, 2, 9), and recent reports have mentioned the efficiency of
immunosuppressive agents such as cyclophosphamide (CY) (1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12), azathioprine (AZA)
(6), cyclosporine (CyA) (9), and methotrexate (MTX) (16) against RM. In our case, etanercept, a
relatively new anti-RA agent, was used for RA treatment prior to RM occurrence. Etanercept,
however, could not prevent the development of RM in this case. In our case, monotherapy with
steroid was effective. RM is a treatable disease, and its accurate diagnosis is critical for treatment.
Pathological findings offer useful information for diagnosis.
References


**Figure Legends**

Fig. 1

Axial magnetic resonance images (A–D). FLAIR image (A) and gadolinium (Gd)-enhanced T1W image (B) obtained on admission showing a left parietal lesion. After treatment, marked improvement in the lesion was observed on FLAIR images (C) and Gd-enhanced T1W images (D).

Fig. 2

Biopsy specimens of the left parietal lobe stained with hematoxylin-eosin (A and B). Low-power (A) and high-power (B) photomicrographs indicate inflammatory cell infiltration in the dura (arrowhead) and suppurative granuloma with macrophages and polynuclear giant cells (arrows) on the surface of the leptomeninges.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>Age(y)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
<th>CSF findings (WBC [×10^3]/mm^3) / MRI enhance</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Biopsy or autopsy</th>
<th>Pathological findings (cell infiltration / rheumatoid nodule / vasculitis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>loss of consciousness, seizure</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>untreated</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>autopsy</td>
<td>+ / + / -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>loss of consciousness, confusion, seizure</td>
<td>3 / 80 / 58</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>autopsy + / + / +</td>
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<td>(15)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>confusion, dementia, blindness</td>
<td>0 / 133 / 57</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>untreated</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>autopsy + / - / +</td>
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<tr>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>seizure</td>
<td>many / 50 / 260</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>autopsy + / + / -</td>
</tr>
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<td>(13)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>weakness</td>
<td>220 / 421 / &lt;5</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>diplopia, left dysesthesia</td>
<td>232 / 260 / 6</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>aspirin + CY</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>autopsy + / + / -</td>
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<td>(6)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>loss of consciousness, seizure, right paresthesias, aphasia</td>
<td>24 / 75 / 49</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>steroid + AZA</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / +</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>headache, visual disturbance</td>
<td>70 / 100 / 53</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>steroid + CY</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<td>(1)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>diplopia</td>
<td>8 / 53 / ND</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid + CY</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<td>(2)</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>fever, arthralgia, headache, nausea</td>
<td>377 / 74 / 9</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement and relapse</td>
<td>autopsy + / - / +</td>
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<td>(8)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>headache, left paresthesias, left hemiparesis</td>
<td>23 / 73 / 60</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / + / +</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>left paresthesias, left hemiparesis</td>
<td>9 / 71 / 62</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid + CyA + CY</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<tr>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>left paresthesias</td>
<td>reactive process</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid + CY</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>headache, numbness, dysarthria, weakness, seizure</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid + CY</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / + / -</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>headache, dysphasia, involuntary movement, confusion</td>
<td>88 / 67 / 48</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<tr>
<td>(16)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>hearing loss</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid + MTX</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / - / -</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>confusion, seizure</td>
<td>N.D.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement</td>
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<td>This case</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>weakness, numbness</td>
<td>18 / 55 / 64</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>steroid</td>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>biopsy + / + / +</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

N.D.: not described, CY: cyclophosphamide, AZA: azathioprine, CyA: cyclosporine, MTX: methotrexate