Seizure as Initial Manifestation of Aortic Dissection Type A

Josef Finsterer, MD, PhD
Marlies Frank, MD
Hans Keller, MD
Adam Bastowanski, MD
Vienna, Austria, Europe

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Background: Seizure as the initial manifestation of aortic dissection is rare.

Case report: An 88-year-old female experienced a first generalized tonic clonic seizure, which was terminated with midazolam. Acute cerebral magnetic resonance imaging and angiography were non-informative. After awakening she complained about cramping pain in the right upper extremity, which was accompanied by involuntary flexion movements of the right upper extremity. Blood pressure was initially normal. Blood gases revealed metabolic acidosis and blood chemical investigations a markedly increased D-dimer. Consecutively blood pressure declined and transthoracic echocardiography showed pericardial effusion. A computed tomography scan of the thorax revealed an aortic dissection type A. The patient died 16 hours after admission after cardiothoracic surgeons had refused surgical treatment.

Conclusion: This case shows that a generalized tonic-clonic seizure may be the initial manifestation of an aortic dissection type A in the absence of thoracic chest pain and that brachyalgia may not develop earlier than with progression of the dissection. [West J Emerg Med. 2010; 11(5):510-511.]

INTRODUCTION

Seizure as the sole initial manifestation of aortic dissection in the absence of chest pain has been reported only once.1 Here we report a second patient in whom aortic dissection type A initially manifested exclusively as generalized seizure without chest pain.

CASE REPORT

The patient is an 88-year-old female with a previous history of arterial hypertension, obstructive lung disease and bilateral total hip endoprosthesis. She was not drinking alcohol and was living well on her own in an asylum. While riding a tram on her way to a festival, she experienced a sudden onset generalized seizure with loss of consciousness and cloni of the upper and lower extremity with right-sided predominance. A dose of 15mg midazolam from the emergency physician stopped the seizure and when she arrived at the emergency department she was comatose and quadriplegic and the brain stem reflexes were absent, except for the pupils, which were widened and reacted slowly to light bilaterally. Deep tendon reflexes were generally absent and there was general muscle hypotonia.

Blood pressure was 130/80mmHg. Blood chemical investigations revealed moderate renal insufficiency, elevated liver function parameters, leucocytosis of 12.3/nl (n = 4.0-9.0/ nl), slight anemia and a D-dimer of 20.0microg/ml (n <0.5microg/ml). Blood gas analysis revealed metabolic acidosis with a pH of 7.36, a base excess of -8.5, and a lactate of 2.4mmol/l. Electrocardiogram (ECG) showed sinus rhythm. Magnetic resonance image (MRI) of the cerebrum 45 minutes after the seizure did not show ischemia or intracerebral bleeding. On MR angiography no major abnormality of the vasculature was detected. Her state of consciousness improved from coma to somnolence, and she started to move her extremities.

After awakening she complained about recurrent cramping pain in her right shoulder and right upper arm, which was accompanied by automatic flexion of the right upper limb. Aortic dissection was suspected and a computed tomography (CT) of the thorax initiated. Before carrying
it out, however, she developed low blood pressure to non-
measurable values and was transferred to the intensive care
unit for suspected cardiac shock where hydroxi-ethyl starch
and vasopressin helped to increased blood pressure. However,
the right pupil widened and became non-reactive to light,
and she developed left-sided hemiplegia. Echocardiography
showed normal systolic function, a small right ventricle and
a pericardial effusion with an embedded clot. Subsequently,
a CT scan of the thorax and the aorta showed aortic
dissection type A extending into the left descending aorta,
the brachiocephalic trunk with an embedded portion of the right common
carotid artery. For right-sided pain she received sufentanil
with success. Carotid ultrasound eight hours after onset
confirmed the complete occlusion of the right carotid artery.
After two cardio-thoracic departments had refused surgical
intervention the patient died without regaining consciousness,
16 hours after admission.

DISCUSSION

The patient is interesting for the epileptic seizure without
chest pain as the initial manifestation of an aortic dissection
type A. Such a scenario has been previously reported in a
single 46-year-old patient, who presented with right
hemiconvulsive movements due to ischemic right middle
cerebral artery stroke. The only risk factor for aortic
dissection in the present patient was arterial hypertension.
Whether steroids in the broncholytic spray favored the
development of the aortic dissection, as has been previously
reported in a patient with systemic lupus erythematosus,
remains speculative. Disorders predisposing for aortic
dissection, such as X-linked heterotopia or Turner syndrome
were excluded.

Why seizure was the initial manifestation remains elusive.
However, one could speculate that the dissection initially
resulted in general cerebral hyperperfusion and thus hypoxia or
stenosis of the common carotid artery, as well cerebral
ischemia, which did not show up on diffusion-weighted
imaging. The B1000 sequence might have been negative
because the MRI was carried out too early or because
ischemia was initially not intensive enough. Neither her son
nor her friend reported previous seizures or syncopes. While it
is conceivable that the seizure was not the consequence but the
cause of the dissection, arguments against such a scenario are
that she did not have a history of epilepsy (her history was
negative for a cerebral lesion) nor have seizures been reported
as triggers of aortic dissection. One could also speculate that
the initial event was a rhythm abnormality with cerebral
embolism inducing the seizure but spontaneous resolution of
the clot. Worsening after the MRI could be attributed to
progression of the dissection resulting in complete occlusion
of the right carotid artery leading to a non-reactive right pupil
and left-sided hemiplegia. Possibly, hemiplegia already
existed at the initial presentation but was masked by the
sedation with midazolam. However, because the pupils were
reactive, though delayed, at the initial investigation,
progression of the dissection during or after the cerebral MRI
is more likely. Neurological manifestations are not infrequent
at onset of an aortic dissection, but in the majority of the cases
they are accompanied by chest pain. Altogether about one
third of the patients with aortic dissection and chest pain
initially present with neurological manifestations. Seizures
occur in 3% of these patients.

This case shows that a generalized tonic-clonic seizure
may be the initial manifestation of an aortic dissection type A
in the absence of thoracic chest pain and that brachialgia may
not develop earlier than with progression of the dissection.

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Address for Correspondence: Josef Finsterer, MD, PhD.
Email: fifigs1@yahoo.de.

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