Bilateral sensorineural hearing loss and cerebellar ataxia in the case of late stage Lyme disease

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Keywords: cerebellar ataxia, hearing loss, bilateral, Lyme disease.

INTRODUCTION

Stage three or late Lyme disease is characterized by chronic neuroborreliosis¹. We present a case of bilateral hearing loss due to late stage Lyme disease and discuss the interrelation of hearing loss regarding the stage of the disease.

CASE REPORT

A 61-year-old woman was hospitalized on March, 2007 for a progressive bilateral hearing loss with a gait disorder. She had a history of migraine and depression. She also suffered from vertigo of unknown origin, which had been thoroughly investigated in 2004, with a near normal audiometry (Figure 1A). Her health insidiously deteriorated at the end of 2005, with an aggravation of her headache. Brain MRI scan was normal. In January 2006, she was depressed. She developed frequent vomiting in March 2006 and had fatigue. There was no abnormality in serum inflammatory markers. In the summer 2006, her hearing progressively deteriorated bilaterally (Figure 1B). At the beginning of 2007, she complained of a permanent gait disorder due to a cerebellar syndrome. Pure tone audiometry showed an aggravation of the hearing loss (Figure 1C). Speech audiometry was in keeping with pure tone audiometry. Brain MRI scan was normal (March, 2007). A cerebrospinal fluid examination (April 2, 2007) showed a predominantly lymphocytic pleocytosis (344 white cells; 90% of lymphocytes) with elevated protein (2.7 g/l). Serology for Lyme disease was normal 6, and antibiotic treatment had a debatable efficacy⁴⁻⁶.

DISCUSSION

The patient, who had a previous and misleading history, developed atypical symptoms at the end of 2005 that can secondarily be related to Lyme disease due to the presence of a lymphocytic meningitis, the detection of high titer antibodies and the efficacy of antibiotic treatment.

There are two cases of progressive bilateral sensorineural hearing loss due to late stage Lyme disease⁵. In both cases, the hearing loss had a long duration, was associated with neurological symptoms, and was successfully treated by antibiotic treatment. However, a hearing loss has been reported in 12 out of 48 patients suffering from late stage Lyme disease although this finding was not documented by audiometry¹. Thus, we can conclude that a progressive bilateral hearing loss occurs in late stage Lyme disease⁶. This feature is different from a sudden unilateral hearing loss which is controversially linked to stage 2 Lyme disease with a positive serology ranging from 21⁶ to 0%. Serological positivity to Borrelia must be viewed with caution due to false positive results, and the clinical diagnosis of stage 2 Lyme disease was difficult to affirm as the sudden hearing loss was isolated (no associated neurological symptoms)⁷⁻⁸, the cerebrospinal fluid analysis was normal⁸, and antibiotic treatment had a debatable efficacy⁹⁻¹⁰.

CLOSING REMARKS

A progressive bilateral sensorineural hearing loss associated with neurological disorders typically occurs in late stage Lyme disease (stage 3). This feature is different from hearing loss in stage 2 Lyme disease, which has essentially been reported to be unilateral and sudden, but for whom, probably due to the early stage of the disease, the causal relationship is more difficult to demonstrate.

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