Letter to the Editor

Full 10-20 EEG application in hospitalised neonates is not associated with an increase in stress hormone levels

Neonatal EEG monitoring in pre-term and full-term infants offers a window onto neurological functioning, and clinically relevant insights into normative and aberrant development of cortical activity patterns (Whitehead et al., 2017). We have recently shown the importance of full 10/20 electrode coverage in neonatal EEG recordings, due to the prevalence of cortical bursting over the posterior temporal regions (electrodes T6/T5) (Whitehead et al., 2017). Nevertheless, 10/20 EEG application involves a relatively high level of handling and could be a potential stressor, especially in those infants who are already exhibiting higher stress levels.

Salivary cortisol reflects activity of the hypothalamic pituitary axis: increased cortisol concentration indicates increased stress. To assess the impact of EEG set-up on systemic stress levels in hospitalised infants, we measured salivary cortisol immediately before EEG application, alongside appropriate comfort measures, does not necessarily increase stress levels in hospitalised infants. Our findings that EEG application is actually associated with decreased stress levels in infants with higher stress levels decreased significantly in infants with a lower pre-EEG cortisol value, and no change in infants who had a lower pre-EEG cortisol value (p = .017), while there was no difference in sex distribution (p = .881), ward location (special care or high dependency unit, n = 14) (p = .201). In particular, this was also the case for vulnerable sub-groups (corrected age: pre-term (<37 weeks), n = 13; ward location: special care or high dependency unit, n = 14) (p ≥ .432).

Next, we investigated whether baseline stress level influenced the effect of EEG application by splitting infants into those with higher pre-EEG cortisol concentration (>0.25 μg/dL, n = 17) and lower pre-EEG cortisol concentration (<0.25 μg/dL, n = 16). Infants with a higher pre-EEG cortisol value had a higher corrected age than infants with a lower pre-EEG cortisol value (p = .017), and no change in infants who had a lower cortisol concentration at baseline (p = .120) (Fig. 1).

Stress in hospitalised neonates is associated with adverse clinical signs, including increased nociceptive cortical response following a necessary heel lance, and fluctuations in intracranial blood pressure (Jones et al., 2017; Mörélius et al., 2016). Consequently, it is important to assess the impact of interventions, like EEG application, on systemic stress levels. In this study we have shown that EEG application, alongside appropriate comfort measures, does not necessarily increase stress levels in hospitalised infants. Our results should be interpreted conservatively because the hospital environment and cumulative exposure to stressful procedures could mask or alter reactivity. Nevertheless, previous studies have demonstrated that salivary cortisol can significantly increase in hospitalised neonates following a non-invasive stressor lasting approximately as long as EEG application (neurological examination) (Mörélius et al., 2016). Therefore our finding that EEG application is not associated with an increase in stress levels is reassuring and supports our clinical impression (based on behavioural observation, and review of heart rate and pulse oximetry acquired by cot-side monitors where available) that EEG application can be well tolerated by both pre-term and full-term infants.

Interestingly we show that EEG application is actually associated with decreased stress levels in infants with higher stress levels at baseline. In line with this EEG-associated decrease in cortisol levels, tactile stimulation of the head and body decreases stress behaviours in neonates (Hernandez-Reif et al., 2007). Further, gentle time-limited sensory stimulation significantly reduces salivary cortisol concentration in neonates (music: Schwilling et al., 2015) and older infants (swimming; riding in car, irrespective of whether
sleep occurs: reviewed in Jansen et al. 2010). Therefore it is possible that EEG application has the potential to be soothing when carried out by experienced staff, especially in conjunction with comfort measures as necessary, which neonates with higher stress levels may be more likely to both require and benefit from.

Declarations of interest

None.

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Kimberley Whiteheada,1
Laura Jonesa,1,⇑
Pureza Laudiano Draya
Judith Meekb
Lorenzo Fabrizia

a Department of Neuroscience, Physiology and Pharmacology, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom
b Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Obstetric Wing, University College London Hospitals, London WC1E 6BD, United Kingdom
* Corresponding author at: University College London, G17 Meda-war Building, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: laura.a.jones@ucl.ac.uk (L. Jones)

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1 These authors contributed equally.