Non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy in COVID-19 infection – A case report

Sanjeeta Sitaula a,⁎, Arika Poudel a, Bikram Prasad Gajurel b

a B. P. Koirala Lions Centre for Ophthalmic Studies, Department of Ophthalmology, Maharajgunj Medical Campus, Institute of Medicine, Kathmandu, Nepal
b Department of Neuromedicine, Maharajgunj Medical Campus, Institute of Medicine, Kathmandu, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To report a case of a non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION) in the setting of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Observations: A 60-year-old healthy female without any risk factors for vasculopathy, presented with an acute painless diminution of vision noticed in the lower half of the visual field in the left eye. She was diagnosed with NAION in the setting of a recent SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Conclusions and importance: The purpose of this case report is to supplement our knowledge about the neuro-ophthalmological complications of COVID-19 in the form of NAION which might occur even in the early stages of the infection.

1. Background

Non-arteritic ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION) is thought to be caused by the inadequate blood supply to the optic nerve leading to acute, unilateral, and painless loss of vision affecting older patients without any risk factors for vasculopathy and sleep apnea. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has created a pandemic with more than 163 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide and resulted in more than 3.37 million deaths as of May 17, 2021. A variety of neuro-ophthalmological complications of COVID-19 have been described in the literature. Herein, we describe a 60-year-old female without any other systemic risk factors presenting with NAION after a COVID-19 infection.

2. Case presentation

A 60-year-old lady from Kathmandu complained of acute painless diminution of vision in the left eye (LE) mainly involving the lower half of the visual field which was noticed upon awakening in the morning for the last 14 days. It was non-progressive and associated with floaters in LE. There was no ocular pain, headache, jaw claudication, weight loss, vomiting, and double vision. The patient had constitutional symptoms of fever, myalgia, dysgeusia, and cough for 5 days before testing positive for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV2). She developed ocular symptoms the next day. She did not have any anosmia, or dyspnea and had not been lying in the prone position. She had no vasculogenic risk factors like diabetes or hypertension. She had no history of smoking, snoring, or sleep apnea. She had a normal body mass index. She attributed her visual symptoms to weakness due to COVID infection and obtained ophthalmological consultation only after completing 14 days of home isolation.

The best-corrected visual acuities were 20/20 in the right eye (RE) and 20/200 in LE by Snellen’s chart on the day of examination. The pupil showed a grade II relative afferent pupillary defect in the left eye. The ocular movements were full and free in all cardinal gazes. On slit-lamp examination, the anterior segment was normal. Dilated fundoscopic examination revealed normal findings in the RE and sectoral disc pallor with retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL) edema in the LE (Fig. 1). Intraocular pressure (IOP) was 20 mmHg in both eyes. The confrontational visual field demonstrated an inferior hemifield defect LE. The color vision in RE was normal but LE showed red and green color deficiency. The contrast sensitivity was RE 2.25 log units and LE 1.85 log units. Optical coherence tomography (OCT) was normal in RE whereas LE showed increased Retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL) thickness more marked in the superior quadrant with thinning of the ganglion cell complex in the superior field (Fig. 2). The Humphrey 30-2 visual field showed a normal visual field in RE and inferior altitudinal field defect in

⁎ Corresponding author. B. P. Koirala Lions Centre for Ophthalmic Studies, Department of Ophthalmology, Maharajgunj Medical Campus, Institute of Medicine, 44600, Kathmandu, Nepal.
E-mail address: sanjeeta.sitaula@mmc.tu.edu.np (S. Sitaula).

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The routine laboratory tests done two weeks before the visit to our outpatient department (during the isolation period), showed a normal complete blood count but the erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) was raised (64mm in 1st hour). Other investigations like Random Blood Sugar, renal function tests, and liver function tests were normal. The coagulation profile including the D-dimer assay was within normal range.

The patient was asked to follow up the next day with further investigations. Complete blood count, blood sugar, renal function tests, liver function tests, and coagulation profile were all normal. ESR had decreased to 24 mmHg and C-reactive protein was negative. Serology for HIV, HBsAg, Rheumatoid arthritis factor, and Treponema pallidum hemagglutination were all non-reactive. Magnetic resonance imaging of the brain and orbits with contrast, echocardiography, serum NMO and MOG antibodies and Thyroid function tests were all normal. She was not having any symptoms of hypoxia and the coagulation profile was also normal although the ESR was raised earlier. We believe that the decrease in ESR was associated with a marked improvement of visual symptoms and visual acuity without any treatment.

Table 1 shows some of the published case reports of cases of NAION following SARS-CoV2 infection.

The causal relationship between NAION and COVID-19 can only be speculated and future observation and research may help us to understand the pathophysiology of NAION and its relationship with COVID-19 infection.

4. Conclusion

This is the first case report of a female patient with sequential COVID-19 infection and NAION in the absence of vasculogenic risk factors. The causal relationship between NAION and COVID-19 can only be speculated and future observation and research may help us to understand the pathophysiology of NAION and its relationship with COVID-19 infection.
Fig. 2. Retinal nerve fibre layer (RNFL) analysis by SD-OCT (Optovue) showing superior RNFL thickening in the left eye measuring 150μm vs 103μm in the right eye due to superior sectoral optic disc edema. Macular ganglion cell – inner plexiform layer complex (GCC) analysis shows thinning of the Superior GCC in the left eye (79μm) when compared to the superior GCC of the right eye (91μm).

Fig. 3. Humphrey visual field analysis (30-2) of the RE(A) showing a normal pattern and the LE(B) showing an inferior altitudinal field defect suggesting the diagnosis of NAION.
The purpose of this case report is to supplement our knowledge about the neuro-ophthalmological complications of COVID-19 which might occur even in the early stages of COVID-19 infection.

**Patient consent**

This report does not contain any personally identifying information.

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**Intellectual property**

We confirm that we have given due consideration to the protection of intellectual property associated with this work and that there are no impediments to publication, including the timing of publication, with respect to intellectual property. In so doing we confirm that we have followed the regulations of our institutions concerning intellectual property.

**Research ethics**

We further confirm that any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript that has involved human patients has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged within the manuscript.

**Authorship**

All listed authors meet the ICMJE criteria. We attest that all authors contributed significantly to the creation of this manuscript, each having fulfilled criteria as established by the ICMJE.

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors.

We confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all named authors.

**Contact with the editorial office**

The Corresponding Author declared on the title page of the manuscript is: Sanjeeta Sitaula.

**Declaration of competing interest**

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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