ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumours in neurofibromatosis 1

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Background: Cross sectional studies have shown that 1.2% of patients with neurofibromatosis 1 (NF1) develop malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumours (MPNST). However, no population based longitudinal studies have assessed lifetime risk.

Methods: NF1 patients with MPNST were ascertained from two sources for our north west England population of 4.1 million in the 13 year period 1984-1996: the North West Regional NF1 Register and review of notes of patients with MPNST in the North West Regional Cancer Registry.

Results: Twenty-one NF1 patients developed MPNST, equivalent to an annual incidence of 1.6 per 1000 and a lifetime risk of 8-13%. There were 37 patients with sporadic MPNST. The median age at diagnosis of MPNST in NF1 patients was 26 years, compared to 62 years in patients with sporadic MPNST (p<0.001). In Kaplan-Meier analyses, the five year survival from diagnosis was 21% for NF1 patients with MPNST, compared to 42% for sporadic cases of MPNST (p=0.09). One NF1 patient developed two separate MPNST in the radiation field of a previous optic glioma.

Conclusion: The lifetime risk of MPNST in NF1 is much higher than previously estimated and warrants careful surveillance and a low threshold for investigation.

METHODOLOGY

The North West Regional Cancer Registry covers a region of north west England, based around Manchester, with a population of 4.1 million. The Cancer Registry ascertains patients with malignancies of all sites, as well as benign central nervous system tumours, from pathology records and death certificates. We reviewed the Cancer Registry for patients with MPNST (ICD-0: M9540/3 and 9560/3). There is very high overall coverage, although misclassification of MPNST does occur at peripheral hospitals. In order to obtain all possible patients with coexistent NF1 and MPNST, we also reviewed our North West Regional NF1 Genetic Register. This covers the same region and proactively obtains details of NF1 from families with the condition. Currently, the NF1 Register has details of 730 patients with NF1. The study period was 1984-1996 inclusive. We reviewed hospital notes for all patients with MPNST who were identified for the study. To confirm a diagnosis of NF1, histology reports and details of other typical NF1 disease features were reviewed (for example, café au lait macules and neurofibromas with respect to the US National Institutes of Health diagnostic criteria). Histology from all sporadic MPNST patients was reviewed to avoid mis-diagnosis.

Death details from the registries were used to calculate survival rates and death certificates were reviewed to determine cause of death. Vital status was determined as of 1 April 2001. Five year survival was determined using Kaplan-Meier curves. NF1 MPNST cases who were identified on the periphery of the region during the study period were included for the survival analysis only. The Mann-Whitney U test and Wilcoxon (Gehan) statistic were used to test between group differences in age at diagnosis and survival (fig 1).

Abbreviations: NF1, neurofibromatosis 1; MPNST, malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumours.
developed a MPNST 17 years after radiotherapy for optic glioma. One of these patients (patient 5) developed a brachial plexus tumour (range 16-77 years), compared to 62 years (range 19-89 years) for the 24 NF1 MPNST patients (95% confidence interval 5-37%) (median survival 2.8 years and 1.3 years, respectively, p=0.09). In those who were diagnosed at less than 60 years of age (22 NF1 MPNST patients and 16 sporadic MPNST patients), the five year survival rate was 50% for sporadic MPNST patients, but only 18% for those with NF1 MPNST (median survival 7.0 years and 1.0 year, respectively, p=0.09). In sporadic MPNST patients, the five year survival rate was 32% in males and 56% in females (median survival 1.7 years and 6.7 years, respectively, p=0.13).

NF1 MPNST lifetime risk
Assuming a population prevalence of 1 in 4000 for NF1, the annual incidence of MPNST in NF1 patients is 1.6 per 1000 (only strict regional patients included, 21/13). If NF1 patients live to 75-80 years, the lifetime risk is 12-13%, respectively. However, the birth incidence of NF1 may be as high as 1 in 2500, which corresponds to an annual incidence of 1.0 per 1000 and a lifetime risk of 8%. This is in accord with our previous estimates of lifetime risks based on actuarial analysis of our NF1 Register, in which there are now 32 known cases of MPNST among 730 NF1 patients. If life expectancy is lower than 75-80 years (for example, 65 years), prevalence decreases and annual incidence increases, yielding a lifetime risk of about 10%.

DISCUSSION
The association between MPNST and NF1 is well known. Initial reports that were based on specialist series found high risks of MPNST in NF1, but more recent population based series have tended to downplay the overall risk. However, most of these studies have inherent biases; specialist series will not have many mildly affected patients with NF1, and attempts to obtain 100% ascertainment of NF1 patients in an area can initially only examine cross sectional estimates of risk. More recent long term longitudinal studies of NF1 patient cohorts are more likely to arrive at an accurate estimate of risk. However, neither of two recent large studies calculated lifetime risk. Nonetheless, a study of 1475 patients in North America found 34 new cases of MPNST over a 20 year period. This equated to a risk of 1.3-6.8 per 1000 from the first to the fifth decades of life. The number of older patients was small; the median age of NF1 patients without MPNST at initial assessment was only 14.7 years. If extrapolated, this corresponds to a lifetime risk of as much as 20-24% (using an average annual risk of 3 per 1000). The main drawbacks of this study were the lack of older patients and the probable ascertainment bias towards more severely affected NF1 patients.

Our study is entirely population based for MPNST and it is likely that there is near total ascertainment for NF1 related...
MPNST in NF1

A number of previous reports have highlighted the poorer prognosis in NF1 related MPNST compared to sporadic tumours. It is likely that this is because of later presentation with the malignant tumour or false reassurance by medical staff. A patient without NF1 is likely to be perturbed by a new, rapidly growing lump, particularly if it is painful. As patients with NF1 can have many lumps, they may become complacent about any new lumps. Indeed, this may be compounded by attempts to downplay the risks of MPNST in NF1. While we cannot be certain that this is the cause of the poorer outcome (it could be the result of other NF1 specific features of the tumour), it is clear that radiotherapy and chemotherapy are of little value and only complete surgical excision before metastasis is likely to give a good prognosis. The severity of other malignant lesions, like optic gliomas, which have a better prognosis in NF1, than in sporadic Regius would also support late presentation as the main reason for poor outcome.

The NF1 patient support group publications tend to quote a lifetime risk of MPNST of 1-2%. In addition to correcting this to a higher lifetime risk of NF1 related MPNST as indicated by the results of this study, NF1 patients need to be aware that MPNST may not occur in a pre-existing plexiform tumour, but from a deeper location. Most of the NF1 patients in our series developed tumours in deep seated locations and only a small proportion occurred in typical cutaneous plexiform tumours. This adds to the findings in the North American study, where 36% of tumours arose in deep areas with no previous plexiform tumour. We found a slight trend to a worse prognosis in males with sporadic MPNST, which accords with previous observations. The risk of radiation induced MPNST has been largely overlooked in recent years. However, there are several published reports relating to patients with and without NF1. Ducman et al described 12 patients with post-irradiation MPNST, of whom seven had NF1 with two having had radiotherapy for optic gliomas five and 17 years previously. More recently, Loree et al described two of four NF1 patients who developed MPNST after head and neck irradiation. We therefore concur with the previous reports that radiotherapy should only be used when absolutely necessary in NF1, which is now probably not the case for optic glioma.
We can make a number of recommendations based on the results of our study. (1) Patients with NF1 should be made aware of the relatively high risk of MPNST with the likely symptoms of pain and rapid growth, and they should have easy access to expert opinion should these symptoms occur. (2) Better diagnostic tools such as PET scanning should be used in suspicious lesions, and prospective studies of PET scanning in the highest risk patients should be considered. (3) Radiation treatment in NF1 should only be used if there is clear clinical need and no equally effective alternative.

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REFERENCES
CORRECTIONS

In the May 2002 issue of the journal, in the paper by Evans et al on “Malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumours in neurofibromatosis 1”, the Kaplan Meier curve published in the article was an analysis from birth to current age or death rather than from diagnosis. The p value attached to the curve related to the analysis from diagnosis. The correct figure of survival from diagnosis is shown below.

In the letter by Maher et al on “Beckwith-Wiedemann syndrome and assisted reproduction technology (ART)” in the January 2003 issue of the journal (vol 40, pp 62-64), there were four errors in the first paragraph of the Methods and result section and in the Key points. The correct paragraphs are reproduced below with the errors noted in bold.

METHODS AND RESULTS

We reviewed the notes of 149 BWS patients who had been referred to the BWS Research Group at the Birmingham University Section of Medical Genetics and/or the West Midlands Molecular Genetics Service (for uniparental disomy analysis) and for whom detailed clinical information had been collected. A history of assisted conception techniques was recorded for six cases (4%) (table 1). To estimate whether this was likely to be a significantly increased proportion, we compared the frequency of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and ICSI births in the BWS cohort with that in the general population. The first ART associated BWS case was born in 1989 and the most recent in 2002. Data for the number of children born after ART are available for 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 (“http://www.hfea.gov.uk”) and during these years there was a total of 43,074 births after IVF or ICSI to UK residents. The corresponding number of total births in the UK was 4,320,482, so that 0.997% of births in the general population were after IVF or ICSI. Based on these data, if the proportion of births after ART is similar in the BWS cohort, we would expect the number of IVF and ICSI births to be 1.4855 of the 149 BWS patients studied to have been born as a result of IVF or ICSI. To test the significance of the observed and expected frequencies we used a Poisson approximation to the binomial distribution and obtained a two tailed p value of 0.009. Thus, the observed frequency (n=6) of IVF and ICSI births in the BWS series is significantly greater than the expected (1.4855), with an associated 95% confidence interval on the excess risk of 1.5, 8.8. It should be noted that (1) although these calculations do not take account of maternal age, there is no reported evidence that maternal age in BWS births differs from that in the general population and (2) data on the frequency of ART births before 1995 are not available for years before 1995. Had such data been available, then it would have very probably reduced the expected number of BWS births after IVF or ICSI, as the birth rate in the general population has been declining since 1989 and the annual number of ART births before 1995 would have been less than during the five years included in the comparison. Therefore our comparison is likely to be conservative in relation to calendar year.

Key points

- Beckwith-Wiedemann syndrome (BWS) is a model imprinting disorder resulting from mutations or epimutations affecting imprinted genes on chromosome 11p15.5.
- Recently a possible association of Angelman syndrome, another human imprinting disorder, and intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) has been described.
- To determine if there might be an association between ICSI and BWS births, we reviewed the incidence of assisted reproduction technology (ART) births in a cohort of 149 sporadic BWS births.
- Six of 149 (4%) BWS children were born after ART (three after ICSI and three after in vitro fertilisation (IVF)) compared to ~1.0% in the general population (p=0.009).
- These observations support an association between ART and human imprinting disorders.
- As both IVF and ICSI procedures were associated with BWS, loss of maternal allelic methylation at differentially methylated regions within imprinted gene clusters associated with in vitro embryo culture may be an important factor in the pathogenesis of ART associated imprinting disorders.