

SHORT REPORTS

Relief of acute pain in herpes zoster ophthalmicus by stellate ganglion block

Stellate ganglion block has been suggested as a useful treatment for trigeminal herpes zoster,¹⁻⁴ being most effective if started within two weeks of the onset of the disease.¹ We evaluated the efficacy of this treatment in a randomised prospective controlled study for the first time and assessed its complications.

Patients, methods, and results

Thirty patients aged 60 and over who presented with herpes zoster ophthalmicus were recruited and randomly allocated to one of two groups: treated (group A; mean age 71.5 (range 60-87) years) or untreated (group B; mean age 72.2 (62-92) years). Pain was assessed by visual analogue scale set horizontally for 100 mm.

Patients in group A underwent stellate ganglion block within 14 days of the onset of the rash as previously described.⁵ After verbal consent a 0.5 ml test dose, followed 30 seconds later by a 9.5 ml bolus of equal parts 1% lignocaine and 0.5% marcaine, was injected on to the C5/C6 prevertebral fascia. Effect was assessed from miosis, hyperthermia, and pain relief at 60 minutes. Patients were followed up for at least three months.

In group A mean pain score before block was 41.9 mm; at one hour it was 5.2 mm, a highly significant reduction ($p < 0.001$, paired t test). Pain scores in subsequent time bands were compared with those at presentation in patients from each group by paired t tests (table). In group A there was a highly significant

Mean visual analogue scale pain scores for patients treated by stellate ganglion block and untreated patients at presentation and at subsequent time bands

| | Presentation | 2 Weeks-1 month | 6 Weeks-2 months | 3 Months |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|----------|
| Treated | 42.53 | 12.43* | 31.45† | 10.46* |
| Untreated | 26.67 | 16.45‡ | 14.85‡ | 11.71‡ |

* $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.05$; ‡ $p > 0.05$.

reduction ($p < 0.01$) in pain scores at two weeks to one month and at six weeks to two months ($p < 0.05$). In group B no significant reduction in pain occurred during the first two months ($p > 0.05$ for each time band). At three months both groups showed significant reductions, reflecting the generally held view that pain decreases with time in this disease.

It was not appropriate to compare directly the pain scores of the treated and untreated groups at each time band as initial randomisation resulted in an appreciable difference in pain scores at presentation ($p = 0.09$). Lower initial scores may have resulted in a different clinical course in each group, and this made interpretation of two sample t tests difficult. None the less, the highly significant reduction in pain scores after treatment indicates a definite effect of treatment.

Seventeen blocks were performed, two being second procedures. Five patients developed a hoarse voice owing to blockade of the ipsilateral recurrent laryngeal nerve, and there was one case of brachial block; as expected these resolved within eight hours. Two blocks were complicated by a bloody first tap: one patient was successfully treated at another site, and the block was abandoned in the other after a test dose at the second site resulted in upbeating nystagmus. Complications occurred in seven patients (41%) but none were permanent.

Comment

This study shows that stellate ganglion block is effective in relieving pain as shown by the appreciable reduction in pain scores at 60 minutes. The effect persists, greatly reducing acute pain for up to three months after treatment, especially between two weeks and one month afterwards.

The method of action of sympathetic block has not been satisfactorily explained, but it clearly modifies both peripheral and central pathways as pain would otherwise return once the effects of anaesthesia wore off.

The acute pain of herpes zoster ophthalmicus is an important contribution to overall morbidity. We think that stellate ganglion block, if used early, plays an important part in greatly reducing or abolishing this pain and suggest that doctors should be aware of the efficacy of this treatment and refer patients early to practitioners experienced in the use of regional blocks. It should be feasible for patients to be treated as a day case by anaesthetists working on an ophthalmic list.

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Urinary sodium excretion in 4-6 year old children: a cause for concern?

There is increasing evidence that a high intake of salt may be important in the development of essential hypertension.¹ Evidence from animals suggests that a high intake of salt early in life may predispose the animal to high blood pressure when it is again exposed to a high intake.² A double blind study of babies showed that blood pressure was lower in babies aged 6 months who from birth had been fed a diet low in sodium compared with babies fed a diet with normal sodium content.³ Little is known about the intake of salt in early childhood, particularly in the age group 4-6 years when children start expressing preferences for food. Dietary histories are unreliable for estimating intake of sodium; a more accurate assessment can be obtained from measurement of 24 hour urinary sodium excretion. We therefore measured this in a group of primary schoolchildren aged 4-6.

Subjects, methods, and results

Seventeen pupils aged 4-6 from each of two primary schools were randomly selected (20 boys, 14 girls); permission for the study was obtained from the pupils and parents. Written and oral instructions on how to collect urine over two consecutive periods of 24 hours were given to teachers, parents, and children. We supervised the collections during the day at school. We never mentioned that the salt content of the food was being assessed, and the children consumed their normal diet. We measured urinary volume and sodium, potassium, and creatinine concentrations. The children were also weighed.

The mean urinary sodium excretion was 64 (SEM 3.9) mmol(mEq)/24 h (range 20.5-131.0 mmol/24 h). Mean urinary potassium excretion was 34 (1.7) mmol(mEq)/24 h and mean urinary creatinine excretion 1.99 (0.14) mmol/24 (225 (16.3) mg/24 h). No results were discarded. The mean body weight of the 34 children was 21.2 (0.62) kg.

The ratio of sodium to creatinine excreted over 24 hours was 39, and the ratio of sodium excreted over 24 hours to body weight was 3.1. These ratios are considerably higher than those found in adults. If sodium excretion in an adult is taken as 150 mmol/24 h with a creatinine excretion of 13 mmol/24 h and a body weight of 75 kg, the ratio of sodium to creatinine excreted is 3.5 times higher in children than in adults and the ratio of sodium excreted to body weight is 1.4 times higher in children.

Comment

Our results show that children aged 4-6 who had already started school had a high average sodium excretion of around 64 mmol/day. This is an underestimate because all the 24 hour collections of urine were included. It is difficult to compare excretion of sodium in young children with that in adults, but if the ratio of sodium to creatinine excreted or sodium excreted to body weight is taken it is clear that these children had a considerably higher intake of sodium than the already high intake of adults.

In the United Kingdom children at school are increasingly consuming snacks rather than meals. These snacks usually have a high content of sodium and saturated fat with little fibre. This change in dietary habit is likely to increase the already high intake of sodium of young children even further. Whether this high intake predisposes these children to develop high