Sir,
Central retinal artery occlusion and cerebral stroke

Aspects of the review by Varma and colleagues¹ conspire to amplify the confusion that surrounds central retinal artery occlusion (CRAO). First, they report that a foveal cherry-red spot is present in 90% of eyes examined within 1 week of CRAO onset, whereas only 58% show concomitant macular opacification. Surely these 'classic' CRAO signs must co-exist?

Second, Varma and colleagues discuss 'transient' CRAO, a small subgroup of eyes in the Iowa CRAO classification characterised by CRA reopening by the time of initial presentation and fluorescein angiography.^{2,3} They state that 'transient' CRAO is 'analogous to a transient ischaemic attack affecting the eye' since 'restoration of blood flow ... results in symptom resolution'.¹ This is not the case. The Iowa classification dispenses with terminological convention by labelling events as 'transient' even though complete reversal of symptoms and signs is precluded by a duration of ischaemic anoxia exceeding 4 h (inner retina's maximum survival time).⁴ They also state that 'transient' CRAO presents 'greatly varied fundus findings'.¹ This is not the case. If the duration of 'transient' CRAO exceeds 4 h, the 'classic' signs will persist for at least a week. Alternative presentations in the form of 'scattered patches of retinal opacity'^{2,3} usually signify 'partial', not 'transient', CRAO.⁵

Third, Varma and colleagues believe 'only a rare subgroup of individuals have viable tissue' in the inner retina by 24 h from CRAO onset.¹ This is not the case. Although the survival time of anoxic tissue in the posterior pole has been exceeded, this 'core' of infarction will be surrounded by a zone of critically hypoxic but viable tissue (the 'ischaemic penumbra'), just as in cerebral stroke. Unlike penumbral cerebral cortex, however, penumbral retina can persist indefinitely.⁵ Reperfusion of this tissue explains the recovery of the ERG b-wave after CRA unclamping following 4 h of CRAO.⁴ It can also account for the visual improvement frequently attributed to 'natural history' in patients,¹⁻³ provided neural connectivity is maintained between reoxygenated penumbra and optic nerve. However, if the CRA does not reopen and cilioretinal collaterals are not formed, the enduring penumbral state of the tissue will stimulate intraocular neovascularisation (developing in 15–20% of CRAO eyes).⁵

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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D McLeod

Academic Department of Ophthalmology,
 Manchester Royal Eye Hospital, Manchester, UK
 E-mail: david.mcleod@nhs.net

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Sir,
Reply: 'Central retinal artery occlusion and cerebral stroke'

We are grateful to Dr McLeod¹ for the interest that he has shown in our paper.² Rather, then there being a conspiracy to increase the confusion within central retinal artery occlusion (CRAO), our study demonstrates that the disease is incompletely understood. In particular, we disagree with Dr McLeod that the retinal penumbra lasts for more than 24 h. Retinal and cerebrovascular ischaemia share a number of common pathophysiological features and is reflected by the recent extended definition of stroke involving retinal as well as cerebral ischaemia.³

In vitro experiments show that when neuronal cells are deprived of oxygen, that within 5 s, there is evidence of neuronal dysfunction. Within 10 s, cell death occurs. The elegant experiment of Astrup *et al*⁴ demonstrated that the penumbra is a function of collateral perfusion and that if there was no resolution of the occlusion, then eventually the penumbra would fail, and infarction would be permanent.

In cerebral stroke using perfusion imaging, various groups have demonstrated that the ischaemic penumbra may persist beyond 24 h. However, randomised controlled trials of reperfusion therapy in acute stroke have demonstrated on that in the majority of individuals, the ischaemic penumbra only extends out to 4.5 h and at maximum, 6 h.^{5,6}

The misperceptions that the retinal penumbra persists for 24 h, initially backed up by observational data, led to the design of two randomised controlled trials that recruited individual with central retinal artery occlusion of beyond 6 h. The EAGLE study recruited subjects up to 19 h of symptom onset,⁷ while our group conducted a randomised controlled trial of intravenous tPA given to individuals within 24 h of symptom onset.⁸ Both of these randomised controlled trials were negative studies, however, a signal was seen in individuals who receive tPA within 6 h of symptom onset.⁸ This mirrors the retinal tolerance time demonstrated in Hayreh's animal experiments of 4 h.⁹

Conversely, if the thrombus that initially caused a retinal artery occlusion resolves such that retinal perfusion is restored, then the symptoms will be invariably improved leading to a transient central retinal artery occlusion.

Nevertheless, we agree with Dr McLeod that the classical clinical features of central retinal artery occlusion remain more or less the same, but that various findings may give a clue as to the time of the onset or alternatively the presence of partial occlusion. These are important points given that for randomised controlled trials on the treatment of CRAO are to succeed, then individuals need to be recruited within the shortest time possible.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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- AW Lee¹, CS Chen², S Cugati² and D Varma¹
- ¹Flinders Comprehensive Stroke Centre, South Australia, Australia
- ²Department of Ophthalmology, Flinders Medical Centre and Flinders University, South Australia, Australia
- E-mail: Celia.Chen@health.sa.gov.au
- Eye* (2013) **27**, 1422–1423; doi:10.1038/eye.2013.216; published online 4 October 2013

Sir,

Comment on 'Adult Horner's syndrome: a combined clinical, pharmacological, and imaging algorithm'

We welcome the article by Davagnanam *et al*¹ and agree when Horner syndrome (HS) presents with localizing clinical signs the choice of imaging is straight forward. However, the authors could have perhaps done more to focus on isolated HS. While recognizing that isolated HS is an important physical sign, the clinician's dilemma is deciding whether to scan, when to scan, and what to scan.

We recently presented² the results of a 5-year retrospective consecutive series of HS cases at our regional neuroscience centre. Seventy-five (74 unilateral and 1 bilateral) cases, with a mean age of 49.7 years (SD ± 17 years, range 18–87 years), were identified from the electronic radiology card system and a case note review was carried out. Two cases were recurrent, and both episodes were recorded as one case. Forty-seven cases were clinically isolated, of these the commonest aetiology was undetermined cases ($n = 22$) followed by carotid dissection ($n = 11$).

Positive aetiology was found in four isolated HS cases who had no history of trauma or surgery, no reported headache, neck ache, or pain: two carotid dissections, one pancoast tumour, and one C1 benign aneurysmal bony cyst. Our main concern is, if a HS is only reviewed at 6 weeks as suggested by the algorithm, instead of undergoing prompt imaging, patients with carotid dissection are at significant risk of a ischaemic event (transient ischaemic attack or stroke) within the first 31 days of onset of symptoms.³

Positive aetiology was found in three isolated HS cases who presented with history of greater than 1 year: two had carotid dissection and one a cervical sympathetic paraganglioma. Although we accept that no treatment would be warranted for the dissections at over 12 months, two recurrent cases of carotid dissection were found within our cohort. This highlights the importance of investigating the patient to fully inform them and clinician in the event HS recurs.

These findings suggest that an atraumatic non-painful isolated HS or a chronic history of isolated HS should not be treated as benign entities. We would recommend prompt imaging in all cases. As suggested by Al-Moosa and Eggenberger,⁴ a prospective study is required to provide evidence to determine what is the 'gold standard' imaging modality for isolated HS.