Stimulus-sensitive burst-spiking in burst-suppression in children: implications for management of refractory status epilepticus

Bernard Dan¹, Stewart G. Boyd²

¹ Department of Neurology, Hôpital Universitaire des Enfants Reine Fabiola, Free University of Brussels (ULB), Belgium
² Department of Clinical Neurophysiology, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, London, United Kingdom

Received June 29, 2005; Accepted February 13, 2006

ABSTRACT – Status epilepticus refractory to sequential trials of multiple medication is a rare but significant problem in children. We describe stimulus sensitivity arising during the treatment of convulsive status epilepticus in children (stimulus-sensitive burst-spiking in burst-suppression). We reviewed retrospectively clinical and EEG features in six children (three months to ten years), with status epilepticus requiring intensive care, in whom tactile, auditory and visual stimulation induced myoclonic jerks and bursts of EEG spikes. Sensitivity was not present at onset, but appeared after 24 hours as myoclonic jerks of the eyes, face and limbs, irrespective of the modality and site of stimulation. These were associated with burst-suppression in the EEG, the induced spiking forming the burst component. Various antiepileptic drugs, including GABAergic and NMDA blockers had no effect, but halogenated agents (used in two patients) abolished the sensitivity. Two children died, but the remainder returned to their previous clinical state. We conclude that stimulus sensitivity may appear in the context of refractory status epilepticus treated with high-dose barbiturates. Outcome may be more favorable than previously reported in adults, mostly in the context of post-anoxic or toxic coma. Evaluation of ventilated children in status epilepticus should include electroclinical assessment using sensory stimulation. If present, the drug regime should be reviewed and halogenated agents considered.

Key words: status epilepticus, stimulus sensitivity, child, barbiturate, isoflurane, halothane, post-anoxic myoclonus

Refractory status epilepticus has been defined as seizures continuing for more than 60-90 minutes after initiation of therapy (Shorvon 1994). Patients who reach this stage are often unresponsive to sequential trials of multiple agents and usually require anesthesia. Outcome is often poor, particularly in children (Sahin et al. 2001, Sahin et al. 2003, Baxter et al. 2003). Some authors have reported (Jäntti et al. 1994), or illustrated (without directly addressing) (Baxter et al. 2003), one uncommon phenomenon
in children with refractory status epilepticus. This consisted of bursts of spikes in response to sensory stimulation in an otherwise “suppressed” EEG. A similar phenomenon has been well-described in adults with post-anoxic coma (Van Cott et al. 1996, Morris et al. 1998) or carbamazepine overdose (De Rubeis et al. 2001), perhaps pointing to common pathophysiological mechanisms. Recently, Hirsch characterized various patterns of EEG discharges in intensive care patients in response to alerting stimuli such as auditory and tactile stimulation, suggesting that these might be linked to arousal mechanisms in critically ill patients (Hirsch et al. 2004). We present six children with prominent evidence of stimulus sensitivity during status epilepticus and report on its phenomenology and response to pharmacological manipulation.

Materials and methods

Five consecutive children with refractory status epilepticus admitted to the pediatric intensive care unit of the Hôpital Universitaire des Enfants Reine-Fabiola (Brussels, Belgium) and one child with refractory status epilepticus admitted to the pediatric intensive care unit of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children (London, United Kingdom) were included in the study. While they were in status epilepticus, EEGs were taken using conventional electrode placements according to the International 10-20 system. In addition, the examiner touched the patients lightly on the arms and face (tactile stimulation), made hand claps (auditory stimuli) and flashed lights on and off in front of the patients face (visual stimulation) during the recordings. A retrospective review of the clinical notes and investigations was then carried out.

Results

Six children (clinical details in table 1) with prolonged convulsive status epilepticus refractory to medication showed clinical and EEG sensitivity to stimulation. This sensitivity appeared after more than 24 hours in response to tactile, auditory and/or visual stimuli. At this time, EEGs showed burst-suppression (not present initially) in all but one patient (Case 4) who showed brief periods of low EEG amplitude. Although none had myoclonic status epilepticus, motor responses to stimulation consisted mainly of myoclonic jerks of the eyelids and extremities. The same response was observed irrespective of the modality or site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>21 months</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous epilepsy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying condition</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tracheal stenosis</td>
<td>Cortical dysplasia</td>
<td>Tracheomalacia</td>
<td>Cortical dysplasia</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status epilepticus precipitant</td>
<td>Post-infectious encephalitis</td>
<td>Cardio-respiratory arrest</td>
<td>Poor epilepsy control</td>
<td>Respiratory arrest</td>
<td>Poor epilepsy control</td>
<td>Upper airway infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of status epilepticus</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>6 days</td>
<td>24 h</td>
<td>3 days</td>
<td>2-3 days</td>
<td>2-3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEG features</td>
<td>Generalized runs of fast activity and spike-waves</td>
<td>Generalized complexes including spikes and fast activity</td>
<td>Brief focal complexes of spikes</td>
<td>Generalized bursts of fast spiking</td>
<td>Brief focal complexes of spikes</td>
<td>Brief focal complexes of spike-waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other clinical neurophysiology</td>
<td>SSEP increased amplitude; fVEP initially normal, later absent; BAEP increased I-V latency</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>SSEP normal; fVEP absent, later normal; BAEP increased I-V latency</td>
<td>SSEP normal; fVEP absent, later normal; BAEP normal</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
<td>DZP PHB PHB</td>
<td>VPA PHB TP CLM TP</td>
<td>VPA LMT LEV</td>
<td>LZP PHB PHT LC ISO+ HAL+</td>
<td>LZP PHB PHT CLM TP</td>
<td>VPA CLB CZP PHT PHB TP CLM PFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Died</td>
<td>Died</td>
<td>No sequelae</td>
<td>No sequelae</td>
<td>No sequelae</td>
<td>Hemiplegia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of stimulation. The clinical response was intermittent and only appeared in association with EEG spikes. The epileptiform EEG bursts were markedly stereotyped, and more readily seen against a low amplitude EEG background, constituting the bursts of activity during burst-suppression (figures 1-3). In three documented cases (Cases 1, 2 and 5), the phenomenon persisted when the burst-suppression pattern was clearly not related to medication but to the time course of the status epilepticus. There was some slowing in the rate of spiking before the end of many of the bursts (figure 1B), without any slow activity after the run of spikes (figure 1C). The electroclinical phenomenon lasted from hours to days, though it persisted for eight weeks in Case 1. Drugs that enhance GABA (barbiturates, benzodiazepines, vigabatrin), or that reduce NMDA activity (ketamine) as their main mode of action did not alter it. However, halogenated agents abolished it.

Three children survived without sequelae; Case 4 who is normal, and Cases 3 and 5 with pre-existing seizures who recovered their previous state, but subsequently required surgical excision of focal dysplasia. One infant (Case 6) was left with hemiplegia related to extensive cortical necrosis. Cases 1 and 2 died in the course of status epilepticus. Case 1 underwent a brain biopsy that showed extensive neuronal necrosis, confirmed at autopsy, although magnetic resonance imaging appeared normal after one week of status epilepticus. Clinical features, time course and effect of treatment are highlighted by two detailed examples.

Case examples

Case 1 – A previously healthy 9-year-old boy became drowsy and confused three days after the onset of a mild febrile illness. The following day he became comatose, and then developed convulsive, apparently generalized, status epilepticus. This did not respond to intravenous diazepam (two doses of 0.5 mg/kg), phenytoin (20 mg/kg), phenobarbital (20 mg/kg) or to infusions of valproic acid (2 mg/kg/hour) or clonazepam (10 µg/kg/h). Thiopental infusion led to hemiplegia related to extensive cortical necrosis. Cases 1 and 2 died in the course of status epilepticus. Case 1 underwent a brain biopsy that showed extensive neuronal necrosis, confirmed at autopsy, although magnetic resonance imaging appeared normal after one week of status epilepticus. Clinical features, time course and effect of treatment are highlighted by two detailed examples.
Figure 1. Case 1. Serial EEG excerpts from one episode of response to stimulation. A) Note the electrocerebral inactivity until tactile stimulation of the arm, which provokes a run of spikes and initially high amplitude fast activity, followed by slower rhythmic spiking. This is accompanied by myoclonic jerking of the face and arms. B) Note the gradual slowing of the bursts of spikes correlated with clinical myoclonic jerks. C) The spike bursts (and clinical jerks) cease with a return of electrocerebral inactivity.
The status epilepticus was therefore treated with halothane, leading to its resolution. She subsequently underwent anterior frontal lobectomy and has had no further episodes of status epilepticus over a 3-year follow-up. Pathological examination of the resected tissue confirmed dysplastic changes and showed a moderate loss of neurons as well as gliosis in the cortex and subcortical white matter.

**Discussion**

The children in this study developed stimulus sensitivity in the setting of refractory status epilepticus. The clinical manifestation of this sensitivity consisted of myoclonic jerks. Sensitivity was not restricted to a single sensory modality and did not depend on any specific location; it could, for example, be elicited by tactile stimulation of...
any of the four limbs or the face or trunk, as commonly seen in post-anoxic myoclonus (Hallett et al. 2000) and other conditions without histological evidence of hypoxic neuronal damage (De Rubeis et al. 2001). While the functional mechanism underlying the phenomenon is uncertain, it does not seem to require extensive neuronal death. Four of the six children survived, including one who is entirely normal and two whose pre-existing seizure disorders have continued, indicating that this phenomenon does not necessarily imply a poor prognosis. However, it may be significant that the children who died had status epilepticus of longer duration, i.e. several weeks as opposed to up to three days in the other children. All of our patients who could be assessed showed the typical EEG sequence of changes associated with convulsive status epilepticus (Treiman et al. 1990) and none showed EEG burst-suppression on initial assessment. However, this was present when stimulus sensitivity appeared after more than 24 hours spent in status epilepticus (with the exception of Case 4). Despite similarities with post-anoxic myoclonus, including time course, motor manifestations, sensitivity to multiple stimulus modalities and EEG burst-suppression, only two of our children (Cases 2 and 4) had suffered a definite hypoxic insult, including one (Case 4) who made a good recovery. Burst-suppression is commonly regarded as a particular EEG pattern reflecting cortical disconnection (Spreafico et al. 1993, Steriade et al. 1994) seen in deep anesthesia or coma. Study of the morphology of the EEG bursts may give insights into the nature of the cerebral activity that generates them (Jäntti et al. 1994). Although the EEG waveforms could change from day to day in some of our cases, the complex but highly reproducible bursts of activity, whether spontaneous or evoked by stimulation, suggest a pathological network of interconnected neurons. The generalized distribution of the bursts and the lack of specificity of the stereotyped responses to varied stimulations suggest that such a network would have widespread connections either to, or within the cortex. By contrast, EEG suppression indicates massive inhibition of the cortex, with persisting activity in 5% of cortical cells contrasting with 30-40% of the thalamic cells (Steriade et al. 1994). However, the existence of stimulus sensitivity, with motor and EEG changes in this state suggests preservation of at least some afferent and efferent connections to cortex. This is supported by the finding by Steriade et al. of sustained cortical activity following stimulation of the intralaminar centro-lateral thalamic nucleus during burst-suppression (Steriade et al. 1994). A propensity to stimulus sensitivity during burst-suppression would be facilitated by this thalamo-cortical interaction. Alternatively, brain stem dysfunction resulting in “brain stem seizures” may be hypothesized, but brain stem circuitry is not sufficient to produce ictal myoclonic jerks (Kreindler et al. 1958). Thiopental-mediated depression of cortical activity may result in brain-stem disinhibition at low doses, but at anesthetic doses, the effects of thiopental on the EEG are related to direct effects on cortical neurons (Lukatch and Maclver 1996). Potentiation of GABA transmission commonly increases synaptic inhibition, leading to disconnection throughout thalamo-cortical systems. Most conventional treatment of status epilepticus is based upon pharmacological potentiation of GABAergic inhibition (Claassen et al. 2002). High doses of GABAergic medication (including thiopental in Cases 1, 2, 3 and 5) was of no benefit to any of our patients despite the absence of two commonly recognized factors leading to refractoriness to treatment, namely prolonged duration of status (Treiman et al. 1991) and late EEG stage prior to treatment (Treiman et al. 1992). Functional modification of GABA receptors (Kapur and Coulter 1995) as status epilepticus progresses, might explain resistance to benzodiazepines (Rice and De Lorenzo 1999) (as in Cases 1-6), phenobarbital (Borris et al. 2000) (as in Cases 1-6) and vigabatrin (Halonen et al. 2001) (as in Case 1). Despite the role of NMDA transmission as status epilepticus persists (Borris et al. 2000, Mewasingh et al. 2003), ketamine was ineffective in modifying the epileptic phenomena observed in response to stimulation in Case 1. This suggests that other mechanisms may be more relevant. Jäntti’s Case 2 (Jäntti et al. 1994) and our Cases 3 and 5 had chronic seizure disorders but no suggestion of stimulus sensitivity before the barbiturate treatment. This suggests that, paradoxically, high-dose treatment with GABAergic agents may promote the phenomenon in certain circumstances. Although the inhibitory action of GABA transmission is well established, increasing evidence of a depolarizing effect has recently been found in a variety of situations (Stein and Nicoll 2003, Gulledge and Stuart 2003, Cohen et al. 2002), including reduced KCC2 gene expression (Hubner et al. 2001, Rivera et al. 2005). The latter has been associated with axonal damage (Nabekura et al. 2002) (documented in Case 1). Partial cortical deafferentation has been shown to promote epileptiform activity (Topolnik et al. 2003), though not solely as a result of pharmacological intervention. Of the many antiepileptic drugs used in our patients, only halogenated agents appeared to suppress the phenomenon. Isoflurane was given in Cases 1 and 3, on the basis of its reported efficacy in refractory status epilepticus (Kolke et al. 1989, Mirsattari et al. 2004). However, its use was limited by tachyphylaxis (Ming et al. 2002) and it was replaced by halothane in Case 3, which proved effective. The mechanisms of action of halogenated agents are complex and not fully understood. Isoflurane and halothane are known to enhance GABA, synaptic inhibition (Antkowiak 1999), and to block NMDA receptors (Ming et al. 2002, Kitamura 2005). These mechanisms are shared by drugs that had no effect in any of the cases. However, halothane and isoflurane have also been shown to block gap junctions (Peracchia 1991). There has been mounting
evidence of a role for this non-synaptic transmission involved in neural synchrony in some epileptic processes (Traub et al. 2004). In particular, experimental work has shown that enhanced GABAergic activity with functional interneuronal connectivity via gap junctions is sufficient to trigger epileptiform activity in the absence of ionotropic glutamatergic transmission (Uusisaari et al. 2002). This might explain the emergence of the phenomenon we describe in the setting of intense GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor activation.

There has been increasing awareness of the importance of recognizing heterogeneity in status epilepticus, underlining the need for more individually tailored approaches (Berg 2002). The stereotyped EEG and clinical manifestations suggest that this particular presentation is promoted by a neuronal network that involves the cerebral cortex, processes afferent information non-specifically, and gives rise to elemental motor responses. Stimulus sensitivity may appear in the context of refractory status epilepticus treated with high-dose barbiturates. Therefore, evaluation of children in refractory status epilepticus should include electroclinical assessment with multimodal sensory stimulation during EEG recording in the intensive care unit. Despite similarities with post-anoxic myoclonus, it is not exclusive to hypoxic-ischemic injury. Survival of four of our six patients suggests a possibly better outcome in children than in adults. This is also consistent with human and animal studies suggesting that the immature brain is more resistant to seizure and status epilepticus-induced damage than the adult brain (Haut et al. 2004). However, the phenomenon does not respond to conventional antiepileptic drugs and might even be promoted by excessive GABA<sub>A</sub> transmission. The failure to respond to increased GABAergic treatment and the effectiveness of isoflurane and halothane may point to the role of non-synaptic mechanisms such as gap junctions in maintaining epileptic activity. Further study of this phenomenon is required. In the meantime, we propose that once stimulus sensitivity is identified in the course of status epilepticus, GABAergic drug dosage should (at least) not be increased and the use of halogenated agents considered.

References

Antkowiak B. Different actions of general anesthetics on the firing patterns of neocortical neurons mediated by the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor. *Anesthesiology* 1999; 91: 500-11.


