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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Mak, CM; Chan, KY; Yau, EKC; Chen, SPL; Siu, WK; Law, CY; Lam, CW; Chan, AYW</td>
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Genetic diagnosis of severe myoclonic epilepsy of infancy (Dravet syndrome) with SCN1A mutations in the Hong Kong Chinese patients

Epilepsy is a clinically and genetically heterogeneous group of disorders. Mutations in genes encoding ion channels in brain neurons have been identified in various epilepsy syndromes. The advent of molecular genetics brings unprecedented advancement in terms of diagnostic molecular pathology and reduces over-reliance on traditional clinical classification. An accurate genetic diagnosis enables personalised medicine in this heterogeneous group of disorders. Severe myoclonic epilepsy of infancy (SMEI) or Dravet syndrome (MIM #607208) is a catastrophic infantile-onset epilepsy affecting about 1 in 20 000 to 40 000 children with a two-fold preponderance in males. After a period of normal development, affected infants develop febrile and afebrile generalised tonic-clonic (GTC) seizures with onset usually within 1 year of age. Some progress into multiple seizure types such as focal, absence, and myoclonus. The course may run relentlessly with psychomotor retardation, ataxia, recurrent status epilepticus and death. Up to half of the patients have a positive family history of febrile seizures and epilepsy. Electroencephalography (EEG) findings are not definitive. Genetic testing provides a more decisive diagnosis and is crucial in guiding the anti-epileptic drugs selection and genetic counselling.

Severe myoclonic epilepsy of infancy shows loci heterogeneity with at least SCN1A, SCN2A, SCN9A and GABRG2 as the culprit genes. Depienne et al conducted the largest genotyping study in 333 Dravet patients with 73% harbouring mutations in SCN1A. To date, there were 595 mutations reported with 59% missense/nonsense mutations, 9% splicing, 23% small insertions/deletions/indels, and 8% gross insertions/deletions/complex rearrangements (Human Gene Mutation Database, Professional 2010.2 accessed on 23 August 2010). However, most mutations were characterised without functional studies, as in practice most laboratories cannot undertake such assessments. Their pathogenicity is commonly documented by disease phenotype cosegregation, conservative nature of the affected amino acid among different species as well as the absence of the variants from screening of ethnically matched normal subjects. Therefore, reporting various phenotype-genotype data from more SMEI patients can increase the level of confidence about what is suspected. On the other hand, genotypic data in Chinese are limited. We report the first two cases of SMEI molecular analysis in two unrelated Hong Kong Chinese patients.

Case reports

Case 1

A 9-year-old boy first presented at the age of 5 months with a GTC for 20 minutes during an episode of fever in September 2002. Within the next 24 hours, he had an atypical febrile convulsion with another generalised seizure lasting 7 minutes. The seizure was aborted with rectal diazepam. General investigations including EEG, brain computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) culture, protein...
and glucose measurements, all of which yielded no abnormality. He was managed as atypical febrile convulsion and roseola infantum on discharge. However, he continued suffering from repeated attacks. Thus, at the age of 8 and 9 months, he had afebrile focal seizures starting with right upper limb twitching going on to four limbs convulsive movements. Before the age of 1 year, he had had six convulsions that were usually associated with fever and/or infections. An interictal EEG at the age of 6 months was normal but the one performed at the age of 10 months revealed bifrontal sharp waves, especially over right side. The patient enjoyed normal development until he was 1 year old. Psychomotor retardation was detected from the age of 2 years. When assessed at the age of 31 months, his mental age was only 9 to 12 months, and his gross motor age was 18 months. He suffered from status epilepticus when he was 5 years old and subsequently endured regression in motor and cognitive function. His brain MRI performed at 10 months old was normal, but when repeated at the age of 5 years, it showed mild cerebral atrophy. He became bed-bound; developed limb rigidity, dystonia and later still choreoathetoid movements, whilst continuing to suffer from frequent (mainly partial) seizures, despite treatment with multiple anticonvulsants. His current medications included: sodium valproate, levetiracetam, topiramate and clobazam. He had no family history of epilepsy or febrile convulsions.

Case 2
An 18-year-old boy, first presented when aged 2 months with an afebrile GTC lasting for 45 minutes in December 1992. Septic work-up revealed an Escherichia coli urinary tract infection. He suffered an afebrile focal seizure with left eye blinking and left limbs twitching for 45 minutes at the age of 5 months, and then five attacks of GTC followed by transient right hemiparesis at the age of 6 months. He had frequent seizures in various forms (eye blinking, myoclonic, focal, and GTC), and were easily provoked by fever, infection and sometimes defaecation. There was a strong family history of febrile convulsions in three maternal aunts and one paternal cousin. The patient had frequent absences. The seizures are relatively refractory to anti-epileptic treatment, and are usually preceded by febrile convulsion at early age in an otherwise normal infant. Patients may suffer from subsequent status. The SMEI caused by SCN1A, SCN2A, and GABRG2 is exemplary. Both the clinical phenotypes and genetic aetiologies of SMEI are heterogeneous and can be overlapping. Dravet syndrome is characterised by multiple seizure types. It can manifest as GTC, myoclonic, myoclonic-astatic, or absences. The seizures are relatively refractory to anti-epileptic treatment, and are usually preceded by febrile convulsion at early age in an otherwise normal infant. Patients may suffer from subsequent status. The SMEI caused by SCN1A, SCN2A, and GABRG2 is exemplary. Both the clinical phenotypes and genetic aetiologies of SMEI are heterogeneous and can be overlapping. Dravet syndrome is characterised by multiple seizure types. It can manifest as GTC, myoclonic, myoclonic-astatic, or absences. The seizures are relatively refractory to anti-epileptic treatment, and are usually preceded by febrile convulsion at early age in an otherwise normal infant. Patients may suffer from subsequent status.
developmental delay and cognitive impairment. Hattori et al. proposed a clinical scoring system for screening high-risk patients for genetic testing of Dravet syndrome. There are seven clinical predictive risk factors, namely onset within the first 7 months of life, more than five seizures, hemiconvulsions, focal seizures, myoclonic seizures, prolonged seizures, and hot water-induced seizures. Our patients had onset at 2 and 5 months old respectively, and suffered from multiple attacks of refractory seizures with different semiologies. The seizures scored more than six marks (ie belonged to high-risk groups) and we detected SCN1A mutations in both patients. Since the genetic analysis of SCN1A is quite laborious, it is useful to have a clinical screening score to guide genetic tests.

Dravet syndrome is inherited as an autosomal dominant, so 50% of offspring are at risk of the disease. In fact, majority of SCN1A mutations are de-novo; only about 5% are inherited. Parents of case 1 did not carry the p.L1318R mutation according to the DNA sequencing results, suggesting a de-novo mutation. However, it is noteworthy that parental mosaicism has been reported. Thus, a mutant load in blood analysis of SCN1A (ie belonged to high-risk groups) and we detected SCN1A mutations in both patients. Since the genetic analysis of SCN1A is quite laborious, it is useful to have a clinical screening score to guide genetic tests.

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In summary, we report the clinical and mutational findings of the two cases of SMEI in Hong Kong Chinese and illustrate the importance of molecular genetics in the diagnosis and personalised medical management of patients with Dravet syndrome.

References