The first case of protease-sensitive prionopathy (PSPr) in The Netherlands: a patient with an unusual GSS-like clinical phenotype


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The first case of protease-sensitive prionopathy (PSPr) in The Netherlands: a patient with an unusual GSS-like clinical phenotype

C Jansen,1 M W Head,2 W A van Gool,3 F Baas,4 H Yull,2 J W Ironside,2 A J M Rozemuller1,5

ABSTRACT

An atypical case of prion disease is described in a 54-year-old Dutch man, homozygous for valine at codon 129 of the prion protein gene (PRNP). The clinical phenotype was characterised by progressive dementia, spastic paraplegia and sensorimotor polyneuropathy. The disease duration was 20 months. Genetic analysis of PRNP did not reveal any abnormalities.

Neuropathologically, only mild spongiform change and a coarse granular immunohistochemical staining for the abnormal prion protein, PrPSc, was observed, with poorly formed plaques in the molecular layer of the cerebellar cortex. However, Western blotting showed low but detectable levels of proteinase K (PK)-resistant PrPSc occurring in an unusual ladder-like profile. These features define a phenotype that corresponds to the recently described protease-sensitive prionopathy (PSPr). Our report on the first Dutch patient with PSPr further expands the spectrum of prionopathies and exemplifies the need to re-evaluate cases of atypical prion disease.

PRNP analysis

DNA was extracted from frozen brain tissue, and the codon 129 (methionine/valine) polymorphism of the prion protein gene (PRNP) was determined by restriction fragment length polymorphism analysis, with full sequence analysis of PRNP using established methods.

Histopathology and immunohistochemistry

Neuropathological examination was performed on 5-micrometer-thick sections of formalin-fixed and paraffin-embedded tissue.
paraffin-embedded brain tissue blocks. Sections were stained with H&E and a combined Luxol—periodic acid-Schiff stain. Monoclonal antibody (mAb) 3F4 (1:400; Signet Laboratories, Dedham, Massachusetts, USA) was used for immunohistochemical detection of PrPSc following pretreatment with PK according to standard procedures. Other immunohistochemical stains included mAb Ubiquitin (1/1000; Dako, Glostrup, Denmark) and mAb 2E2-D3 against TARD-BP (1/1600; Abanova, Walnut, California, USA).

**Western blotting**

Frozen CJD brain tissue was stored at −80°C and investigated for the presence of PrPSc by immunoblotting. Frozen tissues from the occipital and temporal cortices were homogenised, and Western blot analysis of PrPSc was performed using an established method with minor modifications. Homogenates, both with and without PK digestion, were analysed. The homogenates were immunoblotted with mAb 3F4 (1:1000; Dako) and with mAb 1E4 (1.022 μg/ml) to human PrP residues 109–112 and 97–102, respectively.

*Figure 1* | Microscopic findings (A, C, E and F) and immunohistochemistry for prion protein (B, D, G and H) in this patient with protease-sensitive prionopathy. Sections are stained with H&E (A, C and E), combined Luxol—periodic acid-Schiff stain (H) and the 3F4 anti-PrP antibody, original magnification ×20 (A–E and G–H) and ×40 (F). (A) Mild spongiform change in the frontal cortex. (B and D) Multiple rounded clusters of granules with larger granules at the centre and smaller granules at the periphery in a target-like pattern in the frontal cortex and putamen. (C) Moderate spongiform change in the putamen. (E) Mild spongiform change in the molecular layer of the cerebellum. (F) Focal periodic acid-Schiff-positive plaques in the molecular layer (arrow). (G–H) Intense staining of granules in the molecular layer.
RESULTS
PRNP analysis
The patient was homozygous for valine (VV) at codon 129 of PRNP. No mutations, insertions or silent polymorphisms were found.

Histology and immunohistochemistry
Gross examination of the brain (weight 1520 g) was unremarkable. The substantia nigra and locus coeruleus were normally pigmented. Histological evaluation showed only mild spongiform change in the cerebral and cerebellar cortices (figure 1A, B), with a mixture of small and intermediate-size vacuoles (mean diameter 7.2 (2.5) µm). Spongiform changes were more pronounced in the putamen and caudate nucleus (figure 1C; mean diameter 8.1 (2.7) µm). The hippocampal pyramidal layer was relatively spared. In the molecular layer of the cerebellum, several small plaque-like structures were noted in the Luxol—periodic acid-Schiff-stained sections (figure 1F). These were occasionally clustered, giving the appearance of multcentric plaques. Histological examination of the other brain regions was unremarkable.

Immunohistochemical staining for PrPSc with mAb 3F4 in the cerebral cortex, basal ganglia and thalamus showed aggregates of coarse granules with relatively large granules located in the centre of these formations and smaller ones in the periphery, resembling a target-like pattern (figure 1B, D). Immunoreactivity in the cerebellum was limited to rounded structures in the molecular layer (figure 1G, H). This pattern of PrPSc immunostaining could be pathognomonic for PSPr, as described in the original cases by Gambetti et al. Immunohistochemical staining with TDP-43 and Ubiquitin did not show neuronal inclusions or neuropil threads.

Western blotting
On immunoblotting using the mAb 3F4, PK-resistant PrPSc bands were less readily detectable when compared to sCJD type 1 and variant CJD type 2B control subjects. Furthermore, this PK-resistant material constituted a relatively small fraction of the immunopositive material present in PK-undigested brain tissue of the same regions, and it formed a ladder of differently sized fragments, ranging from the most abundant low molecular weight band to those with a similar electrophoretic mobility to the 20–30 kDa bands commonly seen in cases of CJD (figure 2). The ladder-like electrophoretic mobility of these PrPSc fragments did not match those associated with the recognised subtypes of sCJD (20–30 kDa) or with those found in variant CJD. Immunoblotting using the 1E4 mAb resulted in qualitatively similar results, with only minor differences in the sensitivity of detection of individual bands within the PrPSc ladder-like profile (figure 2).

DISCUSSION
Gambetti et al recently described a new prion disease phenotype in 11 patients, based on clinical, pathological and biochemical findings: First, a typical clinical disease course, characterised by slow cognitive decline, gait impairment and incontinence. Second, valine homozygosity at codon 129 of PRNP with no pathogenetic mutations or insertions but with neuropathological features distinct from VV1 and VV2 sCJD. Third, the presence of PrPSc that was more sensitive to PK than that usually found in prion diseases and which exhibited a characteristic ladder-like electrophoretic profile after PK digestion. Fourth, an atypical immunohistochemical profile with poorly formed plaques in the molecular layer of the cerebellum.

We describe the first Dutch patient with a similar phenotype. The disease course was characterised by dementia, spastic paraplegia and sensorimotor polyneuropathy, raising a clinical suspicion of an atypical form of Alzheimer’s disease or GSS.

Immunohistochemical staining for PrPSc revealed several poorly formed, sometimes multcentric plaques in the cerebellar cortex, but genetic analysis did not show any abnormalities of PRNP, ruling out GSS. On re-evaluation 3 years later, histological examination was largely comparable to the cases described by Gambetti et al, and a sensitive and optimised immunoblotting technique did indeed reveal the presence of fragments of PK-resistant PrPSc in a ladder-like profile.

Although, in general, PrPSc can be distinguished from PrPSc by its resistance to treatment with PK, a protease-sensitive but disease-associated form has been described before. Furthermore, accumulation of PrPSc that is relatively protease sensitive has been described in patients affected by GSS. Interestingly, immunoblots of these cases also show multiple smaller fragments of PK-resistant PrPSc, sometimes in combination with conventional...
PrPSc but differing from the profile seen in patients with PSPr. Gambetti et al7 considered the preferential staining of these fragments with mAb 1E4 and not with 3F4, an additional argument against GSS. In our hands, however, these fragments were detectable by both antibodies, and the mechanism by which both antibodies with such closely adjacent epitopes might produce different results remains speculative.

PSPr is probably not an extremely rare disease entity, occurring in approximately 3% of sCJD patients in the North American cohort reported by Gambetti et al,7 although we were only able to find one patient in our database of 135 sCJD patients. This, however, corresponds to 9% of all VV homozygotes in our patient population, which is comparable with the number mentioned by Gambetti et al7.

In the past, PSPr patients probably escaped postmortem examination because clinical diagnoses other than prion disease were made. Clinical recognition of the possibility of atypical prion disease in these patients seems to be the key to a diagnosis of PSPr, and this will, in part, depend on familiarity with these admittedly rare diseases.

Our patient’s case indicates that PSPr is not associated with exclusively North American risk factors and exemplifies the benefits of re-evaluating cases of “atypical dementia”. It also underlines the importance of considering PSPr in patients with a GSS-like phenotype but no mutations in PRNP.

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