Age-related macular degeneration in Hong Kong Chinese — angiographic features and outcomes

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Abstract

Aim: To study the clinical presentation, angiographic features, treatment modalities and visual outcomes of patients with wet type age-related macular degeneration presenting to a tertiary eye center in Hong Kong.

Materials and methods: Retrospective review of case records of all patients with fundus fluorescein angiography done over a 2-year period at Tung Wah Eastern Hospital.

Results: In total, 57 patients were included. The mean age was 71.2 years. The male to female ratio was approximately 7:3. Less than one-third of patients presented with an acute drop in vision or metamorphopsia. The visual acuity of the presenting eye was 4/60 or worse in 54.4% of patients. The visual acuity of the fellow eye was relatively good in most cases. 84.2% of patients had features of age-related macular degeneration affecting both eyes at presentation. Treatable choroidal neovascular membranes were detected in five patients (8.8%). Laser treatment resulted in stable or improved vision for four of the five patients. 56.2% of the non-treated group and 21.1% of fellow eyes had progressive deterioration of vision.

Conclusion: Age-related macular degeneration is a potentially treatable disease. Enhanced publicity of the importance of early detection might be helpful in preventing blindness in the elderly population.

Key words: Age-related macular degeneration, Choroidal neovascularization, Fundus fluorescein angiography, Indocyanine green angiography

Introduction

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is one of the most common blinding conditions in the Western world. AMD is also commonly seen in the Hong Kong Chinese population. The clinical presentation, angiographic features, treatment modalities, complications, and visual outcomes of patients with AMD presenting to a tertiary eye center in Hong Kong were reviewed. The aim was to compare these parameters in a Hong Kong Chinese population with those of the Western world. The prognosis of these patients were studied with a view to helping the prevention of blindness secondary to this disease.

Materials and methods

This was a retrospective study. The case records of all patients with AMD diagnosed by fundus fluorescein angiography (FFA) performed at Tung Wah Eastern Hospital Eye Centre between January 1997 and December 1998 were studied. The patients mainly consisted of those presenting with features of the ‘wet’ type disease, with suspicion of choroidal neovascularization (CNV). Patients with the typical ‘dry’ type of AMD are usually not treatable. FFAs were not performed for these patients and thus they were not included in this study. Indocyanine green angiography (ICG) was performed for selected patients with occult CNV, as this was not routinely performed in our department in the early part of the study period.

The clinical presentations, fundal appearances, FFA, and ICG features of the patients were recorded. The treatment given and visual outcomes were also noted. This information was analyzed and is presented here.
Results

In total, 64 patients with AMD were identified. Seven were lost to follow up or had non-retrievable records and were excluded. Therefore, 57 patients were included in the study. Forty (70.2%) were men and 17 (29.8%) were women (Figure 1). The average age at presentation was 71.2 years (range, 54-89 years). The males had an average age of 71.3 years (range, 58-89 years) and the females had an average age of 71.0 years (range, 54-89 years). At presentation, the disease mainly affected the left eye for 27 patients (47.4%), and the right eye for 30 patients (52.6%; Figure 2).

The initial visual acuity of the affected eye at presentation ranged from light perception (LP) only to 0.8, the majority of which had moderate to severe loss of vision (Figure 3). The visual acuities of the fellow eyes at presentation were relatively good or manageable for most patients (Figure 4).

Concerning the mode of presentation, 11 patients (19.3%) required medical attention because of an acute drop in vision (less than 1 month duration), 7 (12.3%) presented because of metamorphopsia, 2 (3.5%) had floaters in the affected eye, and 32 (56.1%) complained of chronic blurring of the vision in the affected eye. The remainder (5 patients, 8.8%) were diagnosed incidentally to other eye discomfort (Figure 5).

At presentation, all affected eyes had signs of the wet type AMD, with or without additional features of dry type. The fellow eye also had features of wet or dry type disease for the majority of patients (84.2%; Table 1).

Abnormalities detected in the fluorescein angiograms included window defects, blockage of fluorescein, drusens, and classic or occult CNV (Table 2). ICG angiography was performed for 14 patients with occult CNV. The features revealed included hot spots in six, hot plaques in one, and polypoidal vasculopathy in two. Other features included pigment epithelial detachment (PED) or hypofluorescein from scars (Table 3).

Where CNV was identified, patients were counseled regarding laser treatment based on results of the Macula

Abbreviations: LP = light perception; FC = finger count.

Figure 1. Sex distribution of patients (n = 57).

Figure 2. Laterality of the presenting eye (n = 57).

Figure 3. Initial and final visual acuity of the presenting eye.

Figure 4. Initial and final visual acuity of the fellow eye.
Photocoagulation Study.\(^5,\)\(^6\) Five patients (five eyes) received laser photocoagulation of the lesion, two of which were guided by ICG. All were extrafoveal membranes with sizes varying from 1/2 to 2 disc diameters. Pretreatment visual acuity varied from 1/60 to 0.6. Argon laser was used for three patients and diode laser for two patients. Their post-treatment visual acuity ranged from 1/60 to 0.8. No patients experienced complications of laser treatment. Four patients had successful ablation of the CNV resulting in resolution of the exudates or subretinal fluid. One patient had residual CNV post-laser treatment, which was subfoveal in location and no further laser treatment was attempted after discussion with the patient (Table 4).

The patients’ eyes were monitored and visual acuity changes noted at follow-up. The duration of follow-ups ranged from 5 to 26 months (mean, 11.3 months). During this period, none of the patients in the laser group had recurrence of the choroidal neovascularization. Their visual acuities were stable. In the non-laser group, only one patient (1.9%) had spontaneous improvement of the fundal condition (spontaneous resolution of PED). The fundal conditions of 19 patients (36.5%) were stable, while the majority (32 patients, 61.5%) suffered a progressive course of the disease with drop in vision. When the conditions of the fellow eyes were studied, it was found that the fundal conditions were stable for 45 patients (78.9%) while the other 12 patients (21.1%) suffered a progressive downhill course during the follow-up period (Table 5). The initial and final visual acuities of the presenting and fellow eyes are shown in Figures 6 and 7, respectively.

### Discussion

AMD is one of the major blinding conditions affecting the elderly population in the western world.\(^1,\)\(^4\) Ethnicity has long been suspected to play a role in the risk of macular degeneration as well as in the neovascular complications.\(^7,\)\(^9\) The occurrence of AMD in Chinese populations has not been as frequently reported. Pigmentation is likely to be a protective factor, with blacks having the lowest rates of AMD and Chinese having an intermediate predilection compared with Caucasians.\(^7,\)\(^8\) However, environmental factors may also be important. Sunlight exposure has been thought to be a risk factor for development of AMD.\(^10,\)\(^12\) The lower prevalence among Chinese has been attributed to their reluctance to receive excessive sun exposure.\(^13\) Diet may also play a role in the disease.\(^13,\)\(^14\) With the westernization of life style in Hong Kong, it is expected that the importance of this disease may increase in this area during the coming decades.
AMD is a disease that mainly affects the elderly population. In western populations, the incidence of ‘wet’ disease is positively correlated with age.13,15 In our patient group, the mean age was 71.21 years, which may be a reflection of the relatively older affected group. In some studies, AMD has been shown to be more preponderant in females.8,11,16-17 However, in this study, males constituted 70.2% of patients. The left and right eyes were equally affected in this group of patients, which is compatible with reports in previous studies.11,13

The presenting features of AMD may be different between Chinese and Caucasians. Studies by Chang13 and Lim18 have shown that pigment epithelial detachments (PEDs) are more common among Chinese patients with AMD. However, the presence of PEDs only constituted 21% of the presenting eyes in our group of patients; this contrasts with a frequency of as high as 46% in Lim’s study.18

In reviewing the mode of presentation and the presenting visual acuity of the patients, it was found that the majority presented quite late, not having noticed the severity of their condition. Less than one-third of them presented because of an acute drop in vision or metamorphopsia. The majority (54.4%) presented with a visual acuity 4/60 or worse in the affected eye. Although the poor vision at presentation might be representative of the nature of the disease as being acute in onset and rapidly deteriorating,19-20 the lateness of presentation probably reflects the fact that elderly people are not alert to changes in one of their eyes, with the fellow eye retaining moderately good or manageable vision.
AMD is well known to be a bilateral disease.\textsuperscript{2,15} Similarly, in this group of patients, more than 80% had signs of wet or dry type AMD in the fellow eye at presentation.

In recent years, idiopathic polypoidal choroidal vasculopathy (IPCV) has been reported to be associated with AMD in some patients. IPCV can occur in any sex or race, although it is more commonly found in non-whites. Drusens are sometimes absent.\textsuperscript{21} In our series, two patients with features of IPCV were identified with ICG angiography.

Laser photocoagulation of the entire area of the neovascular lesion is the only proven treatment for CNV secondary to AMD.\textsuperscript{22} However, only well-defined lesions shown on FFA or ICG are treatable by this modality. In this group, only five patients had ‘treatable’ extrafoveal CNV, two of which were based on ICG findings; they subsequently received laser treatment of the lesion. Although laser treatment of subfoveal CNV has also been shown to be beneficial with respect to visual acuity, reading speed, and contrast sensitivity compared with no treatment at 24 and 36 months post-laser,\textsuperscript{5} the risk of a significant drop in visual acuity immediately after treatment, and a very low possibility of a final vision of 20/100 or better made this treatment modality unacceptable to our patients.

CNV was shown to be associated with a high recurrence rate after treatment — up to 50% after 5 years.\textsuperscript{8} None of our patients had recurrence of CNV after laser treatment. Our small sample size and relatively short duration of follow up may be part of the reason.

In the Macular Photocoagulation Study, 13% of patients had lesions amenable by laser treatment.\textsuperscript{3} In this study, only five patients (8.8%) were treatable by laser, which may be related to the late presentation and diagnosis. Although the ‘treatable’ patients only constituted a small proportion of the whole study group, the visual outcome of the treated group was still encouraging. The majority (80%) of the treated group had their visual acuity stabilized or improved after laser treatment. In the group where improvement occurred, the improvement ranged from one to two decimal Snellen lines. This was in contrast with the non-treated group, in whom the majority (61.5%) had progressive deterioration of their vision. The fellow eye also deteriorated for 21.1% during the follow up period. This suggests that any possible modalities for halting the progression of the disease is worthwhile in reducing blindness among the elderly population.

Unavoidably, this study had its own biases and limitations. The study population was small and the follow up period was relatively short. The retrospective nature of the study and the fact that only ‘wet’ type AMD eyes with possible CNV were included produced a distorted picture of the disease as a whole. The interpersonal variation among different ophthalmologists within the department in selecting cases for FFA/ICG could have resulted in further biases. However, the authors believe that the patients in this study are, to some extent, representative of how AMD affects the elderly Chinese population in Hong Kong. Further investigation into the disease will rely on large-scale randomized study in the future.

**Conclusion**

AMD is a potentially treatable blinding disease in the elderly. Findings in this study suggest that the presentation, clinical features, and outcomes of AMD among the Hong Kong Chinese population are, to a large extent, similar to those reported in western populations. Successful treatment is only possible for a small proportion of patients who are detected early.\textsuperscript{21} It is felt that the disease has not gained adequate awareness among the public or primary care physicians, as compared with other eye diseases such as cataract or glaucoma. Enhanced publicity of the importance of this disease might be helpful in preventing blindness among the elderly population.

**References**

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Question

A 37-year-old lady with history of chronic open angle glaucoma in both eyes had left eye trabeculectomy performed by a private ophthalmologist. She was referred to our clinic for the management of presumptive post-trabeculectomy hypotony.

Ocular examination revealed decreased visual acuity and low intraocular pressure in the left eye (Table 1). She also had left ptosis and supraduction defect.

| Table 1. Visual acuity and intraocular pressure of the patient following trabeculectomy |
|-----------------|-------------|
|                 | Right eye  | Left eye  |
| BCVA            | 6/5        | 2/60      |
| IOP             | 22         | 8         |

Abbreviations: BCVA = best-corrected visual acuity; IOP = intraocular pressure.

Slit-lamp examination of the left eye revealed a well-formed bleb with shallow anterior chamber. The fundus is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Fundus photo of the patient at presentation.

What is the diagnosis?

(Answer and discussion on page 47)