fundamental protective effect of oestrogen, which would be expected to be present in all populations. The fact that the M:F ratio in Asian populations remains different from that in other ethnic groups with regard to those who move to a Western country suggests that there may be genetic influences on the M:F risk of developing Parkinson's disease. However, further high-quality studies on incidence are required both from Asia and from the West to confirm that these ethnic differences are indeed real.

In summary, therefore, although there is good evidence that men are, in general, about 1.5 times more likely to develop Parkinson's disease than women, this difference is not the same across different studies, and is more pronounced in (and possibly restricted to) people with an older age of onset and in Western populations.

K S M Taylor

Department of Medicine & Therapeutics, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

J A Cook

Health Services Research Unit, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

C E Counsell

Department of Medicine & Therapeutics, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Correspondence to: Dr C Counsell, Department of Medicine & Therapeutics, University of Aberdeen, Polwarth Building, Foresterhill, Aberdeen AB25 2ZD, UK; carl.counsell@abdn.ac.uk

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An unusual presentation of optic neuritis and the Pulfrich phenomenon

The Pulfrich effect (named after Carl Pulfrich) is a well described visual stereoillusion observed when a swinging pendulum bob is viewed through a neutral density filter in front of one eye.¹ Although the bob is moving in a frontal plane, the path seems elliptical. The effect arises from the fact that dimming a stimulus with a neutral density filter slows signal conduction velocity between the eye and the cortex. The visual cortex interprets this as a false depth or disparity cue as the object appears in a different location in the two eyes.²

Suppose an object happened to be moving from left to right, at a constant distance from

the observer. Then, no matter what the (fixed) distance to which the eyes happened to be converged, any given instant, the dual images of the object, reversed by the optics of the eyes, would be moving right to left with some particular retinal disparity proper to the real distance between the object and observer.

Now, if a filter happened to be before the left eye (the Pulfrich effect), the response in the right eye effectively would be advanced somewhat. The advance would change the percept so that, for judgement of depth, the image in the right eye were advanced farther to the left than otherwise it would have been. This change in disparity would be the same as the change caused by removing the object to a distance farther away from the observer. Thus, by the geometry, placing a filter before the left

Figure 1 The visual evoked response of the right and left eye at diagnosis and the increase in the P100 value when a neutral density filter of increasing strength is placed in front of the normal eye.

eye would be expected to increase the binocularly perceived distance of an object moving left to right, and this is just what is observed. The magnitude of the change in disparity caused by a filter is approximately proportional to the speed of the moving object.

The Pulfrich effect can be demonstrated spontaneously (ie, without a neutral density filter) in patients with multiple sclerosis because of the delayed optic nerve conduction seen after unilateral optic neuritis in multiple sclerosis.³ The detrimental impact of the Pulfrich effect on sporting performance with the use of a neutral density filter has previously been described.⁴ The Pulfrich phenomenon is normally seen in patients with clinical signs of optic neuropathy, such as an afferent papillary defect or colour vision abnormalities. Here, we report the case of a patient who presented with the solitary complaint of reduced sporting performance without any other associated symptoms or clinical signs.

A 33-year-old man presented to the accident and emergency department with problems playing squash. Over a 1 month period, he had noticed difficulty hitting the squash ball. If the ball was hit to his right side he returned it with ease. However, if it was placed to his left side he missed it consistently. He had no other visual symptoms and had no significant past medical history.

On examination, his visual acuity was 6/4 in both eyes. He had no relative afferent pupil defect, no manifest or latent deviation. His ocular range of movement was normal with no evidence of internuclear ophthalmoplegia. He showed normal coordination and cerebellar function. Colour vision (100 Hue Test, total error score right eye = 20, left eye = 36) and visual fields were also normal. At this point a Pulfrich-like phenomenon was suspected. A pattern electroretinogram (ERG) and pattern visual evoked potential (VEP) were therefore performed.

The pattern ERG was normal but the pattern VEP showed an abnormal P100 between 126–132.5 ms in the right eye with a normal P100 in the left eye (fig 1) indicative of conduction delay within the right optic nerve. An MRI brain scan was then performed. FLAIR image sequence revealed two discrete lesions in the deep white matter on the right hemisphere and one lesion on the right anterior visual pathway. The findings were consistent with demyelination. Referral to the neurologist was arranged to decide on the need for further treatment.

In order to improve this patient's symptoms it was decided that reversal of the Pulfrich effect could be beneficial. VEP measurements were repeated using neutral density filters of incremental values placed in front of the normal eye. The VEP was brought to approximate the abnormal eye (fig 1). With increasing neutral density filters, the VEP amplitude was almost unaltered but the latency progressively increased. This filter was then prescribed in a pair of squash goggles. Further review showed an improvement in his sporting performance.

There was a 41 ms delay between the VEP of this man's eyes. The delay would result in the ball being apparently in a different spatial location for each eye. At 20 m/s this would correspond to a spatial difference of 82 cm. For fast moving ball games it is therefore easy to appreciate why unilateral delays in optic nerve conduction can create significant hand-eye coordination problems which would not be apparent for stationary targets. The increased difficulty in hitting the ball on the left side

with a right sided pathology may relate to the fact that on this side the ball would be misjudged such that it would be appear to be further away than it was and so would be played late. On the right side, conversely, it would appear closer and hence would be played earlier but with a greater chance of connecting with the ball.

In this patient the only symptoms related to reduced sporting ability. Other tests performed in the clinic were all normal. Specialised electrophysiological testing and MRI imaging were required to determine an organic basis for his unusual presenting complaint. This case highlights how a simple theoretical concept can be applied to a clinical situation and the need to consider Pulfrich-like symptoms as a possible indicator of demyelinating disease even in the presence of otherwise normal clinical examination.

M O'Doherty, D I Flitcroft

Mater Misericordial Hospital, Eccles Street, Dublin, Ireland

Correspondence to: Dr Maeve O'Doherty, Mater Hospital, Eccles St, Dublin 7, Ireland; maeveodoherty@eircom.net

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Braille alexia: an apperceptive tactile agnosia?

Alexia for Braille reading is rarely reported.^{1–6} A further case is presented in which the clinical features may give some insight into the neurobiological mechanisms.

Neurological consultation was requested 17 days after apparently uncomplicated coronary artery bypass grafting in a 73-year old right-handed woman who complained that she could no longer read properly. Blind from birth because of anophthalmia, she learned to read Braille at age 7 years using her left index finger, or middle finger if the index finger became "tired" (the right hemisphere may have better discrimination for complex spatial patterns^{4,7}). She was a proficient Braille reader, normally reading 8–10 book chapters per day; however, on initial recovery from the operation, she could not read at all. Matters improved over the following days but her reading was still much slower than preoperatively (1–2 book chapters/day) and she reported making errors when reading, necessitating re-reading, although she had no difficulty understanding what she read. Past medical history was unremarkable, aside from a right carotid endarterectomy performed several months previously.

On examination, her spoken language was fluent with no evidence of motor or sensory aphasia. There was no left-sided sensory neglect or extinction, and no finger agnosia. Testing stereognosis in the left hand, she was able to identify a pen, ring, paper clip and watch, but was slow to identify a key, could not decide on the denomination of a coin (50p, heptagonal or 10p, circular) and thought a £1 coin was a badge, although she identified this immediately with the right hand. Two point discrimination was 3 mm on the pulp of the right index finger (minimum spacing possible between tines) but 5 mm on the pulp of the left index finger. As she had never learned letters or Arabic numerals, it was not possible to test for graphaesthesia.

MRI of the brain showed a few punctate high signal hyperintense lesions on T₂ weighted and FLAIR sequences in the subcortical white matter, thought to be ischaemic in origin, including one subjacent to the right motor cortex in the region of the internal watershed between the anterior and middle cerebral artery territories (fig 1). In addition, there was marked acquired global brain atrophy, including the occipital lobes.

Three months later, she had still not returned to her previous level of reading fluency. A working diagnosis of Braille alexia due to an apperceptive tactile agnosia was made, of uncertain aetiology: acute onset and partial recovery strongly suggested a vascular event, supported by the structural brain imaging appearances, although neurodegenerative disorders first manifesting with acute postoperative language problems have been reported.⁸

Previous reports of Braille alexia are rare, and clinically heterogeneous with respect to early or late onset of blindness, premorbid fluency of Braille reading and presence or absence of additional neurological signs such as aphasia and hemiparesis, these differences reflecting lesion location and aetiology (vascular, neoplastic, neurodegenerative).^{1–6} Sensory limb symptoms, but without clinical or neurophysiological correlate, have been reported.⁵ In those cases undergoing neuroimaging, structural correlates have included bilateral occipital infarctions⁵ and selective calcarine atrophy in a patient with visual hallucinations,⁶ findings which correlate with functional imaging

Figure 1 Axial MRI of the brain (FLAIR) showing hyperintense white matter signal change subjacent to the right motor cortex, and marked parieto-occipital brain atrophy.