Unruptured Arteriovenous Malformations of the Brain

Unruptured, asymptomatic arteriovenous malformations (AVMs) lurk in the brains of approximately one person in every thousand; their prevalence, based on four studies of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of 7,359 people without brain disorders,5 was 0.1% (95% confidence interval [CI] 0% to 0.2%). Some of these brain AVMs may be discovered if and when they cause intracranial haemorrhage, epilepsy, seizure(s), headache, or a focal neurological deficit, but many brain AVMs may potentially lie dormant from the cradle to the grave.

The detection of this reservoir of unruptured brain AVMs is likely to depend on the differences in availability, uptake, and indications for brain MRI between countries. Indirect evidence for this comes from the two ongoing population-based studies of the clinical epidemiology of brain AVMs:10 in Scotland 54% of all brain AVMs detected in an incidence study were unruptured at presentation,1 whereas this proportion was 62% in New York (difference -8%, 95% CI -19% to 4%). The detection rate of unruptured brain AVMs seems set to rise with the increasing appropriate use of brain MRI for investigating epilepsy and stroke, as well as more indiscriminate uses such as ‘health check-ups’ purchased from private health screening companies.7

What’s the prognosis for an adult with an unruptured brain AVM?

Only a few published studies are of sufficient quality to provide reliable estimates of the prognosis for unruptured brain AVMs.5,11 Most cohorts have been small, retrospective, hospital-based, with short complete follow-up from an unclear inception point, using unblinded assessment according to bespoke rather than generic outcome measures, without stratification by differences in treatment. Even in high quality studies, the outcome described for unruptured brain AVMs that are not treated is inevitably biased, since a conservative strategy may be adopted either because of the ‘untreatability’ of the AVM, or due to the patient’s burden of disability or co-morbidity.

Nevertheless, some generalisations can be made about the crude first bleed rate from an unruptured brain AVM after diagnosis (Table). The most important elements of brain AVM vascular anatomy (‘angiarchitecture’) for risk stratification are deep venous drainage (Figure) and location deep within the brain (Table).

An old population-based study found 30-day case fatality after a bleed to be ~18%,12 which is likely to be less nowadays, and certainly less than the case fatality following non-traumatic intracranial haemorrhage or aneurysmal subarachnoid haemorrhage.13 Few have estimated the morbidity due to haemorrhage, but it does seem to vary between studies: by the time of hospital discharge after a haemorrhage, 33% of patients had a modified Rankin score ≥3,13 and others found this proportion to decrease to ~5% after ~1 year.14 However, the Toronto AVM study group found that only 45% of adults made a recovery from a haemorrhage without a permanent deficit.15 Although re-bleed rates do not concern us in this article, it is worth mentioning that they are higher than first bleed rates, and they seem to be particularly high in the first 6-12 months after a first bleed,16 although the magnitude of the re-bleed rate varies between studies.17,18

Should an adult with an unruptured brain AVM be treated?

People with brain AVMs are likely to benefit from multidisciplinary management, although there is considerable value from a one-on-one meeting between doctor and patient. A neuroradiologist, neurosurgeon, radiotherapist, and clinical nurse specialist should ideally work with a neurologist with interest and expertise in the assessment and treatment of seizures, headaches and chronic disability. A neurologist also has an important independent role in counselling a patient about the risks and benefits of various management strategies.

In the absence of controlled studies, the decision to treat the brain AVM (with any combination of endovascular embolisation, microsurgical removal, and/or stereotactic radiation therapy) is based on the potential benefit of treatment reducing the future risk of haemorrhage, plus an indirect comparison of the possible risk of intervention against the presumed risk of future death/disability if the brain AVM is left untreated.17 This decision involves the potentially flawed extrapolation of short-term outcome data to the rest of the patient’s presumed life expectancy.19,20 Recent research – albeit based on observational data at a single tertiary referral centre – leaves many physicians uncertain that treatment does more good than harm:10,11 intervenventional treatment of unruptured brain AVMs was associated with a highly significant excess of subsequent haemorrhage and disability at five years in comparison to conservative management. If these findings and the paucity of controlled data aren’t enough to support the case for randomisation, further justification is provided by the likely variation in treatment practice by personal conviction, local experience, centre, country, continent, available treatments, and health insurance policy.10,15,16

A Randomised trial of Unruptured Brain AVMs (ARUBA)

A potential solution to the clinical dilemma posed by an unruptured brain AVM is randomisation in ARUBA (www.arubastudy.org). ARUBA is investigating whether conservative management is superior to interventional treatment reducing the future risk of haemorrhage, plus an indirect comparison of the possible risk of intervention against the presumed risk of future death/disability if the brain AVM is left untreated. This decision involves the potentially flawed extrapolation of short-term outcome data to the rest of the patient’s presumed life expectancy.19,20 Recent research – albeit based on observational data at a single tertiary referral centre – leaves many physicians uncertain that treatment does more good than harm:10,11 interventional treatment of unruptured brain AVMs was associated with a highly significant excess of subsequent haemorrhage and disability at five years in comparison to conservative management. If these findings and the paucity of controlled data aren’t enough to support the case for randomisation, further justification is provided by the likely variation in treatment practice by personal conviction, local experience, centre, country, continent, available treatments, and health insurance policy.10,15,16


dto Appendix 1

Table: First bleed rates from unruptured brain AVMs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Annual bleed rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crude (overall) first bleed rate</td>
<td>~1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive deep venous drainage</td>
<td>~2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep brain location</td>
<td>~3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive deep venous drainage and deep location</td>
<td>~8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither deep location nor deep venous drainage</td>
<td>~1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure: The vascular anatomy (‘angiarchitecture’) of brain AVMs

Correspondence to:
Rustam Al-Shahi Salman, Bramwell Dott Building, Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh, EH4 2XU, UK.
Tel/Fax: +44 (0)131 537 2944

Henning Mast
Tenured Consultant Neurologist at Hôpital Lariboisière in Paris (France). His main research interest is the neurology of brain arteriovenous malformations and other conditions predisposing to intracranial hemorrhage and stroke. He is the European Co-PI in the NIH-funded ARUBA trial and serves as a coordinator in the Columbia AVM Databank project and the New York Islands AVM Study.

Christian Stapf
is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Neurology at Columbia University, New York (USA), a Privatdozent für Neurologie at the Charité in Berlin, and a tenured Consultant Neurologist at Hôpital Lariboisière in Paris (France). His main research interest is the neurology of brain arteriovenous malformations and other conditions predisposing to intracranial hemorrhage and stroke. He is the European Co-PI in the NIH-funded ARUBA trial and serves as a coordinator in the Columbia AVM Databank project and the New York Islands AVM Study.
References

Editorial Board and contributors

Roger Barker is co-editor of ACNR, and is Honorary Consultant in Neurology at The Cambridge Centre for Brain Repair. His main area of research is into neurodegenerative and movement disorders, in particular parkinsonian and Huntington’s disease. He is also the university lecturer in Neurology at Cambridge where he continues to develop his clinical research into these diseases along with his basic research into brain repair using neural transplants.

Alasdair Coles is co-editor of ACNR. He has recently been appointed to the new position of University Lecturer in Neuroimmunology at Cambridge University. He works on experimental immunological therapies in multiple sclerosis.

Stephen Kirker is the editor of the Rehabilitation section of ACNR and Consultant in Rehabilitation Medicine in Addenbrooke’s NHS Trust, Cambridge. He trained in neurology in Dublin, London and Edinburgh before moving to rehabilitation in Cambridge and Norwich. His main research has been into postural responses after stroke. His particular interests are in prosthetics, orthotics, gait training and neurorehabilitation.

David J Burn is the editor of our conference news section and Consultant and Reader in Movement Disorder Neurology at the Regional Neurosciences Centre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He runs Movement Disorders clinics in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Research interests include progressive supranuclear palsy and dementia with Lewy bodies. He is also involved in several drugs studies for Parkinson’s Disease.

Andrew Lamer is the editor of our Book Review Section. He is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries’ Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

Alastair Wilkins is our Case Report Co-ordinator. He is Senior Lecturer in Neurology and Consultant Neurologist, University of Bristol. He trained in Neurology in Cambridge, Norwich and London. His research interests are the basic science of axon degeneration and developing treatments for progressive multiple sclerosis.

Roy O Weller is ACNR’s Neuropathology Editor. He is Emeritus Professor of Neuropathology, University of Southampton. His particular research interests are in the pathogenesis of Multiple Sclerosis, Alzheimer’s disease and Cerebral Amyloid Angiopathy.

International editorial liaison committee

Professor Riccardo Soffietti, Italy: Chairman of the Neuro-Oncology Service, Dept of Neuroscience and Oncology, University and S. Giovanni Battista Hospital, Torino, Italy. President of the Italian Association of Neuro-Oncology, member of the Panel of Neuro-Oncology of the ENS and ENRICHT Brain Tumour Group, and Founding member of the EANO (European Association for Neuro-Oncology).

Professor Klaus Berek, Austria: Head of the Neurological Department of the KH Kufstein in Austria. He is a member of the Austrian Societies of Neurology, Clinical Neuropsychology, Neurological and Neurosurgical Intensive Care Medicine, Internal and General Intensive Care Medicine, Ultrasound in Medicine, and the ENS.

Professor Hermann Stefan, Germany: Professor of Neurology / Epileptology in the Department of Neurology, University Erlangen-Nürnberg, and specialises in the treatment of epilepsies, especially difficult to treat types of epilepsy and presurgical evaluation, including Magnetic source imaging (MEG/EEG) and Mri-Spectroscopy.

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