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Neurosyphilis: A Rare Cause of Encephalitis in a Young Male

Background

Neurosyphilis remains a rare but important differential in patients presenting with cognitive change. Its clinical heterogeneity, ranging from psychiatric disturbance to stroke-like syndromes, often leads to diagnostic delay. Early recognition is essential, as appropriate antibiotic therapy can result in significant recovery.

Case

We report a 45-year-old man with unremarkable medical history presenting with seizure, and subacute cognitive decline. MRI brain revealed increased T2/FLAIR signal in the left temporal lobe. Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) demonstrated lymphocytic pleocytosis with elevated protein. Infectious and autoimmune screens, including HSV PCR and NMDA receptor antibodies, were negative. Syphilis serology and CSF VDRL were strongly positive, confirming neurosyphilis.

Results

The patient received 14 days of intravenous ceftriaxone, leading to marked clinical improvement. His Addenbrooke's Cognitive Examination (ACE) score improved from 61 to 71 at 5-month follow-up. Neuropsychological testing showed recovery in language and visuospatial domains, though subtle deficits in processing speed and working memory persisted.

Conclusion

This case highlights neurosyphilis as a rare but treatable cause of encephalitis in immunocompetent patients. Clinicians should maintain a high index of suspicion in atypical encephalitis presentations. Early serological testing for syphilis is crucial to avoid misdiagnosis and ensure timely treatment.

Biography

Dr. William Cunningham is a dedicated medical practitioner with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, United Kingdom. He has experience across acute and community healthcare settings, with a strong focus on evidence-based clinical practice and patient-centered care. Dr. Cunningham has contributed to clinical case reporting and shows ongoing interest in improving diagnostic accuracy and multidisciplinary care within the NHS system. His professional work reflects a commitment to service quality, continuing medical education, and supporting improved health outcomes across the Glasgow region.