Insights Into the Diagnosis and Treatment of Lysosomal Storage Diseases

David A. Wenger, PhD; Stephanie Coppola, BS; Shu-Ling Liu, MD

Lysosomal storage diseases (LSDs) are a group of genetic disorders that result from defective lysosomal metabolism or export of naturally occurring compounds. Signs and symptoms are variable both within and between disorders depending on the location and extent of storage. Many patients develop neurologic symptoms that become obvious from the newborn period to adulthood. Diagnosis of suspected patients can usually be made by measuring the activity of an enzyme or concentration of a metabolite in easily obtained tissue samples. Based on the considerable diagnostic experience of our laboratory, we aid the physician in selecting the appropriate tests to perform. Hematopoietic stem cell transplantation and enzyme replacement therapy are already available or in clinical trials for a number of LSDs. Early diagnosis is critical, especially since those patients who are treated before significant symptoms arise have the best chance for a positive outcome.

The LSDs are a group of genetic disorders that result from the accumulation of storage products due to a defect in a hydrolytic enzyme, activator protein, transport protein, or enzyme required for the correct processing of other lysosomal proteins. About 40 different genes have been identified as sites for mutations resulting in an LSD. A large number of mutations have been delineated for most disorders, and this contributes to the wide clinical spectra observed in patients with a deficiency of a necessary protein. As a group, LSDs occur in approximately 1 in 5000 to 8000 births in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Therefore, about 500 to 800 people are born each year with an LSD in the United States. While some of these disorders result in purely nonneurologic manifestations (eg, Gaucher disease type 1), many others are characterized by a wide range of neurologic symptoms, with or without somatic features, presenting from birth to adulthood. Owing to the complexity of the storage products and differences in their tissue distribution and rates of accumulation, the disease can cause pathologic changes in multiple organ systems or can be confined to the nervous system. While the genes responsible for almost all of the defined LSDs have been cloned, this information may not be useful for diagnosing a patient initially presenting to the practicing physician. Measurement of a panel of lysosomal enzymes and/or identification of storage products is a more definitive method for diagnosing new patients. As effective treatment for some of these disorders becomes more of a reality, it is critical that patients be diagnosed as early as possible. There are even initiatives to institute newborn screening for LSDs to identify presymptomatic individuals who may be candidates for early therapeutic intervention. However, this may result in additional problems because predicting the clinical course in untreated patients is not reliable, especially in the later-onset forms of most LSDs.

Since 1973, our laboratory has diagnosed an LSD in more than 2600 patients. In this review, we outline some clinical features that should signal a request for testing, with a focus on those diseases requiring special diagnostic attention, discuss the difficulties in making a prognosis in newly diagnosed patients, and present the possibilities for therapy in current use or under development. This re-
view will mainly concentrate on disorders diagnosed in
our laboratory.

**CLINICAL FEATURES THAT COULD SUGGEST AN LSD**

The diagnosis of an LSD initially requires a physician to
consider whether the patient's clinical features suggest
this possibility. The Table presents some of the initial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease (Lysosomal Storage Disease)</th>
<th>Defective Protein</th>
<th>Presenting Signs and Symptoms</th>
<th>Samples Acceptable for Diagnosis*</th>
<th>Treatment Options†</th>
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<td>GM1 gangliosidosis‡</td>
<td>Acid β-galactosidase</td>
<td>IO: hypotonia, DD, coarse facial features, HM, CRS (±)</td>
<td>L, F</td>
<td>SC,§ HSCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM2 gangliosidosis, B variant, Tay-Sachs disease‡</td>
<td>Hexosaminidase A</td>
<td>IO: hypotonia, hyperacusis, DD, CRS</td>
<td>L, F</td>
<td>SC, HSCT</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM2 gangliosidosis, O variant, Sandhoff disease‡</td>
<td>Hexosaminidase A &amp; B</td>
<td>Similar to Tay-Sachs disease</td>
<td>L, P</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM2 gangliosidosis, AB variant‡</td>
<td>GM2 activator protein</td>
<td>Similar to Tay-Sachs disease</td>
<td>F, CSF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fabry disease‡</td>
<td>α-Galactosidase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaucher disease, types 2 and 3‡</td>
<td>Glucocerebrosidase</td>
<td>HSM, DD, strabismus, Sz, myoclonus, horizontal supranuclear gaze palsy</td>
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<td>Late IO: weakness, hypotonia, DD, genu recurvatum</td>
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<td>Krabbe disease‡</td>
<td>Galactocerebrosidase</td>
<td>IO: spasticity, irritability, hypotonia, listing, DD</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<tr>
<td>α-Mannosidosis‡</td>
<td>α-Mannosidase</td>
<td>DD, hearing loss, mildly coarse facial features (large jaw), mild DM</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<td>β-Mannosidosis‡</td>
<td>β-Mannosidase</td>
<td>DD, MR, hearing loss, mild facial coarsening, angiokeratoma</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<td>Sialidosis, Mucolipidosis †</td>
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<td>I0: NIFH, DD, coarse facial features, DM, HSM, PR, renal disease</td>
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<td>Sialic acid storage disease, Salla disease‡</td>
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<td>IO: severe DD, fair hair and skin, HSM, coarse facial features</td>
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<td>Galactosialidosis‡</td>
<td>Protective protein, cathepsin A</td>
<td>Neonatal onset: NIFH, HSM, severe DD</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IO and late IO: coarse facial features, HSM, kidney and heart defects, DD, DM, MR</td>
<td>L, F</td>
<td>SC</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L0: coarse facial features, DM, corneal clouding, MR, ataxia, Sz, CRS (±)</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fucosidosis‡</td>
<td>α-L-fucosidase</td>
<td>Spasticity, DD, coarse facial features, DM, MR, angiokeratoma</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<td>MPS I (Hurler and Hurler-Scheie)‡</td>
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<td>Coarse facial features, DD, DM, MR, hearing loss, corneal clouding, hernias</td>
<td>L, F</td>
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<td>MPS III A (Sanfilippo)</td>
<td>Glucosamine-4-sulfatase</td>
<td>Aggressive behavior, DD, mildly coarse facial features, hirsute, coarse hair, mild DM</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>SC, HSCT, ERT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Similar to MPS III A</td>
<td>P, F</td>
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<tr>
<td>MPS III C</td>
<td>AcCoA</td>
<td>Similar to MPS III A</td>
<td>F, P</td>
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<tr>
<td>MPS III D</td>
<td>N-acetylglucosamine-6-sulfatase</td>
<td>Similar to MPS III A</td>
<td>F</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPS VII‡</td>
<td>β-Glucuronidase</td>
<td>NIFH, DM, DD, coarse facial features, HSM, MR</td>
<td>L, F</td>
<td>SC, HSCT, ERT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
diagnostic testing should be performed. A systematic study of disease possibilities, including mitochondrial, peroxisomal, and lysosomal, should be considered. The samples required for the study of each group of disorders may be different, and a given diagnostic laboratory usually does not perform tests for all disorders. For those LSDs diagnosed in our laboratory, whole heparinized blood sent at room temperature permits the isolation of leukocytes and plasma to use for screening. Using our considerable diagnostic experience, test selection is based on a patient’s clinical history, other test results, and suggestions from the physician.

Purely neurologic symptoms in the absence of additional findings, such as coarse facial features, bone abnormalities, and hepatosplenomegaly, signal the need for testing for GM1 and GM2 gangliosidoses, metachromatic leukodystrophy (MLD), and Krabbe disease. The onset of GM1 gangliosidosis (low acid β-galactosidase in both leukocytes and plasma) can occur at any age from birth to adulthood. Patients with the infantile form have initial symptoms related to the storage of GM1 ganglioside in the brain, keratan sulfate in connective tissue, and glycoprotein and oligosaccharides in the liver. Other patients with low β-galactosidase activity can have purely neurologic signs, including dysarthria, and only mild bone and somatic problems, or they may have only severe bone involvement (mucopolysaccharidosis [MPS] IVB, Morquio B). Different mutations in the β-galactosidase gene can result in significant differences in the ability to handle the potential substrates.

Mutations in 3 separate genes can result in patients who are clinically similar to each other and store GM2 ganglioside. GM2 gangliosidosis should be considered in any infant who is losing interest in his or her surroundings and has spasticity, hyperacusis, and macular cherry-red spots. Defining the genetic type is critical for accurate genetic counseling of family members and subsequent prenatal testing. The finding of low hexosaminidase A activity due to mutations in the α-chain in leukocytes and/or plasma confirms the diagnosis of Tay-Sachs disease. While the number of cases of Tay-Sachs disease among the Ashkenazi Jewish community has dropped dramatically since the institution of the carrier testing program in the early 1970s, the number of non-Jewish cases has not declined. Patients with the so-called B1 variant of Tay-Sachs disease have normal hexosaminidase A activity when measured using the heat denaturation method. However, the use of the sulfated derivative of the synthetic substrate for screening will diagnose all patients who have a defect in the α-chain of hexosaminidase A. The finding of low hexosaminidase A and B activity indicates a diagnosis of Sandhoff disease. In addition to the many mutations identified in the α- and β-chains of hexosaminidase A and B, there are infants with similar clinical features who have defects in the GM2 activator protein that is required for the hydrolysis of GM2 ganglioside.
by hexosaminidase A. These rare patients have normal hexosaminidase A and B activity measured with all synthetic substrates, but they can be identified by the accumulation of GM2 ganglioside in cerebrospinal fluid. Additional studies could identify the mutation(s) in the GM2 activator protein gene. While most patients with defects in the lysosomal metabolism of GM2 ganglioside have infantile forms, adolescents and adults with cerebellar ataxia, symptoms resembling amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and psychiatric problems should have their hexosaminidase levels measured.

Metachromatic leukodystrophy is one of the LSDs causing the most problems with regard to accurate patient identification. Arylsulfatase A (ASA) activity is measured in individuals of any age with evidence of weakness, mental regression, psychiatric problems, or white matter changes on magnetic resonance imaging. Low ASA activity could indicate a diagnosis of MLD. However, owing to the high frequency of the so-called pseudodeficiency (Pd) allele, this diagnosis must be confirmed by additional studies. The major cause of pseudodeficiency is a mutation in the polyadenylation signal that results in only about 10% of the normal amount of ASA messenger RNA. About 1 in 7 individuals in the general population are heterozygous for this polymorphism. Therefore, about 1 in 200 individuals, whether completely normal or with neurologic problems, is homozygous for this mutation and has low (5%-15% of normal) ASA activity. These low ASA values overlap those found in patients confirmed to have MLD (MLD/MLD) and in carriers of MLD who have 1 MLD-causing mutation and 1 Pd allele (MLD/Pd). Further complications arise because MLD-causing mutations have been found on the Pd allele. Since the Pd allele is so common, additional mutations have occurred on the same copy of the ASA gene. However, the accurate diagnosis of suspected patients is not difficult when proper samples are analyzed. First, ASA activity should be measured in leukocytes, and if low, DNA can be isolated from the remaining sample, and the presence of the Pd allele can be determined by polymerase chain reaction–based testing. If the Pd allele is not present and the clinical features suggest a leukodystrophy, the diagnosis of MLD is almost certain. If it is present, MLD must still be considered, and a first morning voiding of urine should be analyzed for sulfatides. If excess sulfatides are being excreted, the diagnosis of MLD is confirmed. It is very important to obtain ASA values from the parents of all patients identified. About 1 in 14 of the healthy parents has ASA activity near that of their affected child due to the frequency of the Pd allele. This is critical to know if the couple requests prenatal testing in subsequent pregnancies. The inheritance of the Pd allele (without an additional mutation) from one parent and an MLD-causing mutation from the other results in low ASA activity in any fetal sample (chorionic villi, cultured trophoblasts, and amniotic fluid cells) received for testing. Having information regarding ASA values and the presence of the Pd allele in the parents results in accurate pregnancy prediction. In addition, patients with multiple sulfatase deficiency have low activity for all sulfatas, including ASA, and excrete sulfatides plus glycosaminoglycans in urine. However, the parents of these patients do not have carrier levels of any sulfatas. It should also be noted that there are some patients who have normal ASA activity but have defects in a sphingolipid activator protein known as saposin B. The few individuals who have been identified clinically resemble those with juvenile MLD. Such patients excrete excess sulfatides in urine, and molecular analysis of the saposin gene can usually identify a mutation(s) in the saposin B region.

Another relatively common disorder with significant diagnostic problems is Niemann-Pick type C (NPC). This is because the neurologic features are variable, it cannot be ruled out by relatively simple tests performed in leukocytes or plasma, and “variants” have biochemical findings that are difficult to interpret. Testing for NPC is often requested by neurologists who have exhausted other options by more straightforward testing. Patients range in age from neonates with nonimmune fetal hydrops to adults with evidence of dystonia and vertical supranuclear ophthalmoplegia. Many patients with the “classic” form have a history of jaundice at birth, but this can be resolved with phototherapy. They can appear normal until the middle of the first or second decade, when they develop inappropriate behavior and drop in school performance. Some, but not all, have significant hepatosplenomegaly. Diagnosis requires cultured skin fibroblasts for special studies to detect excess free cholesterol using filipin staining and, if positive, to measure cholesterol esterification. Mutations in 2 different genes, NPC1 and NPC2, can cause NPC. DNA analysis is not useful for screening patients, except in suspected cases in the Hispanic population of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, where one mutation in the NPC1 gene has been identified.

Patients with mild to severe neurologic symptoms who also have evidence of short stature (dysostosis multiplex), coarse facial features, hepatosplenomegaly, corneal clouding, and other more subtle findings (eg, angiokeratomas) usually require a battery of testing to arrive at a definitive diagnosis. Symptoms may be present at birth or become more obvious after a period of relatively normal development. While studies of oligosaccharides and glycosaminoglycans (mucopolysaccharides) in urine may be indicated, it is our opinion that this may only cause a delay in obtaining a diagnosis. Frequent false-negative and false-positive results may influence the tests performed. In most cases, enzymatic or other (eg, sialic acid content) tests are indicated anyway. About 10% of infants born with nonimmune fetal hydrops have an LSD. These include MPS VII, mucolipidosis II, GM1 gangliosidosis, sialidosis, galactosialidosis, Gaucher disease, Faber disease, and NPC. While effective therapy is not currently available for these infants, genetic counseling and prenatal testing can be offered in subsequent pregnancies. However, for other disorders of oligosaccharide and GAG metabolism, early diagnosis could provide an opportunity for treatment, such as hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT) or enzyme replacement therapy (ERT).

Most LSDs can be diagnosed by measuring the activity of specific enzymes with commercially available synthetic or radiolabeled natural substrates using a blood
symptomatic or only mildly affected. Therefore, there is no course if treatment is started when the individual is pre-
can result in a significant improvement in the clinical 
level of specific antigen levels in cultured cells aids in mak-
ing in family members, it is no better than careful clini-
from repeated without acid hydrolysis to determine if it is free 
if the content of sialic acid is elevated, the test is 
high levels of bound sialic acid are found in 
leukocytes and fibroblasts from patients with sialidosis 
and galactosialidosis, and high levels of free sialic acid 
are found in leukocytes and fibroblasts from patients with 
sialic acid storage disease or Salla disease and sialuria (not 
an LSD). Additional studies may be necessary to con-
firms the diagnosis. Reliable prenatal testing is available 
for almost all LSDs using chorionic villi samples and cul-
tured amniotic fluid cells.

PROBLEMS IN ASCERTAINING A PROGNOSIS 
IN A PATIENT WITH AN LSD

Most infants who are diagnosed as having an LSD fol-
lows a rather predictable clinical course. The loss of any 
gained skills and neurologic deterioration continue un-
til the death of the child, usually by infection. Predicting 
clinical course in later-onset patients, especially 
adolescents and adults, is nearly impossible. Accurately 
predicting the clinical course has important implica-
tions not only in selecting candidates for therapy, but also 
in evaluating the effectiveness of the chosen mode of 
therapy. There have been a number of methods pro-
posed for determining the clinical course in newly diag-
nosed patients. While mutation analysis can be useful for 
predicting the possibility of neurologic involvement in 
some disorders, the large number of mutations identi-
cified coupled with the fact that many patients are com-
pound heterozygotes makes phenotype prediction diffi-
cult. For example, finding the N370S mutation in a newly 
diagnosed patient with Gaucher disease indicates that 
there will be no neurologic involvement. While know-
ing the genotype in a newly diagnosed patient may be 
useful for cataloging purposes and may aid in carrier test-
ing in family members, it is no better than careful clini-
cal evaluation at predicting the clinical course. In our ex-
perience, patients with late-onset forms of Krabbe disease 
can show tremendous clinical variability, even between 
siblings who have the same genotype for the galactoce-
rebrosidase (GALC) gene.3 There is a strong suggestion 
that the onset of symptoms in these patients may occur 
after a stressful insult, such as an infection or a blow to 
the head. Also, there is little evidence that measuring re-
sidual enzymatic activity or combining this with studies of 
specific antigen levels in cultured cells aids in mak-
ing a prognosis.

Recent reports provide evidence that ERT and HSCT 
can result in a significant improvement in the clinical 
course if treatment is started when the individual is pre-
symptomatic or only mildly affected. Therefore, there is 
pressure to obtain a diagnosis as early as possible, espe-
cially before neurologic symptoms are significant. This 
requires educating physicians to recognize the early signs 
of these disorders and possibly instituting screening meth-
ods that identify patients at or near birth before symp-
toms are present. The screening methods proposed in-
clude measuring lysosome-associated membrane proteins 
1 and 2 and saposins in small plasma samples, using dried 
blood spots for enzyme analysis, and using tandem mass 
spectrometry for measurement of analytes.10-13 Additional 
testing would be required to make a definitive di-
agnosis. While such testing is theoretically possible, it 
does present some problems related to the need for ex-
ensive or life-threatening therapy in individuals identi-
fied without a family history of a disorder. Of the 500 
to 800 individuals born each year in the United States 
with the potential for developing an LSD, some will have 
very mild disease and may not require treatment, and oth-
ers will have disease so severe that treatment is not ben-
eficial. However, early diagnosis permits careful clinical 
evaluation of the individual so that treatment could be-

POSSIBILITIES FOR TREATMENT OF LSDs

There have been recent improvements in the treatment 
of patients with certain LSDs, even for those disorders 
that can have significant neurologic involvement. The Table 
presents the treatments that are in use, have been tried 
in a limited number of cases, or are under develop-
ment. One treatment that has shown promise in some 
patients is HSCT in presymptomatic or mildly affected 
individuals. Many patients with Gaucher disease, MLD, 
Krabbe disease, and MPS I have undergone transplanta-
tion.14-16 Some of these patients were identified in utero 
or at birth because of family history, and others were 
mildly affected before receiving their transplant. Ini-
ially, most of the bone marrow donors for these pa-
tients were HLA-identical siblings. However, it is ideal 
to use noncarrier donors so that the highest level of ac-
tivity can be supplied by the donor cells. Recently, ub-
ibilical cord blood from unrelated donors has been used in 
transplantation for patients with LSDs. It has been 
shown in animal studies that donor blood macrophages 
eventually replace microglial cells in the brain of the re-
cipient. In humans, this can take many months or even 
years to accomplish. Therefore, HSCT may not be ben-
eficial for those diseases that are progressing rapidly. With 
successful engraftment of donor HSC, enzyme levels in 
leukocytes reach those of the donor, progression of the 
disease slows, and eventually there can be an improve-
ment in certain parameters, such as spinal fluid protein 
concentration, IQ, and magnetic resonance imaging. A 
number of patients with purely neurologic LSDs, such 
as Tay-Sachs disease, have been given HSCT, but more 
time is needed to determine its effectiveness. While im-
provement of somatic and hematologic features and sta-
bilization of some neurologic manifestations are usually 
noted after HSCT, skeletal abnormalities remain diffi-
cult to correct.

Enzyme replacement therapy is now available or un-
der investigation for a number of LSDs, including Gau-

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Substrate deprivation as an adjunctive treatment for certain sphingolipidoses is receiving attention. Since symptoms in the patients are thought to result from the storage of undegraded substrate, a slower rate of accumulation accomplished by decreasing the rate of synthesis of substrate might be effective. This is especially true in patients with later-onset forms of some LDSs who we suspect have some residual enzymatic activity. If the rate of substrate synthesis was slowed until it was approximately equal to the rate of degradation, little additional accumulation would occur. This theoretically could be accomplished by compounds such as L-cycloserine, which inhibits a very early step in the synthesis of sphingolipids, or N-butyldeoxygalactonojirimycin, which inhibits the synthesis of glucosphingolipids derived from glucosylceramide. Mice with Sandhoff disease treated with N-butyldeoxynojirimycin had delayed onset of symptoms and increased life span. It must be noted that sphingolipids play very important functions in cellular metabolism, including signal transduction, cell adhesiveness, and nerve impulse transmission, and modification of these and other functions by these drugs in a developing child must be carefully tested in animal models before human trials are started. In addition, these drugs also have significant side effects that may limit their use. The amount of enzyme needed in ERT for Gaucher disease or Fabry disease could possibly be lowered if an inhibitor of glucosylceramide synthesis was also provided.

While gene therapy and neural and embryonic stem cell therapy to treat LSDs with neurologic involvement have been under investigation using the large number of available animal models, no protocols in humans are currently in use. Much effort has been expended on the mouse model of MPS VII. A large number of viral vectors containing the human β-glucuronidase complementary DNA have been developed, and when injected into the ventricles or the brain parenchyma of young mice, there is evidence for gene expression and clearing of stored material. In addition, numerous neural stem cell lines have been isolated and characterized. When injected into the developing brain, they have the potential to migrate and differentiate, providing a source of healthy replacement cells and enzymes that can be taken up by neighboring cells. However, before human trials are proposed, issues of safety and effectiveness must be addressed by studies in larger animals for longer periods of time.

In conclusion, the diagnosis of most LDSs is relatively simple using easily obtained tissue samples, such as blood or cultured cells from a skin biopsy specimen. A screen of indicated enzymes can result in a definitive diagnosis within a few days. Molecular analysis to identify the disease-causing mutations may or may not be subsequently performed depending on the disorder. Carrier testing for interested family members is usually available by enzymatic testing. One exception is Krabbe disease, where normal polymorphisms in the GALT gene make a wide carrier and noncarrier range. Prenatal diagnosis using chorionic villus samples and cultured amniotic fluid cells is available for at-risk couples and for other family members concerned about having an affected child. Treatment of presymptomatic individuals and those with mild symptoms is limited to HSCT or ERT for some disorders. The method of choice depends on the availability of a recombinant enzyme or a suitable HSCT donor and whether there is a need to stop or reverse neurologic damage. With effective therapy becoming available for more disorders, it will be increasingly important to recognize the earliest presenting symptoms in patients and seek diagnostic help from a reliable laboratory.

For further reference:

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REFERENCES


Call for Papers

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