Infratentorial Lesions Predict Long-term Disability in Patients With Initial Findings Suggestive of Multiple Sclerosis

Arjan Minneboo, MD; Frederick Barkhof, MD; Chris H. Polman, MD; Bernard M. J. Uitdehaag, MD; Dirk L. Knol, PhD; Jonas A. Castelijns, MD

Background: The number and volume of abnormalities on baseline brain magnetic resonance images in patients with initial findings suggestive of multiple sclerosis are known to predict outcome in terms of disability. However, no long-term data exist on specific locations or types of lesions.

Objective: To assess the long-term predictive value of baseline magnetic resonance imaging parameters, including location of lesions and gadolinium-enhancing and hypointense lesions in patients with initial findings suggestive of multiple sclerosis for the occurrence of clinically relevant disability as defined by an Expanded Disability Status Scale score of 3.

Patients: After a median follow-up period of 8.7 years, the medical records of 42 patients were reviewed and assessed for time until patients received an Expanded Disability Status Scale score of 3. Magnetic resonance imaging parameters were dichotomized according to maximum accuracy and then used to calculate hazard ratios using the Cox model for proportional hazard ratios.

Results: Conversion to clinically definite multiple sclerosis was observed in 26 patients (62%), of whom 14 (54%) progressed to an Expanded Disability Status Scale score of 3. Two or more infratentorial lesions best predicted long-term disability (hazard ratio, 6.3). Gadolinium-enhancing and hypointense T1-weighted lesions did not show prognostic value.

Conclusion: Infratentorial lesions are related to long-term prognosis for patients with initial findings suggestive of multiple sclerosis and thus may help to identify patients at high risk for earlier occurrence of clinically relevant disability.

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INITIAL FINDINGS IN PATIENTS WHO eventually develop multiple sclerosis (MS) usually indicate a clinically isolated syndrome, although multisymptomatic onset does occur in a significant subset of patients. For these patients, there are 2 major concerns: the risk of development of clinically definite (CD) MS, and the prognosis with regard to disability if CDMS develops. Therefore, it would be desirable to have a model that estimates the risk of developing MS and accompanying disability, especially now that there is evidence that some patients will benefit from treatment in this early phase of the disease. Several studies have shown the value of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in predicting the development of CDMS. Long-term follow-up studies demonstrate a conversion rate to CDMS of 33% to 80%. With the use of MRI, there is significant diagnostic gain. At their initial examination, most patients already have multiple white matter lesions on T2-weighted MRIs of the brain. The sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy differ between the proposed criteria. However, the prediction of long-term disability is far more uncertain. Several studies described the significant relationship between lesion load at baseline and the Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) score at 5 years’ follow-up, which was also found after 14 years of follow-up. Morrissey et al and O’Riordan et al reported on the 5- and 10-year follow-up results in patients who were initially found to have optic neuritis, brainstem syndrome, or incomplete spinal cord syndrome. After 5 years, 20% had received an EDSS score greater than or equal to 3, whereas after 10 years, 30% showed progression to an EDSS score greater than 3. The type of initial symptoms seems to be important in this context: patients initially exhibiting optic neuritis are reported to have a low risk of reaching an EDSS score of 3 after a follow-up of 5 (4%) or even 15 (10%) years. The outcome of patients initially exhibit-
ing a spinal cord syndrome appears to be worse: 20% of these patients reach an EDSS score greater than or equal to 3 within 3.5 years.8

Not only the presence or absence of lesions but also the location of lesions might be predictive of long-term disability. The presence of lesions in the infratentorial region on the baseline scan has been reported to correlate with EDSS score at follow-up9,12 and is likely one of the major predictive factors. In the studies mentioned so far, the predictive value of T1-weighted MRI parameters, such as gadolinium-enhancing and hypointense lesions for long-term disability has not been studied, and location of the lesions on T2-weighted images was only scored as supratentorial or infratentorial.

In this study, we present the long-term follow-up results in a group of patients with a first episode of neurologic dysfunction suggestive of MS. To determine the prognostic value of baseline brain MRI findings in predicting the development of disability (EDSS score ≥3), we tested several MRI criteria, including gadolinium-enhancing and hypointense lesions on T1-weighted images and location of the lesions on T2-weighted images.

### RESULTS

The median duration of follow-up was 8.7 years (interquartile range [IQR], 7.9–9.3 years). In 26 patients (62%), a second attack occurred, and the diagnosis of CDMS was made (Table 1). The female-male ratio was 1.5. Fourteen (54%) of 26 CDMS patients progressed to clinically significant disability as marked by an EDSS score greater than or equal to 3. The median time to reach an EDSS score greater than or equal to 3 was 6.4 years (IQR, 1.2–7.8 years). Only 5 patients (19%) reached an EDSS score greater than or equal to 6, which precluded the use of this parameter as an outcome variable for statistical analysis.

T2-weighted MRIs showed 1 or more lesions in 34 patients (81%). The median number of lesions was 6.5 (IQR, 2.0–28.3) (Table 2). Most lesions were seen in the frontal lobes (median, 2.5; IQR, 0–11.3) and periventricularly (median, 2.0; IQR, 0–10.5). Relatively low numbers of lesions were seen infratentorially (median, 0; IQR, 0–2.0) and in the basal ganglia or internal capsule (median, 0; IQR, 0–0.3). Strong internal correlations were found among the various MRI criteria on T2-weighted images (data not shown). Four of 5 patients who

### Abbreviations:
- CDMS, clinically definite MS (according to the Poser criteria17)
- EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale.

### Data are given as number (percentage) of patients unless otherwise indicated.

### Table 1. Conversion to CDMS and Progression to an EDSS Score of 3 as Classified by Initial Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Findings</th>
<th>No. of Patients</th>
<th>CDMS</th>
<th>EDSS ≥3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optic neuritis</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12 (67)</td>
<td>5 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstem/cerebellar syndrome</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 (67)</td>
<td>3 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinal cord syndrome</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 (75)</td>
<td>1 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain syndrome</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 (33)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multisymptomatic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5 (63)</td>
<td>4 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26 (62)</td>
<td>14 (33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Magnetic Resonance Imaging Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Total No. of Patients</th>
<th>CDMS Patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T2-weighted images</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of lesions</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periventricular lesions</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callosal lesions</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontal lesions</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parietal lesions</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occipital lesions</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal lesions</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infratentorial lesions</td>
<td>0.0-11</td>
<td>0.0-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basal ganglia/internal capsule</td>
<td>0.0-15</td>
<td>0.0-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Juxt) cortical lesions</td>
<td>0.0-26</td>
<td>0.0-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesions &gt;6 mm</td>
<td>0.0-15</td>
<td>0.0-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1-weighted images</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypointense lesions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadolinium-enhancing lesions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadolinium-enhancing lesions &gt;6 mm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: CDMS, clinically definite multiple sclerosis (according to the criteria of Poser et al17); IQR, interquartile range.

We found that several MRI criteria derived from T2-weighted images were related to the development of clinically relevant disability as defined by an EDSS score of 3. Having at least 2 infratentorial lesions proved to be the best predictor. Criteria derived from T1-weighted images were not associated with the time to reach an EDSS score of 3. Even though case ascertainment was not complete, the group of patients included in this study seems to be representative. After a median follow-up of about 9 years, the rate of conversion to CDMS (62%) and the development of disability were in accordance with data from other long-term follow-up studies in comparable patient groups.13,18 This is also valid for the number of abnormal scans (≥1 lesions) and number of lesions found.

No significant hazard ratio was found for an abnormal MRI finding (≥1 lesion on T2-weighted imaging): although sensitive, the presence of 1 or more T2-weighted lesions is not a useful prognostic factor with respect to development of disability. We aimed at increasing the predictive value of lesions by not only counting them, but also taking the location into account. This resulted in a significant hazard ratio for progression to an EDSS score of 3 for several parameters. A combination of high hazard ratio and high statistical significance (P = .002) was found for infratentorial, callosal, and periventricular lesions.

Infratentorial lesions are thought to be relatively specific for MS10,21; the few studies that reported on the prevalence of infratentorial lesions in MS found these lesions in a percentage of patients ranging from 6% (Jacobs et al7 in a study of patients with optic neuritis) to 40%.12,18 Sailer et al15 found a higher mean EDSS score and a greater increase in total lesion volume after 10 years of follow-up for patients with 1 or more infratentorial lesions than for those without these lesions. They also found a significant correlation of the infratentorial lesion volume at baseline and EDSS score at 10 years. Our results confirm and extend these findings: in our final model only, infratentorial lesions are included as predictors of long-term disability. The other parameters, despite their good performance when tested in isolation, do not add independent information.
There are at least 2 possible explanations for the observed dominance of infratentorial lesions in predicting the development of disability. First, damage to structures in the infratentorial compartment is likely to have an important effect on clinical disability, as has been emphasized before.22 Second, there is a close relationship between the spinal cord and the infratentorial compartment. The presence of infratentorial lesions may be an indicator for spinal cord disease, and the latter is known to correlate well with disability.23-26

Even though the presence of gadolinium-enhancing lesions is probably one of the best predictive MRI parameters for the development of CDMS,13,16,18,27 the relationship between gadolinium enhancement and the development of long-term disability is less clear. In a meta-analysis by Kappos et al,28 both the baseline and monthly rates of gadolinium-enhanced MRI in MS patients were not predictive for the change in EDSS score in the following 1 or 2 years. These authors concluded that the presence of gadolinium-enhancing lesions is not a good predictor of long-term disability in patients with relapsing-remitting and secondary progressive MS. Our data confirm that the predictive value of gadolinium enhancement in patients at their first disease manifestation with respect to future disability is also limited. Despite our search for optimal cutoff levels, none of the T1-weighted MRI parameters was related to the development of disability.

There are several limitations to our study. Based on the clinical data available for follow-up, we were not confident to decide on the exact moment of conversion of relapsing-remitting to secondary progressive MS for many patients, and therefore, we were unable to include this parameter in our analysis. In addition, MRI scans were performed many years before on a 0.6-T machine, and the results perhaps cannot be compared directly with results from high-resolution scanning protocols using 1.0- or 1.5-T machines. Owing to technical problems regarding the storage of the electronic MRI data, it also was not possible to obtain lesion loads and incorporate these quantification.
titative data into our analyses. Furthermore, at the time of the first clinical examination, we did not routinely perform spinal cord imaging. Therefore, spinal cord abnormalities, potentially of great importance concerning disability development, could not be taken into account. The duration of follow-up in this study was such that the proportion of patients who reached an EDSS score of 6 was low, thereby preventing analysis of parameters predictive of more severe disability, although it may be speculated that there will be similarities with parameters correlated with moderate disability.

In conclusion, we found that several MRI criteria derived from baseline T2-weighted images were strongly related to progression to an EDSS score of 3 at follow-up. The presence of at least 2 infratentorial lesions was found to be the strongest predictor of progression to an EDSS score of 3. We did not find any prognostic value of MRI criteria derived from T1-weighted images, such as gadolinium-enhancing lesions and hypointense lesions for progression to an EDSS score of 3. Longer follow-up is needed to determine the predictive value of these criteria for more severe disability.

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Corresponding author: A. Minneboo, MD, VU Medical Centre, Department of Radiology, PO Box 7057, 1007 MB Amsterdam, the Netherlands (e-mail: a.minneboo@vumc.nl).

REFERENCES