Acute presentations of inherited metabolic disease in adulthood

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It has been over a century since Sir Archibald Garrod first recognised the existence of inherited metabolic diseases (IMD). Technological and scientific advances have gradually led to greatly increased understanding of their aetiology and pathogenesis, and have ultimately resulted in effective therapies. Treatment has dramatically altered the natural history of metabolic disorders. Examples include:

- the phenylalanine-restricted diet for phenylketonuria
- uncooked cornstarch for the hepatic glycogenoses
- cobalamin for vitamin B12-responsive methylmalonic acid
- nišitinone for tyrosinaemia type 1
- enzyme replacement therapy for Gaucher disease

Affected individuals can also present for the first time in adulthood. It is important for clinicians working in the adult sector to be aware of these disorders, not only to manage survivors of childhood but also to recognise patients presenting in adulthood. This article describes some acute clinical scenarios in which IMDs need to be considered. As they are genetic diseases, missing the diagnosis may have implications both for the affected individuals and for their families.

Encephalopathy/coma

IMD is high in the differential diagnosis when infants present with encephalopathy, but in adult medicine the emphasis tends to be on acquired conditions such as infection or poisoning. Even though most patients will have blood glucose and arterial blood gas measured, hypoglycaemia and acidosis are often (and often rightly) thought to be secondary features and are treated but not investigated further. It is important to remember that in the unconscious patient metabolic disturbance can sometimes be the primary cause.

In any patient with metabolic acidosis, it is important to calculate the anion gap. A raised anion gap suggests the presence of an abnormal metabolite and needs further investigation. Measuring plasma lactate or detecting urinary ketones by dipstick will often be helpful. Plasma ammonia concentrations should be readily available in all acute settings but are rarely measured on the adult intensive therapy unit. They should form part of the assessment of any unconscious
patient. The precise cause of hyperammonaemia may take some time to elucidate but the treatment, which may involve haemofiltration, is standard and life-saving.

It is crucial to collect, freeze and store urine and blood in the acute stage so that specialist investigations can be performed subsequently.

The most common metabolic causes of encephalopathy in adults are urea cycle and fatty acid oxidation defects. Decompensation occurs when patients become catabolic, which is often triggered by intercurrent infection. There are often clues in the history (not always available in the acute setting). Any patient who has had previous, unexplained episodes of impaired consciousness should be investigated for a metabolic cause.

**Stroke**

Metabolic stroke, such as seen in mitochondrial cytopathies, organic acidemias and urea cycle defects, is very rare and the diagnosis will often be suggested by clinical and imaging features. It is important to remember that metabolic disease can also be the cause of cerebrovascular events, especially in younger patients.

Fabry disease is present in about 4% of adults below the age of 55 presenting with cryptogenic stroke.7 The prevalence of transient ischaemic attacks or ischaemic stroke in patients with Fabry disease is about 15% and thought to relate to small vessel disease. It is an important diagnosis to make both because it can be treated with enzyme replacement therapy and because it is an X-linked disorder so other family members are at significant risk.

About 25% of patients with homocystinuria suffer from thromboembolic...
events at some time, 32% of which are strokes, either ischaemic or secondary to venous sinus thrombosis. Adequate control of plasma total homocysteine reverses the coagulopathy in these patients and normalises thromboembolic risk.

Psychosis
In adults with urea cycle disorders, hyperammonaemia not severe enough to cause frank encephalopathy can frequently present with psychiatric features. A metabolic intoxication should be suspected in patients with an acute psychiatric presentation who have an altered level of consciousness. Episodes are often recurrent and can be triggered by catabolic states, notably in the puerperium.

Porphyria
Acute attacks of porphyria nearly always involve cognitive and behavioural changes, usually anxiety and insomnia, in most cases accompanied by abdominal pain and the other classic symptoms of acute autonomic and sensorimotor neuropathy. Occasionally, however, psychiatric symptoms can be predominant and psychotic features such as hallucinations can occur. The diagnosis is made by measuring urinary porphobilinogen in the acute phase. This requires a urine sample to be protected from light and delivered to the laboratory as quickly as possible. It is also helpful to collect faecal and blood samples acutely.

Structural brain disease
Structural brain disease can also present as psychiatric illness. This seems to be particularly common in metabolic demyelinating disease, with both adrenoleucodystrophy and metachromatic leucodystrophy frequently demonstrating prominent psychiatric features. Careful examination will reveal abnormal neurological signs and lead to further investigation, although brain imaging can be remarkably normal in the early stages. Measuring plasma very long-chain fatty acids and white cell enzymes is important diagnostically.

Rhabdomyolysis
Exercise-induced rhabdomyolysis is frequently due to metabolic muscle disease. Exercising muscle relies initially on glycogen breakdown and then on fatty acid oxidation as a source of adenosine triphosphate. Diseases in which these processes are impaired can therefore present with muscle damage during exercise. How long the patient can exercise before the onset of pain will depend on which metabolic pathway is affected. It is important to screen for glycogen storage diseases (GSD), especially myophosphorylase (GSD type V) and phosphofructokinase (GSD type VII) deficiencies, and fatty acid oxidation defects such as carnitine-palmitoyl transferase II and long-chain defects.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy
Disorders affecting muscle energetics can cause a dilated cardiomyopathy in childhood but these patients more commonly present with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) as adults. HCM can also be secondary to storage of undegraded macromolecules. In many cases, the conducting system is also affected and patients can present with arrhythmias and sometimes sudden cardiac death. Examples of IMDs that can present with HCM include Fabry disease and mucopolysaccharidoses, whilst arrhythmias are common in long-chain fatty acid oxidation defects.

Conclusions
A number of clinical situations in which IMDs need to be considered have been discussed. These disorders can present in a variety of ways at different ages, often triggered by a catabolic event such as intercurrent illness, fasting (eg preoperatively), postpartum or by the introduction of a new medication, particularly centrally acting agents such as antidepressants. Often, however, the trigger is not apparent. If IMDs are not considered, the diagnosis could be missed with potentially catastrophic consequences for the individual and their family. There are often clues in the history:

- previous similar, unexplained episodes
- unexplained deaths in the family
- parental consanguinity
- relatively young age.

Simple tests which give important clues are often not performed (eg anion gap by measuring bicarbonate and chloride with standard electrolytes, plasma ammonia). These may indicate the need for further first-line metabolic tests such as blood lactate, plasma amino acids, acylcarnitine profile (which can make the diagnosis in more than 30 different metabolic disorders) and urinary organic acids. It is essential to save samples of blood and urine in the acute phase. The diagnosis can then later be confirmed using specialised laboratory techniques such as enzymatic assays, gas-chromatography and TMS as well as molecular genetic analyses.

The specialty of adult IMD is rapidly growing as awareness of the patients’ needs grows and specific treatments are increasingly available for these diseases. Giving patients access to these therapies is important as they can alter the natural history of these conditions and are potentially life-saving. When a genetic disorder has been diagnosed, patients and family members can be offered prenatal diagnosis with the aim of preventing transmission to further generations. This is of particular importance with X-linked conditions such as ornithine transcarbamylase deficiency, adrenoleucodystrophy and Fabry disease. IMDs are individually rare but collectively common, with an overall incidence of over one in 2,000. A combination of improved diagnosis and increased longevity means that it is now likely that most adult physicians will come across a patient with an IMD at some stage in their career.

References


**Further reading**
