

THE CHANGING FACE OF VARICELLA-ZOSTER AND HERPES SIMPLEX MENINGOENCEPHALITIS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Background: Varicella-zoster virus (VZV) has become one of the most frequent causes of sporadic viral meningoencephalitis (ME). Some authors state that VZV ME is a benign condition whereas others report a more severe clinical course. Herpes simplex virus (HSV) was considered to cause a severe central nervous system infection with a high mortality rate. However, in the era of PCR diagnostics mild cases are increasingly recognized.

Methods: Cerebrospinal fluid samples with positive PCR studies for HSV 1, HSV 2 and VZV between the years 2002 and 2010 were retrieved from the computer records. The demographic and clinical parameters of patients with VZV ME were compared to those with HSV ME.

Results: Twenty patients with VZV and 17 patients with HSV ME (13 with HSV 1, four with HSV 2) were found. Both groups were comparable with respect to age, sex, underlying diseases and clinical presentation except for seizures and focal neurological signs that were more common in patients with HSV ME. Other differences included a higher proportion of monocytes and lower chloride levels in patients with HSV. All-cause in-hospital deaths, complication rate and sequels on discharge were similar in both groups, but patients with HSV had a longer duration of hospital stay.

Conclusions: Our study confirms that VZV ME is increasingly recognized in the era of PCR diagnostics and may be indistinguishable from HSV ME on clinical grounds if the classical rash is absent. Awareness of the changing epidemiology should guide routine testing for VZV in patients with aseptic ME.