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AUTHOR INDEX

- Aarli, J, 172
 Ahonen, Aa, 369
 Ahuja, G, 216, 295
 Alacam, R, 561
 Albizatti, M, 227
 Almay, B, 16
 Alperovitch, A, 454
 Andersen, E, 386
 Andersen, H, 561
 Andersen, I, 561
 Andersen, P, 561
 Anderson, R, 248
 Andersson, T, 316
 Airaksinen, E, 666
 Arlien-Søborg, P, 34
 Armbrustmacher, V W, 582

 Balslev-Jørgensen, M, 536
 Bassi, S, 227
 Berlit, P, 318
 Bistolaki, E, 267
 Bjerre, P, 82, 180, 472
 Blomstrand, C, 199
 Boesen, F, 386, 396
 Boey, H, 309
 Bouvier, M-H, 454
 Boysen, G, 68, 145
 Brigham, P, 248
 Brodtkorb, E, 462
 Brynskov, J, 100
 Buruma, O, 363

 Cabello, A, 237
 Cady, W, 248
 Calne, D B, 547
 Campo, F, 237
 Capsalakis, Z, 378
 Carlsson, A, 16
 Cendrowski, W, 121
 Christensen, N, 386
 Christiansen, C, 335
 Cohen, I R, 568
 Cohen, O, 568
 Collan, Y, 643
 Cripps, J, 342
 Csillik, B, 401
 Czlonkowska, A, 121

 Dalsgaard-Nielsen, J, 191

 Danner, R, 673
 Detels, R, 209
 Diemer, N H, 536

 Ebers, G, 342
 Engell, H, 145
 Engbæk, F, 276
 Ertekin, C, 690
 Ertekin, N, 690
 Evans, B, 594

 Falck, B, 42
 Falk, J, 105
 Ferrarese, C, 227
 Franzen, J, 363
 Frattola, L, 227

 Gabellini, A, 705
 Gade, A, 34
 Gainotti, G, 652
 Gannushkina, I, 482
 Gilhus, N, 172
 Gjedde, A, 392
 Grahne, B, 681
 Grigoriadis, A, 378
 Gustafsson, Å, 462
 Gyldensted, C, 34, 82, 180, 472

 Hadjikonstantinou, M, 267
 Hatzikonstantinou, V, 378
 Hawley, R J, 582
 Hein-Sørensen, O, 259
 Heltberg, A, 488
 Hemmingsen, R, 145
 Henriksen, L, 34
 Henriksson, K, 130
 Hesse, B, 386
 Heuck, C, 328
 Hindfelt, B, 444
 Hitzschke, B, 709
 Hokkanen, E, 369
 Honoré, P, 191

 Jans, H, 488
 Jansen, E, 93, 100
 Jensen, G, 68
 Jeppsson, P, 444
 Johansson, B B, 482, 575
 Jonsson, M, 462

- Julkunen, I, 1
 Kanaka, T, 347
 Kanstrup, I-L, 386
 Kartinelli, P, 705
 Kellar, K, 248
 Kemp, B, 363
 Khanna, A, 295
 Knyihár-Csillik, E, 401
 Konat, G, 568
 Korlak, J, 121
 Krause, K-H, 328
 Kurlander, H M, 594
 Kuroda, K, 160
 Kurtzke, J F, 582

 Lademann, A, 276
 Larsen, R, 93
 Larsen, T, 289, 547
 Lassen, N, 160
 Leino, E, 666, 673
 Lev-Ram, V, 568
 Linder, L-E, 575
 Lindholm, J, 82, 180, 472
 Lindqvist, M, 462
 Liu, K-S, 209
 Lope, E, 237
 Low, C, 309

 Magnussen, I, 276
 Manchanda, S, 295
 Manz, H, 582
 Markianos, M, 267
 Marttila, R, 58
 Mastaglia, F, 432
 Masters, C, 16
 Mejsholm, B, 145
 Meyer-Rienecker, H, 709
 Miceli, G, 625
 Mikkelsen, B, 105
 Mohanta, A, 216
 Mondrup, K, 276
 Mouritzen Dam, A, 601
 Myllylä, V, 369
 Münster-Swendsen, J, 100
 Mähönen, M, 643

 Naukkarinen, A, 643
 Neu, I S, 497
 Nicoletti, F, 112

 Nikoskelainen, E, 42
 Nilsson, B, 444
 Nix, W, 521
 Nordell, L E, 130
 Nyberg, P, 16
 Nørregaard-Hansen, K, 259

 Offner, H, 568
 Olesen, M, 93
 Olivarius, B, 276
 Olsson, J-E, 444

 Papageorgiou, C, 378
 Partanen, J, 643, 673
 Patten, B M, 594
 Paulson, O, 34
 Pedersen, B, 25
 Pelkonen, R, 681
 Persson, L, 482
 Peterslund, N, 25
 Pettersson, T, 529
 Pfaffenrath, V, 497
 Pira, F, 112
 Poikolainen, K, 555
 Poltorak, M, 121
 Poser, C, 413
 Poser, S, 355
 Poser, W, 355
 Prosiengel, M, 497
 Puvanendran, K, 309
 Pyhtinen, J, 369
 Pönkä, A, 529

 Rao, A, 347
 Raun, N, 355, 488
 Rautakorpi, I, 58
 Reunanen, M, 1
 Richter, K, 709
 Riekkinen, P, 643, 673
 Riishede, J, 82
 Rinne, U, 58
 Roos, R, 363
 Rudd, A, 342
 Ryberg, B, 444

 Saini, N, 582
 Salmi, A, 1
 Salmi, J, 681
 Sandstedt, P, 130
 Schellenberg, B, 328

VII

- Schnor, P, 68
Schwartz, M, 568
Sela, B-A, 568
Selvam, R, 347
Sherratt, R, 303
Shinohara, Y, 590
Sidén, A, 316
Sievers, K, 58
Silveri, M, 652
Sivenius, J, 643
Skyhøj Olsen, T, 160
Smirni, P, 112
Soelberg Sørensen, P, 68
Sorvari, T, 643, 673
Sotaniemi, K, 697
Strandjord, R, 172
Sullivan, C, 209
Szücs, A, 401
Sörnäs, R, 444
- Tagaki, S, 590
Takala, J, 58
Tan, K, 309
Teräväinen, H, 289, 505, 547
Tharakan, J, 295
Thygesen, J, 396
Thyssen, H, 100
- Tjellesen, L, 335
Trabucchi, M, 227
Tsuji, K, 590
- Udd, B, 505
- Valdiviezo, N, 209
Valtonen, S, 681
van der Velde, E, 363
Vathylakis, J, 378
Villa, G, 652
Villardita, C, 112
Visscher, B, 209
Vivekanandan, S, 347
- Wager, O, 1
Walker, G, 432
Wegener, S, 709
Wikkelsø, C, 199
Winblad, B, 16
Wulff, C, 283, 303
- Zappala, G, 112
Zeeberg, I, 191
Ziola, B, 1
Ziroyannis, P, 378

SUBJECT INDEX

Activated EEG	303	Carotid endarterectomy	145
Aetiology of epilepsy	216	Carrier detection	259
Aging	100	Cerebellitis	413
Albumin	482	Cerebral blood flow	34
Alcoholics	555, 582	Cerebral ischemia	536
Alcohol intoxication	555	Cerebral predictive analysis	697
Alpha-adrenergic receptors	248	Cerebrospinal fluid	1, 666
Antibodies	561	Cerebrospinal rhinorrhea	82, 180
Anti-convulsant (osteomalacia)	335	Cerebrovascular accidents	295
Anticonvulsants	328	Cervical myelographic findings	369
Antigravity mechanisms	690	Color vision	42
Amino acids	594	Complement	432, 488
Amipaque	392	Comprehension disorders	652
Amytrophic lateral sclerosis		Computed tomography	378, 462
with dementia	16	Constructional apraxia	112
Aphasia	652	Craniotomy	681
Apomorphine	227	Creatine kinase	259
Aseptic meningitis	444, 529	Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease	16
Atenolol	547	CSF-albumin	25
Autoantibodies	432	CSF-IgG	25
Autonomic dysfunction	386	CSF lactate dehydrogenase iso-	
Autonomic nervous system	503	enzyme	347
Axoplasmic transport	401	CSF protein patterns	369
		"CSF-specific" proteins	199
Bacterial meningitis	529	CT scan	309, 378, 462
Bannwarth's syndrome	444	Cyclic AMP	267
Basal ganglia	309	Cytomegalovirus	561
BBB permeability	369		
Beta-blockade	289, 547	Death rates	454
Birth order	342, 209	Degenerative neurological diseases ...	199
Blackouts	555	Denervated muscle	521
Blood-brain barrier	25, 392, 482	Diabetes mellitus	386
Blood groups	432	Differential diagnosis of MS	369
Books	288, 513, 723	Diphenylhydantoin	561
Brain amines	16	DI-propranolol	289
Brain antigens	482	Doppler radar	363
Brain atrophy	378	Drinking frequency	555
Brain specific gravity	575	Dyskinesia	227, 363
Brain tissue, decompression	160		
Brain tissue compression	160	EEG	697
Brain tumor	160, 347	Electrical stimulation	521
Brain tumors, differential diagnosis	160	Electroencephalography	462
Brain tumors, heterogeneous		Electromyography	283, 643, 673
blood flow	160	Electroneurography	673
Buccolinguofacial dyskinesias	705	Empty sella syndrome ...	82, 180, 472
		Encephalitis	462
Calcification	309	Epilepsy	172, 396, 561, 601
Carbamazepine	172, 335	Erector spinal muscles	690
Cardiac surgery	697	Essential tremor ...	58, 289, 547, 705

Experimental autoimmune multiple sclerosis-like disease	568	Maturation	575
Evoked potentials	42	Membrane effect	289
Femoxetine	191	Meningism	25
Gamma-amino butyric acid	666	Meningitis	25, 180
Gerbils	601	Meningoencephalitis	529
Glutamate antagonist	536	Mental deterioration	112
Guillain-Barré syndrome	316	Methohexitone	303
Hemodialysis	378	Methoxyhydroxyphenylglycol	267
Hepatotoxicity	396	Metrizamide	392
Herniated lumbar disc	283	Migraine	105, 191
Herpes simplex virus	462	Minor stroke	145
Heterophilic antibodies	488	Mitral valve prolapse	295
Hippocampus	601	Monoclonal gammopathy	643
Histocompatibility antigen	590	Motor neuron disease	594
HLA	432	Multi-infarct dementia	145
HLA antigen	590, 709	Multiple sclerosis	1, 25, 42
Homovanillic acid	267, 666	121, 209, 342, 355, 454, 488, 709	
5-HTP	276	Muscle biopsy	130, 643
5-HT uptake inhibition	276	Muscle contraction	521
Hydrocephalus	82	Myelination	575
6-hydroxydopamine	575	Myelin basic protein	121
5-hydroxyindoleacetic acid	267, 666	Myelin subfractions	568
Hyperlipemia	328	Myelitis	413
Hypophysectomy	681	Myoclonus	276
Idiopathic inflammatory myopathy ..	432	Neonatal treatment	575
IgA	172	Neuromuscular diseases	130, 259
IgG	172	Neuron loss	601
IgG-index	25	Neuropathy	582
IgG synthesis in CNS	369	Neuropsychology	697
IgM	172	Nociception	401
Intellectual function	145	Norwegian Neurol. Assoc. Meeting	508
Intellectual impairment	34	Objective assessment of involuntary	
Involuntary movements	283, 363	movements	363
Immune complexes	1, 488	Occupational chronic toxic	
Immunoglobulin G	482	encephalopathy	34
Immunoglobulin levels	432	“On-off” syndrome	227
Immunohistochemistry	643	Ophthalmoscopy	42
Iontophoresis	401	Optic neuritis	42, 413
Late onset epilepsy	216	Optic neuropathy	42
L-dopa	267	Organic solvents	34
Lisuride	227	Orthostatic hypotension	386
Lymphocyte sensitization	121	Pain	283, 401
Lymphocytic meningo-radiculitis	444	Parkinsonian syndrome ...	112, 267, 590
		Partial seizures of temporal lobe	
		origin	303
		Peripheral nerves	503

Peroneal muscular atrophy	237	Social groups	555
Phenothiazines	248	Society Proceedings	508, 713
Phenytoin	335	Spasticity	248
Phonemic and lexical discrimination	652	Sphenoidal electrodes	303
Pindolol treatment	386	Spinal muscular atrophy	237
Pituitary neoplasm 82, 180, 472,	681	Spinal tissue	594
Platelet aggregation	497	Spreading depression	536
Platelet function	191	Stab wound	482
Plexitis	413	Standing posture	690
Polyneuropathy	643	Stroke in the young	295
Posterior column involvement	690	Stroke prevalence	68
Postoperative complications	681	Subacute spongiform encephalopathy	16
Posture	93, 100	Substantia gelatinosa	401
Postvaccinal encephalitis	413		
Progressive myoclonus epilepsy 666,	673	Temporal lobe lesions	652
Prophylactic treatment	105	Temporal spikes	303
Propranolol	547	Tick bite	444
Prostaglandin inhibitor	105	Tolfenamic acid INN	105
Pseudotumour cerebri	180, 472	Transganglionic degenerative	
		atrophy	401
Quantification of involuntary		Transient ischaemic attacks (TIA) ...	145
movements	363	Tremor	58
Quantification technique	363	Trophic influence on the brain	575
Quantitative EEG	697		
Quantitative Romberg's test ...	93, 100	Uremia	378
rCBF	160	Vaccination	413
Risk of cardiovascular diseases	328	Valproate	396
		Vasculomyelinopathy	413
Sciatica	283	Vinca alkaloids	401
Sella turcica	472	Visual field	42
Sequential study on treatment	347	Visuoperceptive disabilities	112
Serotonin uptake inhibition	191	Vitamin D metabolism	335
Serum lipids	328	Vitamin E	328
Serum myoglobin	259	Vocal cord paralysis	503
Short-term memory	555		
Shy-Drager syndrome	503	X-ray contrast materials	392

Immune complexes in serum and cerebrospinal fluid of multiple sclerosis patients and patients with other neurological diseases	1	<i>A. Salmi, B. Ziola, M. Reunanen, I. Julkunen & O. Wager</i>
Brain monoamine abnormalities in the two types of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease	16	<i>P. Nyberg, B. Almay, A. Carlsson, C. Masters & B. Winblad</i>
Liquor:serum quotients of IgG and albumin in patients with meningism, meningitis and multiple sclerosis	25	<i>N. Peterslund & B. Pedersen</i>
Cerebral blood flow in chronic toxic encephalopathy in house painters exposed to organic solvents	34	<i>P. Arlien-Søborg, L. Henriksen, A. Gade, C. Gyldensted & O. Paulson</i>
Do visual evoked potentials give relevant information to the neuro-ophthalmological examination in optic nerve lesions?	42	<i>E. Nikoskelainen & B. Falck</i>
Essential tremor in a Finnish population	58	<i>I. Rautakorpi, J. Takala, R. Marttila, K. Sievers & U. Rinne</i>
Prevalence of stroke in a district of Copenhagen	68	<i>P. Soelberg Sørensen, G. Boysen, G. Jensen & P. Schnohr</i>
The empty sella and pituitary adenomas	82	<i>P. Bjerre, C. Gyldensted, J. Riishede & J. Lindholm</i>
Quantitative Romberg's test	93	<i>E. Jansen, R. Larsen & M. Olesen</i>
Normal ranges and reproducibility for the quantitative Romberg's test	100	<i>H. Thyssen, J. Brynskov, E. Jansen & J. Münster-Swendsen</i>
Prophylactic treatment of migraine with tolfenamic acid	105	<i>B. Mikkelsen & J. Falk</i>
Mental deterioration, visuoperceptive disabilities and constructional apraxia in Parkinson's disease	112	<i>C. Villardita, P. Smirni, F. Pira, G. Zappala & F. Nicoletti</i>
Sensitization of cerebrospinal fluid and peripheral blood lymphocytes to myelin basic protein in multiple sclerosis	121	<i>A. Czlonkowska, M. Poltorak, W. Cendrowski & J. Korlak</i>
Quantitative analysis of muscle biopsies from volunteers and patients with neuromuscular disorders	130	<i>P. Sandstedt, L.E. Nordell & K. Henriksson</i>

Intellectual function in patients with transient ischaemic attacks (TIA) or minor stroke	145	<i>R. Hemmingsen, B. Mejs-holm, G. Boysen & H. Engell</i>
Regional cerebral blood flow in various types of brain tumor	160	<i>K. Kuroda, T. Skyhøj Olser & N. Lassen</i>
The effect of carbamazepine on serum immunoglobulin concentrations	172	<i>N. Gilhus, R. Strandjord & J. Aarli</i>
Pathogenesis of non-traumatic cerebrospinal fluid rhinorrhea	180	<i>P. Bjerre, J. Lindholm & C. Gyldensted</i>
Changes in platelet function and blood serotonin level in migraine patients during treatment with femoxetine	191	<i>J. Dalsgaard-Nielsen, P. Honoré & I. Zeeberg</i>
Cerebrospinal fluid "specific" proteins in various degenerative neurological diseases	199	<i>C. Wikkelsø & C. Blomstrand</i>
Birth order and multiple sclerosis	209	<i>B. Visscher, K.-S. Liu, C. Sullivan, N. Valdiviezo & R. Detels</i>
Late onset epilepsy	216	<i>G. Ahuja & A. Mohanta</i>
"On-off" phenomena, dyskinesias and dystonias	227	<i>L. Frattola, M. Albizzati, S. Bassi, C. Ferrarese & M. Trabucchi</i>
Hypertrophic type of peroneal muscular atrophy and spinal muscular atrophy in sibilings	237	<i>E. Lope, F. Campo & A. Cabello</i>
Role of alpha-2 adrenergic affinity in the action of a non-sedative antispasticity agent	248	<i>R. Anderson, P. Brigham, W. Cady & K. Kellar</i>
Significance of serum myoglobin in neuromuscular diseases and in carrier detection of Duchenne muscular dystrophy	259	<i>K. Nørregaard-Hansen & O. Hein-Sørensen</i>
Urinary noradrenaline and serotonin metabolites in drug-free Parkinson patients and the effect of L-dopa treatment	267	<i>M. Markianos, M. Hadji-konstantinou & E. Bistolaki</i>
Treatment of myoclonic syndromes with paroxetine alone or combined with 5-HTP	276	<i>I. Magnussen, K. Mondrup, F. Engbæk, A. Lademann & B. Olivarius</i>
Painful legs and moving toes	283	<i>C. Wulff</i>
Books	288	

Propranolol and essential tremor: Role of the membrane effect	289	<i>T. Larsen & H. Teräväinen</i>
Mitral valve prolapse and cerebrovascular accidents in the young	295	<i>J. Tharakan, G. Ahuja, S. Manchanda & A. Khanna</i>
Sequential EEG findings and symptoms in partial seizures of temporal lobe origin	303	<i>R. Sherratt & C. Wulff</i>
Basal ganglia calcification on computer tomographic scan	309	<i>K. Puvanendran, C. Low, H. Boey & K. Tan</i>
A clinical study of Guillain-Barré syndrome	316	<i>T. Andersson & Å. Sidén</i>
Serum lipids and anticonvulsants	328	<i>P. Berlit, K.-H. Krause, C. Heuck & B. Schellenberg</i>
Serum vitamin D metabolites in epileptic patients treated with 2 different anti-convulsants	335	<i>L. Tjellesen & C. Christiansen</i>
Birth order and multiple sclerosis	342	<i>J. Cripps, A. Rudd & G. Ebers</i>
Sequential determinations of cerebrospinal fluid lactate dehydrogenase isoenzyme in human brain tumors on treatment	347	<i>S. Vivekanandan, A. Rao, R. Selvam & T. Kanaka</i>
Age at onset, initial symptomatology and the course of multiple sclerosis	355	<i>S. Poser, N. Raun & W. Poser</i>
Quantification of choreatic movements by Doppler radar	363	<i>O. Buruma, B. Kemp, R. Roos, J. Franzen & E. van der Velde</i>
Cerebrospinal fluid protein findings in cervical syndromes classified by myelography, and in multiple sclerosis	369	<i>Aa. Ahonen, J. Pyhtinen, E. Hokkanen & V. Myllylä</i>
A comparative study of brain atrophy by computerized tomography in chronic renal failure and chronic hemodialysis	378	<i>C. Papageorgiou, P. Ziroyannis, J. Vathylakis, A. Grigoriadis, V. Hatzikonstantinou & Z. Capsalakis</i>
Treatment of diabetic orthostatic hypotension with Pindolol	386	<i>F. Boesen, E. Andersen, I.-L. Kanstrup, B. Hesse & N. Christensen</i>
The blood-brain barrier is impermeable to metrizamide	392	<i>A. Gjedde</i>
2 cases of reversible liver lesion induced by valproate	396	<i>J. Thygesen & F. Boesen</i>

Iontophoretically applied microtubule inhibitors induce transganglionic degenerative atrophy of primary central nociceptive terminals and abolish chronic autochthonous pain	401	<i>E. Knyihár-Csillik, A. Szücs & B. Csillik</i>
Neurological complications of swine influenza vaccination	413	<i>C. Poser</i>
A search for genetic influence in idiopathic inflammatory myopathy	432	<i>G. Walker, F. Mastaglia & D. Roberts</i>
Clinical and cerebrospinal fluid findings in lymphocytic meningoradiculitis (Bannwarth's syndrome)	444	<i>B. Hindfelt, P. Jeppsson, B. Nilsson, J.-E. Olsson, B. Ryberg & R. Sörnäs</i>
Geographical pattern of death rates from multiple sclerosis in France	454	<i>A. Alperovitch & M.-H. Bouvier</i>
Diagnosis of herpes simplex encephalitis	462	<i>E. Brodtkorb, M. Lindqvist, M. Jonsson & Å. Gustafsson</i>
Pseudotumor cerebri. A theory on etiology and pathogenesis	472	<i>P. Bjerre, J. Lindholm & C. Gyldensted</i>
Increased blood-brain barrier dysfunction around cerebral stab wounds in rats immunized to brain antigens	482	<i>I. Gannushkina, B. Johansson & L. Persson</i>
Circulating immune complexes and complement in the course of multiple sclerosis	488	<i>H. Jans, A. Heltberg & N. Raun</i>
Platelet aggregation and multiple sclerosis	497	<i>I. S. Neu, M. Prosielgel & V. Pfaffenrath</i>
Vocal cord paralysis in the Shy-Drager syndrome	505	<i>H. Teräväinen & B. Udd</i>
Norwegian Neurol. Assoc. Meeting	508	
Books	513	

The effect of low-frequency electrical stimulation on the denervated extensor digitorum longus muscle of the rabbit	521	<i>W. Nix</i>
The incidence and aetiology of central nervous system infections in Helsinki in 1980	529	<i>A. Pönkä & T. Pettersson</i>
Selective neuron loss after cerebral ischemia in the rat: Possible role of transmitter glutamate	536	<i>M. Balslev Jørgensen & N. H. Diemer</i>
Atenolol vs. propranolol in essential tremor. A controlled, quantitative study	547	<i>T. Larsen, H. Teräväinen & D. Calne</i>
Blackouts increase with age, social class and the frequency of intoxication	555	<i>K. Poikolainen</i>
Cytomegalovirus antibodies in epileptics receiving diphenylhydantoin	561	<i>P. Andersen, R. Alacam, I. Andersen & H. Andersen</i>
Abnormalities in brain myelin of rabbits with experimental autoimmune multiple sclerosis-like disease induced by immunization to gangliosides	568	<i>G. Konat, H. Offner, V. Lev-Ram, O. Cohen, M. Schwartz, I. Cohen & B.-A. Sela</i>
Specific gravity of brain tissue during maturation	575	<i>B. B. Johansson & L.-E. Linder</i>
The course of alcoholic-nutritional peripheral neuropathy	582	<i>R. Hawley, J. Kurtzke, V. Armbrustmacher, N. Saini & H. Manz</i>
Histocompatibility antigens in Parkinson's disease	590	<i>S. Takagi, Y. Shinohara & K. Tsuji</i>
Free amino acid concentrations in spinal tissue from patients dying of motor neuron disease	594	<i>B. Patten, H. Kurlander & B. Evans</i>

Hippocampal neuron loss in epilepsy and after experimental seizures. Review	601	<i>A. Mouritzen Dam</i>
Monoclonal gammopathy with neurological signs and symptoms	643	<i>M. Mähönen, J. Partanen, Y. Collan, A. Naukkarinen, T. Sorvari, J. Sivenius & P. Riekkinen</i>
Some anatomo-clinical aspects of phonemic and semantic comprehension disorders in aphasia	652	<i>G. Gainotti, G. Miceli, M. Silveri & G. Villa</i>
Decrease of GABA in the cerebrospinal fluid of patients with progressive myoclonus epilepsy and its correlation with the decrease of 5HIAA and HVA	666	<i>E. Airaksinen & E. Leino</i>
Electroneuromyographical and morphological findings in progressive myoclonus epilepsy (PME)	673	<i>R. Danner, E. Leino, J. Partanen, T. Sorvari & P. Riekkinen</i>
Recurrence of chromophobe pituitary adenomas after operation and postoperative radiotherapy	681	<i>J. Salmi, B. Grahne, S. Valtonen & R. Pelkonen</i>
Reflex erector spinal responses in disorders of the central nervous system	690	<i>N. Ertekin & C. Ertekin</i>
Prediction of cerebral outcome after extracorporeal circulation	697	<i>K. Sotaniemi</i>
Essential tremor and buccolinguofacial dyskinesias	705	<i>P. Karttinen & A. Gabellini</i>
Multiple sclerosis – relation between HLA haplotype A25, B18 and disease progression	709	<i>H. Meyer-Rienecker, S. Wegener, B. Hitzschke & K. Richter</i>
Proceedings of the Danish Neurological Society	713	
Books	723	

Serum lipids and anticonvulsants

P. BERLIT¹, K.-H. KRAUSE¹, C. C. HEUCK² AND B. SCHELLENBERG²

The serum lipid levels of 200 epileptics (aged 20 to 40 years) undergoing long-term treatment with anticonvulsants were measured and compared with the levels of a normal population of the same age. The epileptics had higher serum lipid levels (especially of apolipoprotein B and HDL-cholesterol) but no higher incidence of hyperlipemias. A correlation between LDL-cholesterol and vitamin E has been found in epileptics, but it was not as significant as in normals. In male epileptics, positive correlations between the average daily dose of anticonvulsants (especially of those with a well-known enzyme-inducing effect) and triglycerides, cholesterol and LDL-cholesterol were found; in females there were no significant correlations.

Key words: Anticonvulsants – hyperlipemia – risk of cardiovascular diseases – serum lipids – vitamin E.

The different types of hyperlipemias and their importance as a risk factor in cardiovascular diseases have been known for many years. In 1975, new attention was drawn especially to the high-density-lipoproteins (HDL), when *Miller & Miller (1975)* postulated that these lipid fractions are a protective factor against atherosclerosis. In the following years many authors confirmed the fact of a low level of plasma-HDL in patients with cardiovascular diseases (*Berg et al. 1976, Castelli et al. 1977, Fuller et al. 1978, Gordon et al. 1977, Miller et al. 1977, Steinberg 1978*). In various previously reported studies (*Livingston 1976, Luoma et al. 1979, Mertz 1979, Pelkonen et al. 1975, Reunanen & Sotaniemi 1977*) elevated levels of serum lipids had been found in epileptics undergoing long-term treatment with anticonvulsants. Diphenylhydantoin (DPH) and barbiturates especially increase the cholesterol as well as the triglyceride level, possibly via an inducing effect on hepatic enzymes (*Reunanen & Sotaniemi 1977*) or an altered bile acid metabolism (*Miller & Nestel 1973*). Some authors postulated a high risk of cardiovascular diseases (*Pelkonen et al. 1975, Reunanen & Sotaniemi 1977*).

On the other hand, *Linden (1975)* and *Livingston (1976)* suspected a low incidence of myocardial infarction in a large number of epileptic patients. Since the discovery of the above-mentioned protective effect of HDL these observations were thought to be due to an increased HDL-

level in epileptics. *Nikkilä et al.* (1978) found elevated HDL-levels in a small number of epileptics.

The present study was undertaken to compare the serum lipid levels of a larger number of epileptics with the levels of an unselected population of the same age in order to find out whether there is a connection between anticonvulsant drug therapy and hyperlipemias, the single lipid parameters, and the risk of cardiovascular diseases. In addition we tested to see if the highly significant correlation between LDL-cholesterol and vitamin E, shown in healthy adults (*Brubacher et al.* 1974), also exists in epileptics undergoing anticonvulsant treatment.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A total of 200 epileptics (127 males and 73 females) aged 20 to 40 years were investigated. Each of them had been undergoing anticonvulsant therapy for at least 1 year. Because most of the epileptics were undergoing a combination therapy with several anticonvulsants, a calculation of equivalent units (modified after *Richens & Rowe* 1970) was made*; the anticonvulsants were divided into those with a well-known enzyme-inducing effect (phenytoin, phenobarbital, primidone, carbamazepine, mephenytoin) and others. The daily intake as well as the total amount of equivalent units since start of therapy were calculated and compared with the lipid levels.

The fasting serum levels of triglycerides and cholesterol were determined following the procedure of the *Lipid Research Clinics* (1974); the determination of the phospholipids after ashing with trichloro-acetic acid-precipitates followed the method of *Boehringer (Zöllner & Eberhagen* 1965). The fractionation of the lipoproteins was carried out by ultracentrifugation (*Technicon Instruments* 1972); apolipoprotein B was measured by immunonephelometric quantitation (*Heuck & Schlierf* 1979).

The lipid levels of the epileptics were compared with those of a normal population of the same age from the same area (*Arab et al.* 1981). 2 lipid fractions (phospholipids, LDL-cholesterol) were not measured in the group of normal males. For these cases, the normal values of the medical laboratory Heidelberg were used.

Statistical analysis of the data employed Student's *t*-test and regression analysis.

* 1 equivalent unit = 50 mg phenytoin, 30 mg phenobarbital, 125 mg primidone, 50 mg CHP-phenobarbital, 200 mg carbamazepine, 50 mg mephenytoin, 250 mg ethosuximide, 300 mg valproate sodium, 2 mg clonazepam, 300 mg mesuximide, 100 mg sulthiam, 250 mg trimethadione.

Table 1. Mean range and standard deviation of serum lipids in epileptics and normals

	Triglyc. ¹	Chol. ¹	Phos- phol. ¹	LDL- chol. ¹	HDL- chol. ¹	APO-B ²	
Epileptics (n = 127)	1.36 ± 0.77	5.41 ^d ± 1.06	2.87 ± 0.67	3.42 ± 0.92	1.27 ^b ± 0.35	113 ^a ± 31	♂
Normals (n > 500)	1.30 ± 1.08	5.21 ± 1.09	2.80 ± 0.47	3.33 ± 0.81	1.12 ± 0.31	91 ± 22	
Epileptics (n = 73)	1.14 ^d ± 0.38	5.68 ^b ± 1.01	3.11 ± 0.68	3.39 ^c ± 0.89	1.63 ^b ± 0.37	115 ^a ± 35	♀
Normals (n > 500)	1.06 ± 0.38	5.26 ± 0.96	3.09 ± 0.60	3.18 ± 0.91	1.41 ± 0.31	91 ± 23	

¹ mmol/l² mg/dlSignificances in the *t*-test:^a *P* < 0.0001 ^c *P* < 0.005^b *P* < 0.001 ^d 0.1 > *P* > 0.05

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean range and the standard deviation of serum lipid levels of the epileptic patients in comparison with the normal population. All lipid fractions showed higher levels in the patients treated with anti-convulsants. The apolipoprotein B- and the HDL-cholesterol levels were most clearly elevated. In male patients, the HDL-cholesterol levels were elevated about 11 %, in females about 18 % when compared with the group of normals. The 14 epileptics with a high HDL-cholesterol > 2.0 mmol/l had a significantly higher cholesterol level (6.36 mmol/l), compared with the rest of this group (5.48 mmol/l). The triglyceride levels as well as the LDL-cholesterol levels were within normal ranges in these patients.

In epileptics the incidence of hyperlipemias was not higher than in normals: 4.7 % of the group had a type IV, 1.6 % a type IIa and 1 single patient a type IIb hyperlipemia.

The results of the statistical analysis of the lipid levels in correlation with the average daily and total intakes of equivalent units are shown in Table 2. In male epileptics we found positive correlations between the average daily dose of anticonvulsants (equivalent units/d) and the triglycerides (*P* < 0.01), the cholesterol (*P* < 0.003) and the LDL-cholesterol (*P* < 0.003). Taking only the daily dose of enzyme-inducing anticonvulsants into consideration, the significance becomes higher (triglycerides *P* <

Table 2. Regression analysis between anticonvulsants and serum lipids
(N.S. = non significant)

		P	
		♂	♀
Total amount of anti-convulsants (equivalent units)	Tg., Chol., Pl., LDL-chol., HDL-chol., Apo-B	N.S.	N.S.
Total amount of enzyme inducing anticonvulsants (equivalent units)	Tg., Chol., Pl., LDL-chol., HDL-chol., Apo-B	N.S.	N.S.
Average daily intake of anti-convulsants (equivalent units/d)	triglycerides	0.010	N.S.
	cholesterol	0.003	N.S.
	LDL-cholesterol	0.033	N.S.
	HDL-cholesterol	N.S.	0.057
Average daily intake of enzyme inducing anticonvulsants (equivalent units/d)	triglycerides	0.0009	N.S.
	cholesterol	0.0003	N.S.

0.0009, cholesterol $P < 0.0003$). Because of the small number (11) of patients undergoing monotherapy with drugs without known enzyme-inducing effect, no statistical analysis of these cases was made. In females we found no significant correlations.

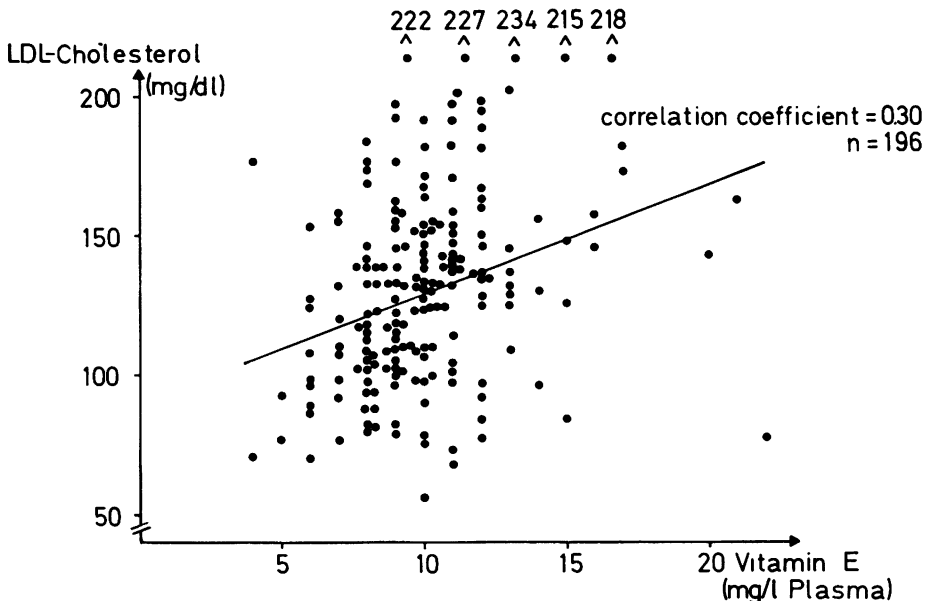


Fig. 1. Correlation between vitamin E and LDL-cholesterol in epileptics.

In addition, a correlation analysis between the LDL-cholesterol and vitamin E has been carried out. Testing these 2 parameters we found a significant correlation (coefficient 0.30, $P < 0.001$, Fig. 1).

DISCUSSION

While *Nikkilä et al.* (1978) found an elevation of HDL-cholesterol and VLDL-triglyceride as well as a lowering of LDL-cholesterol in their patients, in the present study all lipid fractions were elevated in patients of both sexes. These results suggest a general influence of anticonvulsants on the lipid status. The findings of significant positive correlations between some of the lipid fractions and the average daily dose of anticonvulsants (especially of those with a well-known enzyme-inducing effect) support this suggestion. There were different findings in female and male epileptics: only the male patients showed a significant correlation between triglyceride, cholesterol and LDL-cholesterol and the average daily antiepileptic drug dose. Probably this fact is due to the smaller number of females examined. But also one has to consider an interference from female sexual hormones, which are known to influence the enzyme induction (*Conney* 1967).

On the other hand, only women showed a probable correlation of HDL-cholesterol with the average daily drug intake. These results are consistent with those of *Luoma et al.* (1980) who described a significant elevation of HDL-cholesterol only in female patients. In contrast *Nikkilä et al.* (1978) found a more marked elevation of HDL-cholesterol in males. The evidence of sex-linked differences in the influence of antiepileptic drug treatment on the lipid status should be controlled with larger groups, taking constitutional factors, such as height, weight and Broca-index, into consideration.

The elevation of HDL-cholesterol in our patients was higher than that of cholesterol, but lower than the elevation of apolipoprotein B in males as well as in females. Since this apolipoprotein plays a role in the deposition of lipids into blood-vessels (*Fischer-Dzoga et al.* 1976), it is unlikely that the influence of anticonvulsants on the lipid status leads to a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases in epileptics. Corresponding to this prediction, *Hauser et al.* (1980) in their epidemiological study found no lowered mortality rates of cardiovascular diseases in epileptics. The increase of HDL-cholesterol seems to be part of an elevation of all serum lipids in patients undergoing anticonvulsant treatment. These findings are consistent with the observations of *Luoma et al.* (1979), who suggested that the increase of plasma HDL-cholesterol was influenced by the endogenous lipid metabolism.

Reviewing the connection between LDL-cholesterol and the vitamin E-plasma-level in treated epileptics we found a positive correlation, but it was not as significant as that of the normal group examined by *Brubacher et al.* (1974). This fact may be due to the altering of the lipid status by the anticonvulsants, but one also has to consider a possible influence of antiepileptic drugs on the vitamin E-metabolism.

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