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## Herpes Viruses and Senile Dementia: First Population Evidence for a Causal Link

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1    Commentary. J. Alzheimer Disease, in press

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3    **Herpes Viruses and Senile Dementia: First Population**  
4    **Evidence for a Causal Link**

5

6    **Ruth F. Itzhaki<sup>a,b,\*</sup> and Richard Lathe<sup>c,\*</sup>**

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8    <sup>a</sup> *Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, UK*

9    <sup>b</sup> *Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK*

10   <sup>c</sup> *Division of Infection and Pathway Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Little France, Edinburgh,*  
11   *UK*

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13    \*Correspondence to: E-mail: [ruth.itzhaki@ndcn.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.itzhaki@ndcn.ox.ac.uk) (R.F.Itzhaki); [richardlathe@ed.ac.uk](mailto:richardlathe@ed.ac.uk) (R.  
14    Lathe).

1 Three articles have very recently appeared that are of especial relevance to the causes of dementia  
2 and its potential treatment. The first two (Tsai *et al.*, published in *PLoS One* in November 2017, and  
3 (Chen *et al.*, published in the January/February 2018 issue of *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*)  
4 demonstrate an increased risk of subsequent senile dementia (SD) development in patients with  
5 acute varicella zoster (herpes zoster) infection. These articles present data highly relevant to the  
6 third, and most important, paper – by Tzeng *et al.*, published online in the journal  
7 *Neurotherapeutics* at the end of February 2018. These authors report that infection with a different  
8 herpes virus, herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV1), leads to a similarly increased risk of later  
9 developing SD. Further, when the authors looked at patients treated aggressively with antiherpetic  
10 medications at the time, the relative SD risk was reduced by a factor of 10. It should be stressed that  
11 no investigations were made on subjects already suffering from SD, and that those treated were the  
12 few rare cases severely affected by HSV. Nonetheless, antiherpetic medication prevented later SD  
13 development in 90% of their study group. These articles provide the first population evidence for a  
14 causal link between herpes virus infection and senile dementia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

2

3 Alzheimer disease (AD) is a devastating neurological disorder that principally affects the elderly,  
4 but no effective treatments are yet available. Therapeutic approaches have focused on removing the  
5 AD signature peptide A $\beta$ , but these have, without exception, been unsuccessful. Findings that  
6 infectious agents such as herpes viruses are present in brain and can induce A $\beta$  and AD-like tau, the  
7 main components of the abnormal features of AD brains, have led to the proposal that herpes virus  
8 infection, in particular, might underlie some cases of senile dementia (SD) ([1] for overview).  
9 Recent work from Taiwan casts new light on this issue.

10

11 Most of the population harbors latent infections with several types of herpes viruses that are  
12 acquired during their lifetimes. Infection rates in neonates are very low but, in the case of herpes  
13 simplex virus type 1 (HSV1), by age 70 years some 80–90% or more of the population is  
14 seropositive. The virus is present also in brain [2] in many elderly people and AD patients, and it  
15 was proposed that sporadic reactivation of latent HSV1 in the brain, particularly in *APOE- $\epsilon 4$*   
16 carriers, might confer an increased risk of later developing AD [2]. (Also, *APOE- $\epsilon 4$*  was found to  
17 be a risk for cold sores, which are caused usually by HSV1). However, validation of a viral link  
18 demands epidemiologic evaluation at the population level, a logistically daunting task because  
19 sufficiently comprehensive data are not available in most countries.

20

21 By contrast, in Taiwan researchers are beginning to interrogate the Taiwan National Health  
22 Insurance Research Database. This database was launched in 1995, and as of 2014 99.9% of the  
23 population has been enrolled (<https://nhird.nhri.org.tw/en/>). Thought-provoking findings are now  
24 beginning to emerge, and we highlight three recent papers that begin to address potential links  
25 between herpes virus infection and SD.

26

## 27 VARICELLA ZOSTER VIRUS (VZV)

28

29 The first two studies focus on VZV, a herpes virus that causes chickenpox and which, like HSV1,  
30 remains in the body for life. In some people VZV reactivates in older age causing shingles, referred  
31 to as herpes zoster (HZ), and when the eye is involved, as herpes zoster ophthalmicus (HZO).

32

33 In the first paper, published in *PLoS One* in November 2017, Tsai *et al.* [3] looked at the risk of  
34 dementia in patients (mean age 61.6 years) diagnosed with HZO as of 2005, and examined whether  
35 they later developed SD. They studied a target HZO group of 846 patients, contrasted with an age-

1 matched control group of 2538. Of patients with HZO, 4.16% developed SD within the 5 year  
2 follow-up period, versus 1.65% in the controls ( $P<0.001$ ). This represents a relative risk ratio of  
3 developing SD within 5 years of HZO diagnosis of 2.82–2.97 (depending on statistical adjustment),  
4 a finding comparable to the relative risk (ca. threefold) associated with harboring a single *APOE*  $\epsilon$ 4  
5 risk allele ([4]; reviewed in [5]).

6  
7 The second paper, by Chen *et al.* [6], published in the January/February 2018 issue of the *Journal of*  
8 *Clinical Psychiatry*, examined the frequency of later SD development in patients aged 50–90 years  
9 diagnosed with VZV infection in the period 1997–2013, with a mean follow-up period of 6.2 years.  
10 They compared SD outcomes in 39 205 VZV patients versus 39 205 controls.

11  
12 In this study the incidence of SD was only marginally increased in the VZV patients (risk ratio 1.11,  
13 95% CI 1.04–1.17;  $P=0.0014$ ), in contrast to the major increase after HZO. Possibly in HZO there  
14 is a greater likelihood of the virus reaching the brain (as opposed to the peripheral infections in  
15 most VZV patients). However, when Chen *et al.* compared VZV patients treated with antiviral  
16 therapy (AVT, including all forms of acyclovir, tromantadine, famciclovir, valacyclovir) versus  
17 untreated VZV patients, there was a major effect on the outcome. The risk of SD in VZV patients  
18 receiving AVT was reduced by a factor of 0.47 (adjusted 0.55; 95% CI 0.34–0.65 and 0.40–0.77)  
19 [6]. In other words, VZV patients receiving AVT were half as likely to develop SD during the  
20 follow-up period, a highly significant result ( $P<0.0001$ ).

21  
22 Although the potential involvement of herpes viruses in SD has been widely debated, VZV itself  
23 has not so far been suggested as a prospective cause of SD. The sole study that searched for VZV  
24 DNA in brain of aged normal people and of AD patients by PCR failed to detect it (sensitivity: <10  
25 VZV sequences per sample) [7]. However, the finding that AVT (the agents used by Chen *et al.*  
26 block the replication of both VZV and HSV, but have no effect on the latent viruses) reduces the  
27 risk of later SD is consistent with other interpretations. Because the immune system declines with  
28 age, some older people (notably carriers of risk alleles of immunomodulatory APOE) may be more  
29 susceptible to infections. Inflammation (a known reactivator of latent HSV1) occurring as a result  
30 of infection (e.g., with VZV) could then lead to reactivation of other latent viruses in brain. The  
31 majority of the adult population already harbors latent infections with viruses such as HSV1, but  
32 there is direct evidence that infection with another herpes virus, cytomegalovirus, can reactivate  
33 HSV1 [8]. This was attributed to the increased reactivation rate of CMV on aging (which, the auth  
34 found, applied also to another herpesvirus, Epstein-Barr virus [Stowe *et al.*, 2007].) Hence,

1 suppression of some VZV infections by AVT medication could plausibly reduce the likelihood of  
2 reactivation of other related viruses and the resulting damage.

#### 4 **HERPES SIMPLEX VIRUS (HSV)**

5  
6 The third paper, by Tzeng *et al.* [9], now published online in the journal *Neurotherapeutics*, is  
7 equally intriguing. Using the same database, the authors identified 8362 subjects aged  $\geq 50$  years  
8 during the period January to December 2000 who were newly diagnosed with HSV (HSV1 or 2)  
9 infections. Infection was defined as at least three outpatient visits within the index year, which  
10 presumably means that all the patients had recurrent and severe overt signs of infection such as  
11 genital ulceration and/or severe herpes labialis. In each case HSV infection was confirmed by  
12 ELISA, antibody test, or PCR. This study group was compared to a control group of 25 086 age-  
13 and gender-matched individuals with no HSV infection history during the index year. The authors  
14 then monitored the development of SD in these individuals over a follow-up period of 10 years  
15 (2001–2010).

16  
17 The risk of developing SD in the HSV group was increased by a factor of 2.542 (2.564 after  
18 statistical adjustment, 95% CI 2.351–2.795;  $P < 0.001$ ), comparable to the risk associated with  
19 ophthalmic VZV infection (2.82–2.97, Tsai *et al.* [3]), but well above the risk associated with  
20 general VZV infection (1.11, Chen *et al.* [6]). The effect was largely restricted to HSV1 infections,  
21 although a small risk associated with HSV2 was also noted. When SD was subtyped into AD and  
22 vascular dementia, similar risk profiles were found in both cases.

23  
24 Remarkably, when the authors compared those among the HSV cohort who were treated with AVT  
25 (the same agents as those examined by Chen *et al.*) at the time, versus those who did not receive  
26 AVT, there was a dramatic reduction in the later incidence of SD. The overall risk of SD  
27 development in the 10 year follow-up period was reduced by at least 80% (adjusted relative risk  
28 factor = 0.092, 95% CI 0.079–0.108,  $P < 0.001$ ) in those receiving any one of several AVT  
29 medications, compared to individuals who received no AVT; protection was greater in those treated  
30 for longer times ( $> 30$  days versus  $< 30$  days).

31  
32 Not only is the magnitude of the AVT effect remarkable, but also the fact that – despite the  
33 relatively brief duration of treatment – AVT appeared to prevent the long-term damage in brain that  
34 results in SD. The mechanism by which AVT might prevent later-life SD development remains  
35 unknown. To speculate, it could reduce the likelihood that HSV1 in the periphery reaches the brain,

1 based on the assumption that passage generally occurs in middle age when the immune system  
2 starts to decline. The Taiwan study group ( $\geq 50$  years of age) subjects were selected as having newly  
3 diagnosed HSV infection, although whether they had newly acquired infection or reactivation of  
4 existing (latent) infection is uncertain. In either case, however, AVT would greatly reduce viral  
5 replication in the periphery, thereby reducing the likelihood that peripheral virus travels to the brain.  
6 Because AVT treatment might only delay (rather than prevent) transmission to the brain, extending  
7 the Taiwan survey for 5–10 years could determine whether SD cases later increase in the treated  
8 cohort. Investigation to seek HSV1 DNA in the brain *post mortem* of any such subsequent cases of  
9 dementia, and of those who remained free of the disease, might help to elucidate the situation.

10

## 11 CAVEATS AND CONCLUSIONS

12

13 To our knowledge, these three papers provide the first population-level evidence for a link between  
14 herpes infection and later SD development, and of the possible preventive efficacy of AVT – with  
15 potential implications for the clinical management of acute infections with HSV and VZV.  
16 Although the antiviral agents employed are very specific against the Herpesviridae, the three papers  
17 do not yet prove a causal link between infection with a specific virus and SD. The key study by  
18 Tzeng *et al.* [9] has also some limitations that we highlight below.

19

20 First, the paper does not present any comprehensive data on the exact numbers of patients in each  
21 category of dementia, but relies instead on relative risk factors, an omission that further reports  
22 from the investigators will need to address. Second, in European and North American populations  
23 the patient group presenting with acute HSV infection is strongly biased in favor of females,  
24 whereas in the Taiwan study group an excess of males was seen. There is no obvious explanation  
25 for this discrepancy, although it is possible that societal, environmental, and/or genetic differences  
26 might underlie this difference.

27

28 Third, the study group in Tzeng *et al.* [9] was selected by their susceptibility to severe overt HSV  
29 infection; equivalent studies on subpopulations susceptible to other types of infection would be  
30 valuable. Another study – a 10 year follow-up of patients with chronic periodontitis/gingivitis in the  
31 index year – did reveal a small trend towards an increased rate of SD in patients versus controls  
32 (1.13% versus 0.92%) [10], but focused examination of brain-related infections (for example,  
33 bacterial conjunctivitis/encephalitis/meningitis, as well as viral encephalitis) could help to evaluate  
34 the relative proportions of SD cases that might be attributed to herpes viruses versus other  
35 infectious agents.

1

2 Fourth, the incidence of SD in the study group (acute HSV infection;  $n = 8362$ ) represents a very  
3 small proportion of total SD cases. In a population of 24 million (Taiwan), making some  
4 assumptions regarding mean age and SD incidence in the general population, the calculated number  
5 of SD cases in this group would represent at most well under 1% of all SD cases in that country. In  
6 the absence of further data it is not possible to know whether viral infection might be a contributory  
7 factor to SD development more generally, or is likely to be responsible for only a minority of SD  
8 cases.

9

10 Fifth, these results are so far unreplicated. Findings in Taiwan may not be representative of other  
11 populations worldwide, and studies elsewhere will be essential for confirming or otherwise these  
12 data. Nonetheless, over 130 studies to date, using a variety of approaches, support a major role for  
13 HSV1 in AD; it is possible that the broad conclusions of the Taiwanese studies might also apply to  
14 the high proportion of individuals who, although HSV1-seropositive, have remained largely  
15 asymptomatic to date.

16

17 It must be stressed that these studies give no information about subjects who already suffer from  
18 SD: the data apply only to AVT in a small minority group applied well before any obvious  
19 symptoms of dementia. Although a clinical trial to evaluate the potential of AVT in early SD has  
20 been initiated [11], it will take several years before any results become available. The finding that  
21 AVT can prevent later SD development, albeit in a very small proportion of the population, does  
22 directly implicate herpes infection as a causal factor in at least some cases. Although the principle is  
23 now firmly established, its generality requires independent replication, and, importantly, the  
24 proportion of SD cases that might be attributed to virus infection remains unknown – and still might  
25 represent only a minority. Despite these important caveats, these three thought-provoking reports  
26 will undoubtedly stimulate further investigations into the link between infection and SD.



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