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Citation for published version:

Haas, J & Lathe, R 2018, 'Microbes and Alzheimer's Disease: New Findings Call for a Paradigm Change', *Trends in Neurosciences*, vol. 41, no. 9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2018.07.001>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1016/j.tins.2018.07.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2018.07.001)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Trends in Neurosciences

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Microbes and Alzheimer's Disease: New Findings Call for a Paradigm Change

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Keywords: neurodegeneration; antimicrobial protein; herpesvirus; HSV-1; HHV-6;
HHV-7.

References: 10

Text wordcount: 1820

Abstract: 68

Items: 1 Figure

1 Abstract

2

3 Two papers in *Neuron* provide compelling new indications of a link between
4 herpesviruses and Alzheimer's disease (AD). Readhead *et al.* report an
5 increased abundance of human herpesvirus 6A and 7 (HHV-6A/7) in AD brain,
6 whereas Eimar *et al.* show that binding of the AD signature protein, A β , to
7 herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and HHV-6 surface glycoproteins causes
8 fibrillar A β agglutination that can protect against viral challenge.

1 Main text

2
3 Two new papers in *Neuron*, by Readhead *et al.* [1] and Eimer *et al.* [2], provide fresh
4 impetus to the link between infection and Alzheimer disease (AD). A causal
5 association has long been suspected [3], underlined by escalating data indicating that
6 a key signature of AD – amyloid- β (A β) – can act as an antimicrobial defense peptide
7 [4].

8
9 Because the majority of the adult population already harbors subclinical infections
10 with several herpesviruses, including HSV-1, HHV-6/7 and Epstein–Barr virus (EBV),
11 it seems plausible that a declining immune system with age might permit reactivation
12 of erstwhile silent viruses, and thereby exacerbate pathology stemming from other
13 causes [4]. An alternative hypothesis, however – which recent studies seem to
14 reinforce – places viral infection as a more central player, arguing that viruses such
15 as those mentioned above are essential triggers of the pathophysiology.

17 **Herpesviruses: Evidence for Causation**

18
19 To place these recent developments in context, it should be mentioned that evidence
20 has recently emerged supporting a causal link between AD development and
21 infection with HSV-1, and possibly HSV-2. Briefly, based on retrospective analyses,
22 population data from Taiwan argue that 10 year AD development in patients with
23 severe herpesvirus infection could be prevented, in ~90% of treated patients, by
24 aggressive antiviral medication at time of the infection [5,6]. It should be underscored
25 that the treated population in this study was limited to subjects severely affected by

1 HSV. Nevertheless, this study firmly demonstrates, we would argue, that
2 herpesviruses can indeed cause AD, in line with earlier pioneering work by Ruth
3 Itzhaki and others ([3] and references therein). Two key questions arise, however: (i)
4 which of the different herpesvirus species are relevant for the emergence of AD? –
5 and (ii) in the broader picture of AD across the population, are the herpesvirus-linked
6 cases exceptional ones, or is the microbial connection a more general feature of the
7 disease? The paper by Readhead *et al.* [1] tackles both questions head-on.

9 **Over-Representation of Human Herpesviruses in AD**

10
11 To date, most studies on herpesviruses in AD have focused on HSV-1. HSV-1 DNA is
12 widely found both in AD brain and in control tissue. In AD brain, an association was
13 demonstrated between HSV1 and A β plaques. By contrast, herpesviruses such as
14 HHV-6 have been so far predominantly implicated in multiple sclerosis, but (to our
15 knowledge) not in AD. The striking new results from Readhead *et al.* [1] cut across
16 this compartmentalization.

17
18 The team led by Joel Dudley, based at Mount Sinai, New York, started out by looking
19 for possible commonalities that might underpin the spectrum of gene regulation
20 changes seen in AD brain. Unexpectedly, this analysis highlighted transcription
21 factors such as C2H2-TF, and also G-quadruplex (G4) motifs, that are known to be
22 involved in regulating viral transcription. The researchers then inspected AD brain
23 samples for 515 known human viruses. Strikingly, they discovered that transcripts of
24 specific herpesviruses are increased in AD brain – predominantly HHV-6A and HHV-7,
25 although there was also evidence of over-representation of HSV-1 and HSV-2

1 transcripts. These patterns held up when three different banks of AD samples were
2 inspected (Figure 1). Notably, the overabundance was not restricted to a few
3 exceptional cases, but from the data at hand appears to be a more general feature of
4 AD. Other potential AD-linked pathogens including spirochetes (as proposed by
5 Miklossy and others) were not surveyed; further work in this direction will be essential.

6
7 The researchers also found increased abundance of HHV-6A (and HSV-2) DNA, in
8 line with earlier work [7], pointing to active viral replication in AD brain. Moreover, the
9 presence of HHV-6A and HHV-7 was significantly associated with severity of
10 dementia and brain pathology. In further support of a link, genetic variants linked to
11 infection with these viruses overlapped with genes known to be involved in host–virus
12 interactions and panels of 'AD risk' genes. Of note, similarly to HSV-1/2, HHV-6 and -
13 7 are well-known causes of viral encephalitis, in particular in immunocompromised
14 individuals, and have also been shown to be associated with demyelinating brain
15 diseases.

16 17 **The AD Signature Protein A β Targets Herpesviruses**

18
19 In the same issue of *Neuron*, Rob Moir, Rudy Tanzi, and colleagues at Harvard [2],
20 extending their earlier seminal findings that the AD signature protein A β is an
21 antimicrobial peptide [4] (independently validated by researchers at Sherbrooke and
22 elsewhere), now confirm that A β binds to HSV-1 and HHV-6 surface glycoproteins,
23 and causes fibrillar agglutination and protection against virus challenge, further
24 reinforcing the link between herpesviruses, A β , and AD.

1 Drivers or Passengers? Differential Tropism Could Point the Way Forward

2
3 Readhead *et al.* highlight the challenge ahead: "Distinguishing the earliest drivers of
4 disease from the 'opportunistic passengers' of a multi-decade neurodegenerative
5 process is especially formidable..." [1]. In other words, herpesvirus infection of key
6 degenerating brain tissues in clinical AD might either be a causal component/cofactor
7 of the disease or, alternatively, represent opportunistic invasion of brain tissues that
8 are damaged early in AD progression. An important consideration is the frequently
9 observed invasion of inflammatory immune cells into brain areas most prominently
10 affected by AD. As discussed next, the differential tropism of the viruses might offer
11 an insight.

12
13 HSV-1 and HSV-2 are considered to be 'neurotropic', in that they have a predilection
14 to infect and replicate in neurons. By contrast, the HHVs as a group have generally
15 been dubbed 'lymphotropic', in that they principally target immune cells, including T
16 cells and macrophages. HHVs have also been reported to infect glial cells (e.g.,
17 oligodendrocytes). Viral tissue tropism can be ascribed mainly – but not exclusively –
18 to the expression of their cellular receptors. Work has been done on identifying
19 receptors for HSV-1 and mapping them in the human brain (e.g., [8]), but much less
20 is known about receptors and coreceptors for HHVs. Overall, based on the existing
21 data, it seems that the dichotomy of neuro- versus lymphotropic viruses is in fact
22 inaccurate, although it serves well to illustrate potential reciprocal interactions
23 between HHV-6A/B, HHV-7, and HSV-1/2 *in vivo*, by highlighting their action via
24 different pathways, and potentially differential contributions of different herpesvirus
25 species.

AD is accompanied by a major CNS influx of proinflammatory immune cells, including macrophages as well as T and B cells. Accordingly, it is conceivable that invading cells harboring episomal or integrated HHV genomes might have skewed the AD versus non-AD ratio of viral transcripts detected by Readhead *et al.* [1]. With that in mind, it would be very interesting to study the distribution of HHV genomes in neuronal versus non-neuronal cells.

In addition, active herpesvirus infections can foster reactivation of other latent herpesviruses: for example, human cytomegalovirus infection can be accompanied by reactivation of latent HSV-1. In this regard, a 2016 paper by Chapenko *et al.* [9] is notable. Briefly, in this study on unspecified encephalopathy (UCP), some 30–80% of all human brain samples (controls and UCP patients) were positive for both HHV-6 and HHV-7, and there was no significant difference in positivity between controls and UCP patients. However, there was a highly significant (roughly 100-fold) increase in HHV-6 genome content in the frontal and temporal lobes of UCP patients [9]. Despite diagnostic caveats, it seems clear that some event (or events) in these individuals switched HHV replication on – perhaps by genome reactivation induced by another triggering factor/agent, or by an influx of susceptible cells, or possibly both.

Conclusions: Rethinking AD from Scratch

Immense effort has been expended on targeting A β , based on the overall premise of A β being a key driver of the pathophysiology of the disease. Despite significant resource investment, and clinical testing of a large number of compounds, this

1 approach has so far been unsuccessful. The realization that A β can act as a crucial
2 defense molecule calls for a reformation of its role in the disease, and – we think –
3 reconsideration of the priorities in exploring possible treatments strategies (or
4 preventive measures). The papers by Readhead *et al.* [1] and Eimer *et al.* [2], as well
5 as Tzeng *et al.* [5] and others, have brought herpesviruses (and other pathogens) to
6 the fore as vital contributors to AD development. But obviously, questions remain. For
7 instance, how broad is the set of pathogens that can be linked to AD? And are they
8 merely opportunist infections of a degenerating brain?

9
10 Retrospective epidemiological studies linking HSV-1 and AD [5,6], as discussed
11 earlier, coupled with a recent study by Rathore *et al.* at Genentech reporting that
12 genetic variants in PILRA, a receptor for HSV-1 glycoprotein B (and that affect HSV-1
13 viral entry into cells), are associated with AD [10], do indicate that HSV-1 may play a
14 direct role in disease development. Interestingly, other potential HSV receptor genes
15 are located within the *APOE* locus, an observation which could offer a new
16 perspective on some of the linkages between *APOE* variants and AD. Regardless,
17 however, it could well be that the role of HSV-1 in AD pathology is more complex than
18 it seems. It is possible, for instance, that HSV-1 inevitably brings in HHVs, by immune
19 cell recruitment and/or reactivation, leading to 'double pathology'. The Readhead *et al.*
20 paper [1] is a convincing demonstration that HHVs are also likely to play a role.

21
22 But what is it that first triggers AD? It does not seem to be infection *per se*, because
23 many of the viruses discussed above are fairly prevalent, and are found in many
24 subjects who do not eventually develop AD. Key 'AD genes' encoding immune
25 system modulators such as *APOE* are clearly important (and *APOE* alleles modulate

1 susceptibility to diverse pathogens including herpesviruses, HIV, *Chlamydia*, and
2 malaria); lifestyle factors such as stress may play a role as well. Squinting ahead, it
3 could be that a combination of infection, genes, age, and environment might explain
4 a majority of AD cases.

5
6 However, lest we spend too much time peering into the mist, priorities in searching
7 for cures should be focused – we think – on what we do know at this point. As it
8 stands, the field has established that viruses are somewhere central in the causal
9 chain, at least in a subset of AD patients. We believe that the increasing evidence
10 over the past few years – including the papers by Readhead *et al.* and Eimer *et al.* –
11 that chronic infections and defense mechanisms including inflammatory processes
12 are central to AD, warrants revisiting antiviral drugs such as aciclovir (and possibly
13 also vaccination) as potential routes to combating AD.

14
15 As a final note, whereas herpesviruses have emerged as a recurring theme in
16 several recent studies on AD, other pathogenic candidates have been identified as
17 well, and future work should not be solely limited to herpesviruses. Both spirochetes
18 and fungi, for instance, have been previously associated with AD. And in their study,
19 Readhead *et al.* detected traces of diverse pathogens such as human adenovirus,
20 Ippya arenavirus, Torque teno virus, and Kaposi sarcoma-associated herpesvirus in
21 AD brain. More broadly, it would be important, we think, to examine the possible role
22 of pathogens in the etiology of other neurodegenerative diseases, including
23 Parkinson's disease, where an infectious component has long been speculated.

24
25 **Conflict of Interest Statement**

1

2 R.L. has previously acted as a consultant to industry in the field of AD.

Figure 1. Differential Abundance of Viral Transcripts in Alzheimer's Disease (AD) Versus Control Brain Samples. Figure adapted, with permission, from Figure 2 of Readhead *et al.* [1]. Abbreviations: KSHV, Kaposi sarcoma associated herpesvirus; MAP, Memory and Aging Project (prefrontal cortex); MAYO, Mayo Clinic Brain Bank (temporal cortex); MSBB, Mount Sinai Brain Bank (cortex); ROS, Religious Orders Study (prefrontal cortex).

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