Session NANO11 - Recovery Mechanisms From Brain Injury

NANO11.06 - In Vivo Detection of Pathology at the Depths of Cortical Sulci in Sports Repetitive Head Impacts

October 6, 2024, 9:15 AM - 9:30 AM | MCP Room N426

Session Type
Nanosymposium

Grant Support
Dana Foundation

Grant Support
R01NS123374

Grant Support
R01NS082432

Grant Support
T32GM149364-01

Grant Support
3R01NS123374-02S1

Citation
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Disclosures
B. DeMessie: None. W. Stewart: None. R. Lipton: E. Ownership Interest (stock, stock options, royalty, receipt of intellectual property rights/patent holder, excluding diversified mutual funds); Holds stock and stock options in Axon, Biohaven Holdings, CoolTech and Manistee. F. Consulting Fees (e.g., advisory boards); Serves as consultant, advisory board member, or has received honoraria from: Abbvie (Allergan), American Academy of Neurology, American Headache Society, Amgen, Avanir, Axon, Axsome, Biohaven, Biovis. Other; Receives royalties from Wolff's Headache 7th and 8th Edition, Oxford Press University, 2009, Wiley and Informa. M. Zimmerman: None. M. Kim: None. K. Ye: None. T. Kaminski: None. R. Fleysher: None. M.L. Lipton: None.

Abstract
Post-mortem evidence suggests the depths of sulci (DoS) are vulnerable to repetitive head impacts (RHI). Diffusion MRI (dMRI) has identified microstructural features of brain injury but has largely overlooked the juxtacortical white matter (jWM). We assessed the relationship of RHI due to heading in soccer players with dMRI in jWM at DoS. RHI has been associated with worse verbal learning; we tested the mediating role of dMRI in this relationship.

Healthy amateur adult soccer players (n=380; 18-53 years old; 30% female) and healthy non-collision athlete controls (82; 18-50; 61%) were included. In this cross-sectional analysis, we assessed the relations among estimated 12 month RHI (HeadCount) represented in quartiles (medians: 43, 300; 782, 2607) and verbal learning (International Shopping List).

3T dMRI (2mm^3, 109 directions, b=300, 800, 2000) was processed to extract DTI (fractional anisotropy (FA), axial diffusivity (AD), radial diffusivity (RD), mean diffusivity (MD)) and NODDI (orientation dispersion index (ODI), neurite density index (NDI), isotropic water fraction (ISO)) metrics from (1) jWM subjacent to the DoS, (2) jWM subjacent to the crests of the gyri (CoG), and (3) deep WM (dWM: corticospinal tract, corpus collosum, fornix, and uncinate fasciculus). dMRI metrics at each region for each RHI quartile were compared to non-collision athletes, using generalized linear models adjusted for age, sex, and concussion history. Significant associations underwent causal mediation analysis using bootstrapping to test the significance the mediating effect of a dMRI metric on the relationship of RHI with verbal learning. Bonferroni correction was applied.

dMRI metrics in DoS jWM differed from controls in an RHI-dependent fashion. The highest RHI quartile exhibited (corrected P<0.001) lower FA in the frontal lobe (FL), orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), parietal lobe (PL), temporal lobe (TL), and occipital lobe (OL); lower AD in OFC, PL, TL, and OL; higher RD in FL, OFC, PL, TL, and OL; higher ODI in FL, OFC, PL, TL, and OL; and lower NDI in OFC. DoS effect sizes were larger CoG or dWM. jWM ODI in OFC partially mediated the association of greater RHI with worse verbal learning (P=0.008); other white matter regions had no mediation effect.

Microstructural injury related to RHI in young healthy individuals is most prominent in DoS jWM. The previously identified adverse association of RHI with verbal learning is partially mediated by OFC DoS jWM, consistent with measurable functional effects of subclinical axonal injury, demyelination, and/or inflammation. Our findings suggest a focus on DoS jWM holds potential for identifying clinically significant injury pathology in RHI.