Visual evoked potentials after retrobulbar or pericocular anaesthesia

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Abstract
The effect of the local anaesthetic agent, etidocaine, on the optic nerve function was examined at regional ophthalmic anaesthesia. Visual evoked potential (VEP) was recorded before and 15 minutes after injection of the anaesthetic agent in 19 patients scheduled for elective cataract surgery (seven retrobulbar and 12 pericocular). Both the anaesthetised – that is, the eye to be operated on – and the fellow eye were examined. In the retrobulbar group, two patients displayed non-recordable VEPs while one had virtually non-detectable waves following the anaesthesia. In two retrobulbarly anaesthetised eyes, later peaks were unidentifiable while two other eyes had decreased amplitudes. In the pericocular group, in nine patients, there was no clearcut effect on VEP resulting from the anaesthetic. In three patients of this group mild changes in the anaesthetised eyes were found. The differences in the effect of retrobulbarly or pericocularly injected anaesthetics on VEP are probably due to the different concentration of the anaesthetic agent around the optic nerve.

(Br J Ophthalmol 1992; 76: 541–544)

Pericocular anaesthesia is an alternative method to the retrobulbar technique for providing local blockade in eye surgery. In the pericocular method, the extraconal needle is reported to be accompanied by a lower incidence of serious complications. On the other hand, life threatening respiratory arrest and unilateral or bilateral amaurosis due to toxic or mechanical injury to the optic nerve, although rare, are complications of the retrobulbar technique. Although some deny that pericocular anaesthesia could result in black-out of vision, temporary visual loss caused by the anaesthetic agent has been described both with the retrobulbar and the pericocular technique. The addition of hyaluronidase to the local anaesthetic solution is believed to increase the transient loss of vision during retrobulbar anaesthesia.

The visual evoked potential (VEP) is an electrical response of the visual cortex to an appropriate visual stimulus. Normal individuals exhibit a variety of complex waveforms arising from flash VEP. In spite of this a unilateral abnormality is detectable with this method. A patient presenting with a cataract alone will demonstrate an intact VEP response. If, however, the cataract is coexistent with – for example, macular degeneration or optic atrophy, then an abnormal VEP becomes evident. Changes in VEP have earlier been detected during general anaesthesia. In regional anaesthesia of the eye, temporary visual blocks and abnormal VEPs have earlier been reported in a few patients following retrobulbar block. On the other hand, in a recent study the VEPs of three patients after peribulbar anaesthesia showed no significant changes.

The purpose of the present study was to compare the effect of a local anaesthetic drug injected either by pericocular or retrobulbar route, on VEP.

Patients and methods
A total of 19 patients scheduled to undergo elective cataract surgery were divided into two groups. Lorazepam (Temesta, Wyeth, USA) 1–2 mg, was given as an oral predmedication 3 hours prior to the administration of regional anaesthesia. One group of seven patients was given a retrobulbar anaesthesia with a semisharp 35 mm needle (2R2, Luer Lock). The other group (12 patients) was given one pericocular, inferolateral injection with a 25 gauge, 25 mm needle (Terumo, Belgium). The volume of the injections was 3 ml with the retrobulbar and 4 ml with the pericocular technique. The anaesthetic solution in both groups was prepared by mixing 20 ml of etidocaine (Durane, Suomen Astra, Sweden), 15 mg/ml, with 1 ml of hyaluronidase, 150 IU/ml (Hyason, Organon, Holland). One patient in the retrobulbar group required a further injection of 2 ml because of insufficient akinesia. In the pericocular group, four supplemental injections of 3 ml were given superonassally. For orbicual

Figure 1. Visual evoked potential (VEP) before (A) and after (B) retrobulbar anaesthesia. VEP is not recordable after the anaesthesia. The fellow, non-anaesthetised eye shows only slightly increased latencies (D) when compared with the pre-anaesthesia situation (C).
amplitudes

Results

The mean age of the patients in the retrobulbar group was 74-6 (SD 4-7) and in the peribulbar group 74-1 (SD 2-4) years.

Retrobulbar group

In the retrobulbar group subjective light perception was normal in five patients 15 minutes after the injection of the anaesthetic agent. One patient in this group had only temporal projection left while a second had lost nasal projection.

Following retrobulbar anaesthesia, the VEPs of two patients were non-recordable although the pre-anaesthesia VEPs were present (Fig 1). One of these patients had a normal subjective light perception while the other had lost her nasal projection. The pre-anaesthesia visual acuities of these respective patients were 0-2 and light perception. The fellow eyes of these patients displayed smaller changes. In the first patient the latencies increased (P1 by 14, N2 by 25, and P2 by 27 ms) while in the second patient only the amplitudes changed (decrease of 6-7 μV). The patient with only temporal projection remaining had hardly recordable responses in VEP showing only waveform N3 with disappearance of the later waveforms. No changes were found in the fellow eye of this patient.

The late responses disappeared in two patients: in the first, P2 was no longer identifiable after anaesthesia, while in the second the same was true with N2 and P2. The latency of P1 of the second patient increased by 13 ms. The fellow eyes of these two patients displayed mildly increased latencies of P2 (11 and 22 ms). In the final two patients, the amplitudes were reduced (Fig 2) and the shape of the waveform N2 changed from N to W but no changes were found in the latencies. The responses of the fellow eyes did not change.

The two non-recordable VEPs were recorded anew during a check-up visit and were found to be similar to the pre-anaesthesia recordings.

Peribulbar group

All patients belonging to the peribulbar group had normal light perception after the anaesthesia.

After peribulbar anaesthesia, no patients demonstrated non-recordable VEPs. When
Visualization of potentials after periocular anaesthesia (extraconal injection)

In the current study, eight patients displayed mild increases in the latencies and reduced amplitudes (Fig 3). The latencies of P1, N2, and P2 increased by 6 ms (median) in the anaesthetized eyes while the increases in the fellow eyes were 4, 16, and 18 ms (median). The amplitudes of P1, N2, and P2 were reduced by 0, 1, and 2 µV (median) in the anaesthetized eyes and by 1, 1, and 2 µV (median) in the fellow eyes.

Of the remaining four patients, three manifested with reduced amplitudes of P1 by 1, 4, and 5 µV; N2 by 4, 20, and 11 µV; and P2 by 3, 12, and 3 µV in the anaesthetised eyes with no clear changes in the latencies. No changes were found in the VEPs of the fellow eyes of these three patients (Fig 4). In the last patient of this group, no changes were found in the anaesthetised eye while mild increases in the latencies were detected in the fellow eye.

Discussion

In this study the waves of VEPs were classified according to Harding. Wave P1 corresponds to a positive peak appearing at around 60 ms (P60), N2 to a negative peak at about 75 ms (N75), and P2 to a positive peak at about 100 ms (P100). However, normal values for VEP latencies are dependent on the patient's age and the intensity of the flash. For example, the latency of P2 increases with age from 114-5 (SD 9-8) (10–19 years) to 134-3 (SD 12-7) (70–79 years) µV/s.

The study reveals that local anaesthetic agents can alter electrical activity of the optic nerve. Periocular anaesthesia (extraconal injection) seemed to have only a slight or no effect on VEPs. On the other hand, there were obvious changes in VEPs following the retrobulbar (intracranal) injection. A rapid diffusion of the anaesthetic agent from the extraconal to the intracranal space occurs in the periocular technique while the reverse can be seen in the retrobulbar method.

When using the retrobulbar technique, the concentration of the anaesthetic agent becomes very high around the optic nerve. In the periocular technique, however, the optic nerve is not reached by all of the injected anaesthetic. The results here support an earlier observation that a transient conduction block is probably caused by the absorption of the anaesthetic agent.

Subjective light perception did not correlate with the total loss of the VEP responses in the retrobulbar group. Unfortunately, the afferent pupillary defect could not be examined because the fellow eye served as control. However in an earlier study, despite the afferent pupillary defect after retrobulbar anaesthesia, 75% of the patients could detect the operating instruments. In the present study, the patients of the periocular group had normal light perception following the injection. This is in contrast to an earlier result in which 22% of patients lost their light perception after their periocular blockade. This might be partially explained by the larger volume of the anaesthetic agent used in that previous study. Subjective light perception in a pre-medicated patient may also be subject to errors in cooperation.

Premedication and its effect on the electrical activity of the brain might also explain why the VEPs recorded from the fellow eye in 13 of 19 patients showed mild changes. This was especially noticed in the periocular group where eight patients displayed mild, but similar, changes in both the anaesthetised and the fellow eye.

We omitted statistical analysis because of the different size of the study groups. Statistical analysis would also have become unreliable because in three patients most of the waves were unidentifiable after retrobulbar anaesthesia. As it was noticed that retrobulbar anaesthesia with a long needle caused great changes in VEPs the use of that particular method was discontinued.

This study suggests that periocular anaesthesia with a 25 mm needle may be safer for the optic nerve function than retrobulbar anaesthesia with a 35 mm needle. Though the effect of the anaesthetic on the optic nerve conduction is transient it may be deleterious in some compromised (for example, ischaemic, glaucomatous) eyes. Because of this safety factor and the equally good akiinesis compared with the akiinesis after the retrobulbar technique, the periorcular method is a good alternative to retrobulbar anaesthesia in eye surgery.

We are grateful to Slat nurse Lea Riekki for recording the VEPs. This study was supported by The Eye Foundation and The Paulo Foundation, Helsinki, Finland.

4 Javitt JC, Addiego RA, Friedberg HL, Libonati MM, Leathy
544


