Long term follow up of premature infants: detection of strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors

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Abstract

Aim—To establish recommendations for long term ophthalmological follow up of prematurely born infants.

Methods—130 infants with a gestational age (GA) <37 weeks and born between 1 November 1989 and 31 October 1990 were enrolled in a prospective study about the development of strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors. Infants were subdivided in three groups according to GA: A <28 weeks (n=32), B ≥28–≤32 weeks (n=64), C >32–<37 weeks (n=34). Ophthalmological assessment took place at the postconceptional age of 32 weeks, at term and at 3, 6, 12, and 30 months post term. At the age of 5 years parents received a questionnaire and a majority of the children was examined again (n=99).

Results—At the age of 5 years 46 infants were known to have strabismus (n=29) and/or amblyopia (n=22) and/or refractive errors (n=22). Statistical analysis showed that gestational age, duration of supplementary oxygen, and duration of hospitalisation were important predictive variables for the development of strabismus, amblyopia, or refractive errors (SAR) at the age of 5 years (p<0.05). Infants with a GA ≤32 weeks had a significantly higher risk of developing SAR than infants with a GA >32 weeks, who developed an incidence comparable with the normal population. Strabismus developed mainly in the first year of life and at the age of 5 years. Most infants with amblyopia were detected at the age of 2–3 years. Refractive errors were found in the first year of life and at the age of 2.5 and 5 years.

Conclusion—Infants with a GA <32 weeks should be selected for long term ophthalmological follow up. These infants should be screened at the age of 1 year, in the third year of life (preferably at 30 months), and just before school age (including testing of visual acuity with optotypes).

Patients and methods

STUDY POPULATION

The study population consisted of 130 infants (gestational age <37 weeks) born between 1 November 1989 and 31 October 1990 and admitted to the Wilhelmina Children’s Hospital. Infants with a gestational age ≤32 weeks and/or a birth weight <1500 g were screened for ROP from their fifth week of life onwards, according to our protocol. Parents of these infants were asked for permission to include their child in the study. Infants were subdivided into three groups according to gestational age (GA): group A <28 weeks; group B ≥28–≤32 weeks; group C >32–<37 weeks. Infants from group C were selected at random from the level II department of our hospital.

General data concerning the neonatal period were assembled. At the postconceptional age of 32 weeks, at term and at 3, 6, 12, and 30 months post term all infants were examined by an ophthalmologist and a neonatologist. Apart from this, examinations were done at any time when the parents or attending physicians/paediatricians suspected the development of ocular abnormalities. At the age of 5 years parents received a questionnaire on general health, general performance, and ophthalmological problems of their children, and most of the children were examined again.

OPHTHALMOLOGICAL EXAMINATIONS

Ophthalmological examinations included an orthoptic examination for the detection of strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors. Ophthalmoscopy was performed at every examination. Strabismus was defined as a latent symptomatic or a manifest squint. Amblyopia was considered to be present when patients were treated as such, when a difference in visual acuity between the two eyes of more than two lines existed, in case of unilateral strabismus or resistance to occlusion of one eye. Cycloplegic refraction was performed with streak retinoscopy after instillation of cyclopentolate 0.5% eyedrops, twice at a 10 minute interval, 30 minutes before examination. Refractive values were converted to spherical equivalents and astigmatism was...
Table 1: General characteristics of population (SD) arranged according to different age groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
<th>p Values</th>
<th>Differences between groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean gestational age (weeks)</td>
<td>26.9 (8.0)</td>
<td>29.9 (1.0)</td>
<td>34.4 (1.2)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean birth weight (g)</td>
<td>936 (144)</td>
<td>1305 (298)</td>
<td>2089 (438)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial ventilation (days)</td>
<td>18.6 (12.7)</td>
<td>7.1 (9.4)</td>
<td>0.2 (0.8)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental O2 (days)</td>
<td>45.8 (35.8)</td>
<td>37.9 (85.2)</td>
<td>0.3 (0.8)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 (A=B)-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean maximum O2 administration (%)</td>
<td>67.4 (28.2)</td>
<td>66.2 (32.3)</td>
<td>22.3 (3.0)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean duration of hospitalisation (days)</td>
<td>71.1 (37.8)</td>
<td>54.2 (60.1)</td>
<td>22.3 (9.4)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 (A=B)-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPD (N (%))</td>
<td>16 (50%)</td>
<td>19 (29.7%)</td>
<td>0 (%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.01 (A=B)-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDA (N (%))</td>
<td>14 (43.8%)</td>
<td>13 (20.3%)</td>
<td>0 (%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.02 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROP (N (%))</td>
<td>21 (65.6%)</td>
<td>12 (18.7%)</td>
<td>0 (%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00 A-B-C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continuous variables were tested by ANOVA on class differences and p values are listed in column 5. A Tukey post hoc procedure was performed to determine which age groups are really different from each other. A χ² test was performed on discrete variables.


STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

General clinical data were evaluated by using the Student's t or χ² test for discrete variables and a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables. If the ANOVA test resulted into significance, a Tukey post hoc procedure was performed. Differences with a p value <0.05 were considered significant. To assess the effect of different variables on the development of ocular sequelae at the age of 5 years, a logistic regression analysis (LRA) as well as a classification and regression trees (CART) technique was used. The predictive variables were selected for inclusion in the LRA model if they were significant at the 5% level when tested by t test.

Results

General characteristics of the population are given in Table 1. The three age groups A, B, and C showed significant differences for mean gestational age, mean birth weight (BW), number of days of artificial ventilation, persistent ductus arteriosus (PDA), and retinopathy of prematurity (ROP). With regard to the number of days with supplemental oxygen administration, mean maximum concentration of supplementary oxygen, mean duration of hospitalisation and bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD), group A and B were comparable but they were significantly different from group C. Retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) was found in 33 infants: group A: 21 (stage 1 in 12 eyes, stage 2 in 22 eyes, and stage 3 in four eyes), group B: 12 (stage 1 in eight eyes, stage 2 in 14 eyes, and stage 3 in 10 eyes), group C: 0. No ROP stage 4 or more was found. Two patients in group B underwent cryotherapy because they reached threshold disease as defined by the Cryotherapy for ROP Cooperative Group.

The questionnaire, sent at the age of 5 years, was returned by parents of 99 infants. All infants had an ophthalmological examination at the age of 5 years, either at the hospital by an ophthalmologist (n=61) and/or at the child health clinics by a general physician (n=38). During the study period two infants died, 11 infants moved without a forwarding address, and 18 questionnaires were not returned because parents were not motivated to do so as they or the health clinic physician observed no problems (verbal communication with the parents).

At the age of 5 years 46 infants were known to have strabismus (n=29) and/or amblyopia (n=22) and/or refractive errors (n=22) (SAR).

Table 2: Number and percentage of infants with strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors at the age of 5 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All infants</th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAR</td>
<td>46 (46%)</td>
<td>16 (57%)</td>
<td>28 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strabismus</td>
<td>29 (22%)</td>
<td>11 (39%)</td>
<td>12 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amblyopia</td>
<td>22 (17%)</td>
<td>9 (32%)</td>
<td>11 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refractive errors</td>
<td>22 (17%)</td>
<td>8 (29%)</td>
<td>13 (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SAR = number of patients with strabismus and/or amblyopia and/or refractive errors.

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been classified as having ophthalmological abnormalities at the age of 5 years. The ages at
onset of strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors of infants who had
been screened, 96% of infants with ophthalmological abnormalities would have been detected
in this study.

Discussion
In this prospective study of prematurely born infants a high incidence of strabismus, amblyo-
pia, and refractive errors was found, grossly comparable with other studies. Forty six per
cent of the infants did have some visual abnormality. Strabismus was found in 29%, amblyo-
pia and refractive errors were found in 22% of cases.

In a population based study on 313 very low birth weight (VLBW) infants (<1500 g) at the
age of 7–8 years Darlow et al found an overall ophthalmological morbidity of 64%, strabis-
mus in 29%, myopia in 21%, hypermetropia in 18%, and astigmatism in 11%. These find-
ings were supported by a study of Robinson and O’Keefe15 who examined 131 infants who
had been screened for ROP in the neonatal period. They found myopia in 20% and
strabismus in 22%. Holström et al16 followed 248 infants for 3.5 years and found increased
incidences of myopia, astigmatism, anisometropia, and strabismus compared with con-
trol groups of full term children. In an earlier study we also found a significantly higher
risk of developing strabismus (20%) and myopia (22%) in 96 infants with a gestational age ≤ 32
weeks. All studies had in common that infants who developed any stage of ROP in the neona-
tal period were found to have a significantly higher risk of developing strabismus or myopia
than infants without ROP. Pennefather et al17 studied 565 infants with gestational age <32
weeks at the age of 2–3 years retrospectively and found high incidences of abnormalities—
strabismus in 12.5% and refractive errors in 12.7%. These studies all compare their out-
comes of ocular morbidity with incidence figures of full term neonates and conclude that
prematurity is associated with an increased risk to develop ophthalmological problems. How-
ever prematurity is defined as being born with a gestational age <37 weeks. When searching
for criteria for patient selection for ophthalmological screening one has to be sure that
neonates with GA >32–<37 weeks have incidences comparable with the normal popu-
lation. Therefore this study differs from previous reports in that premature infants >32–<37
weeks (group C) were included. Infants from group C indeed had a significantly lower risk of
developing ocular problems than infants from groups A and B.

Statistical analysis of the data showed that gestational age, duration of supplementary
oxygen, and duration of hospitalisation were important predictive variables for ocular mor-
bidity in this cohort of premature infants. It is possi-
ble to create a predictive model to calculate the
probability for ophthalmological sequelae at the
age of 5 years for every prematurely born
infant. As this predictive model is di
icult to
develop in a clinical setting, it is presented as a
note at the end of the article. For practical pur-
poses GA is the most useful factor to use in
developing selection criteria for long term
follow up, as GA is reproducible by all parents for many years to come, whereas the duration of oxygen supplementation or hospitalisation are not. Figure 1 shows that when all infants with GA ≤ 31 weeks would have been screened, 96% of infants with ocular abnormalities would have been detected in this study. Incidence figures for strabismus (5%), amblyopia (3%), and refractive errors (5%) of the normal population of preschool infants can be found in a report about supply and demand in the care of patients with eye disease in the Netherlands. This supports the idea that long term follow up of premature infants is of current value. They should be encouraged to seek regular follow-up examinations at the age of 1 year, in the third year of life (preferably at 30 months), and just before school age (including testing visual acuity with optotypes) (Table 3).

The increased survival of prematurely born infants poses a long term problem in terms of increased incidence of ophthalmological problems such as strabismus, amblyopia, and refractive errors. Patient selection and timing of follow up examinations should be formulated. The conclusion of this study is that infants with a gestational age <32 weeks should be selected for long term ophthalmological follow up. One has to keep in mind that infants with prolonged oxygen supplementation or hospitalisation as well as infants who developed ROP in the neonatal period or infants with neurological complications, are at the highest risk. Parents should be made aware of the various problems their infants can encounter. Infants should be screened at the age of 1 year, in the third year of life (preferably at 30 months), and just before school age (including testing visual acuity with optotypes) (Table 3).

Note: Predictive model to calculate the probability for ophthalmological sequelae at the age of 5 years (p) with standard errors in parentheses: log (p/(1 − p)) = 9.43 (3.56) − 0.31 (0.11) GA + 0.04 (0.01) O2 adm − 0.03 (0.01) hosp

GA = gestational age; O2 adm = duration of oxygen administration; hosp = duration of hospitalisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who?</th>
<th>Infants with a gestational age &lt;32 weeks</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When?</td>
<td>At the age of 1, 2, 3, and just before school age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| GA = gestational age; O2 adm = duration of oxygen administration; hosp = duration of hospitalisation. |
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