Primary headache in the elderly in South-East Asia

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Received: 7 January 2012 / Accepted: 1 March 2012
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Abstract Headache aetiology and presentation are considerably different in elderly individuals. However, literature on headache characteristics among Asians is limited. The objective of this study was to evaluate the headache characteristics among elderly in an outpatient clinic setting in Malaysia, a South-East Asian country with diverse ethnicity. In this prospective cross-sectional study, patients presenting with headache to Neurology and Primary Care Clinics of University Malaya Medical Centre between February 2010 and July 2010 were included. Data for consecutive eligible adult patients were entered in a prospective headache registry. International Headache Criteria II (ICHD-II) were used to classify various headache subtypes. Patients with headache due to intracranial space occupying lesions were excluded. Patient were divided into two age groups—elderly (55 years and above) and younger (less than 55 years of age). Of the 175 screened patients, 165 were included in the study—70 in elderly age group and 95 in younger group. Tension-type headache was the commonest subtype (45.7 %) among the elderly while Migraine without aura (54.7 %) was more common in young adults. More elderly patients suffered from chronic daily headache as compared to younger patients (47.1 % vs. 28.4 %; p = 0.015). headache subtypes and frequency differ considerably among elderly South East Asian patients.

Keywords Headache · Elderly · Young · Clinic · Ethnic

Introduction

Headache is one of the most common conditions seen in general medicine as well as neurology specialist clinics [1]. Prevalence of headache in general population during 1 year has been reported as about 46 % with the life-time prevalence of 64 % [2]. Headache among the elderly has been evaluated only by a few studies [1, 3–7]. Although, the prevalence of headache decreases with age [3, 8], it still remains a common complaint in the elderly [8, 9]. Most of the previous studies on headache in the elderly have included Caucasian patients. Compared to males, females tend to have more headaches in all age groups [8–10]. Accordingly, among the elderly aged 75 years or more, the prevalence of headache was 55 % in females compared to 22 % males [8, 9]. Expectedly, higher prevalence rates were reported among younger population with female preponderance (66 % females and 55 % males in patients aged 55–74 years; 92 % females and 74 % males in younger adults aged 21–34 years) [8–10]. Although, headache starts at younger ages, de novo appearance in elderly may be observed in 5.4 % patients aged 65 years old and above [6]. Furthermore, all subtypes of headache are observed among elderly. However, migraine occurs less frequently (4.6 %) as compared to tension-type headache (16–27 %) [5, 8].

Various demographic and social factors influence the prevalence of headache. Accordingly, the prevalence of headache in rural Ecuador was found to be considerably lower (6.8 % among elderly) as compared to the Western literature [11]. Data for headache among the elderly in Asia are scarce. In a study conducted in a nursing home in Thailand, 1-year headache prevalence of 55 % was similar.