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Radiology in Emergency Medicine: Diagnostic Imaging for Acute Stroke Management

Maha Muthqal Alshammari[1], Eman Gadban Alkhomashi[1], Majedah Fehan Alshammari[1], Ahmed Mohammed Asiri[2], Rana Saleh Alghaithi[3], Faris Abdrhman Alshammari[1], Abdulsalam Abdulaziz Almulayfi[1]

[1]Radiological Technologist, Department of Radiology, King Salman Specialist Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Hail, Saudi Arabia
[2]Radiological Technologist, Department of Radiology, King Abdulaziz Specialist Hospital, Aljouf Health Cluster, Skaka, Saudi Arabia
[3]Radiological Technologist, Department of Radiology,Women's and Children's Health Clinic, Hail Health Cluster

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: Acute stroke is a major global health issue responsible for many of the deaths; therefore the early diagnosis and treatment of acute strokes is a crucial part of this branch of medicine. Diagnostic imaging is an inseparable component of diagnosis of stroke, helping clinician to define the nature, location, and the degree of the event. Currently the use of diagnostic imaging in acute stroke has significantly improved and allows for the rapid and accurate separation of ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke which is critical to early management.
Aim of work: To explore the critical role of radiology in the emergency management of acute stroke, highlighting the various diagnostic imaging modalities used, their applications, and their impact on therapeutic decision-making.
Methods: We conducted a comprehensive search in the MEDLINE database's electronic literature using the following search terms: Radiology, Emergency Medicine, Diagnostic Imaging, Acute Stroke, and Management. The search was restricted to publications from 2016to 2024 in order to locate relevant content. We performed a search on Google Scholar to locate and examine academic papers that pertain to my subject matter. The selection of articles was impacted by certain criteria for inclusion.
Results: The publications analyzed in this study encompassed from 2016 to 2024. The study was structured into various sections with specific headings in the discussion section.
Conclusion: Imaging in particular is a key modality in the emergency management of acute stroke as it is the basis upon which initial and subsequent treatment is both planned and carried out. Whether to distinguish ischemic stroke from hemorrhagic stroke or make therapeutic decisions or determine the prognosis, NCCT, CTA, CTP and MRI are invaluable tools.
With even the current generation of imaging technology being potent, let alone the use of AI and new techniques expected to improve the accuracy and availability of stroke treatment. However, to build on the successes of SWIFT and similar studies, and to enhance the capacity to reduce the global burden of future stroke, future challenges will need to be addressed effectively, including the problem of limited resources and factors that influence heterogeneity in implemented imaging strategies.

Keywords: Radiology, Emergency Medicine, Diagnostic Imaging, Acute Stroke, Management

INTRODUCTION

Stroke is one of the most disabling and lethal diseases and, because acute stroke is time-sensitive, its preliminary diagnosis and subsequent management are crucial in emergency medicine. Radiology acts as a helpful map to the clinicians in determining the nature, location and acuteness of the stroke (Czap, & Sheth, 2021). Improvement in diagnostic imaging has changed the management of acute stroke, since it helps to distinguish between ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke within a short period of time, which is vital for each type of stroke. When time is of the essence, as it is in emergency care, the incorporation of radiology into the treatment of strokes allows for the best results of the patient (Smith & Rowland Hill, 2017).

This stroke classification intrigues two major types including ischemic and hemorrhagic that call for different therapeutic interventions (Campbell et al., 2019). Ischemic strokes, contributing to approximately 87 % of all strokes, result from the blockage of cerebral blood flow by a thrombus or embolus (Campbell et al., 2019). On the other side, hemorrhagic stroke occurs due to the breaking of blood vessels that cause intracranial hemorrhage (Boccardi et al., 2017). Clinical features of stroke maybe vague with symptoms like sudden onset weakness, slurring of speech or altered grade of consciousness. As a result, diagnostic imaging is the key in identifying the diagnosis, alterity of the disease, and guide the treatment (Alkathiri, 2024).

In the emergency situation common initial examination is NCCT because it is available worldwide, fast and useful to exclude ICH (Rindler et al., 2020). Indeed, although NCCT has high sensitivity for detecting hemorrhagic stroke it lacks good sensitivity for early ischemic changes. In response to this shortcoming, newer imaging modalities like the CTA and perfusion imaging have become more popular. For CTA reconstructs detailed blood vessel presentation which useful in identifying large vessel occlusion, while for perfusion imaging allows to estimate cerebral blood flow abnormality and penumbra (Hage et al., 2016).

Other imaging modality that has proved to be very useful in the diagnosis of stroke is MRI especially DWI (magnetic resonance imaging; diffusion weighted imaging) (Dmytriw et al., 2017). DWI has the shortest time to imaging of any of the MR sequences and it is extreamly sensible to early ischemic changes that it can detect infarcctions within minutes of onset. Moreover, magnetic resonance angiography and perfusion-weighted imaging give complementary data: about vessel patency and about the blood flow rate correspondingly. Although it is more accurate in identification of strokes, MRI in acute stroke settings can be noticeably hampered by availability, prolonged scan time, and contraindications for the patient (Ananda, 2017).

New developments in the use of imaging, such as AI and automated imaging, have added value in managing stroke (Soun et al., 2021). Machine learning is fast at analyzing images, pinpointing special features, as well as help decide whether a patient is suitable for clot dissolving agents or procedures like mechanical embolectomy. These technologies do not only enable fast decisions to be made but also minimize the chances of a diagnosis being wrong (Soun et al., 2021).

Adding radiology to the acute stroke patients handling reinforces the fact that emergency medicine is actually a utilitarian subspecialty. Radiologists, neurologists and emergency physicians must be able to agree on imaging findings in order to initiate treatment within therapeutic windows. In this context, the longer the patient waits, the worse the outcome is, so any time saved when diagnosing results in better patient outcomes (Khan, 2023).

Therefore, radiology plays an irreplaceable role in the treatment of acute stroke in emergency care service delivery. By virtue of growing experiences in the performance of diagnostic imaging procedures, bringing the same in line with clinical practice, diagnostic radiology remain a force for precision, speed and appropriateness in the management of stroke. Looking into the future that technology is continuously improving, imaging without a doubt will serve an even bigger part in the management of stroke thus leading to improved patient outcomes in different countries.

AIM OF WORK

The scope of this review is to discuss the capability of radiology in the management of acute ischemic stroke and the function of different diagnostic imaging techniques in combination with their contribution to therapeutic planning. Through reviewing the difficulties and achievements in stroke imaging as well as future development, it is aimed at stressing the significance of prompt and accurate imaging in enhancing clinical results and decreasing the global disease burden of stroke.

METHODS

A thorough search was carried out on well-known scientific platforms like Google Scholar and Pubmed, utilizing targeted keywords such as Radiology, Emergency Medicine, Diagnostic Imaging, Acute Stroke, and Management. The goal was to collect all pertinent research papers. Articles were chosen according to certain criteria. Upon conducting a comprehensive analysis of the abstracts and notable titles of each publication, we eliminated case reports, duplicate articles, and publications without full information. The reviews included in this research were published from 2016 to 2024.

RESULTS

The current investigation concentrated on the critical role of radiology in the emergency management of acute strokebetween 2016 and 2024. As a result, the review was published under many headlines in the discussion area, including:The Importance of Radiology in Acute Stroke Management, Imaging Modalities in Acute Stroke, Role of Imaging in Differentiating Ischemic and Hemorrhagic Stroke, Imaging in Therapeutic Decision-Making, Imaging for Prognostication and Secondary Prevention, Challenges in Radiology for Acute Stroke and Future Directions in Stroke Imaging.

DISCUSSION

Stroke is described as the second cause of death and disability and that a rapid and accurate determination is required. Radiology in emergency medicine and more specifically its part in acute stroke management is considered to be hugely important. Diagnostic imaging remains the single most important modality for deciding the type of stroke and its categorization as ischemic or hemorrhagic and determining the extent of the lesion which dictates the type of therapy to be administered (Harrison, 2023). In this review, an important aspect of acute stroke care- radiology, together with all the imaging techniques that are discussed comprehensively, is presented within the emergency context.

The Importance of Radiology in Acute Stroke Management

The treatment of acute stroke remains highly dependent on time, with popular wording being "time equals brain." This shows how important it is to diagnose the disease early because every one minute that passes; one loses 1.9 million neurons. Beneficial for the reason of being safe, quick, thorough, and shedding a light on the essential picture that needs to be seen both from a structural and functional point of view by the clinicians (Akbarzadeh et al., 2021).

Contrasted with CT scan, MRI clearly defines the nature of a stroke as ischemic and thus ischemic stroke from hemorrhagic one and identifies patients who can be treated with intravenous thrombolysis or mechanical thrombectomy. Additionally, newer imaging modalities quantify collateral circulation, penumbra or 'tissue at risk' and non-viable infarcted tissue. These capabilities facilitate accurate delivery of therapy and to get the best results or outcomes (Patil et al., 2022).

Imaging Modalities in Acute Stroke

1. Non-Contrast Computed Tomography (NCCT)

In suspected acute stroke cases, non-contrast CT is the imaging modality of choice because of its availability, fast acquisition time and exclusivity that rules out hemorrhagic causes. NCCT is very sensitive in diagnosing ICH and other conditions that may present like stroke, for example- tumors or abscesses. Nevertheless, it is not very helpful in early identification of ischemic changes, especially in the first 3-6 hours after a stroke (Giammello, 2024).

2. CT Angiography (CTA)

CTA is normally done immediately after NCCT and offers great detail of the cerebral vessels. It detects LVOs, vascular malformations such as aneurysms, and arterial dissection. Due to the speed of the acquisition of vascular images, CTA necessarily became one of the most important tools to decide on the admissibility of endovascular interventions. CTA source images can also be used to assess the ischemic penumbra and in addition to providing angiographical data, can offer functional information, as well (Demchuk et al., 2016).

3. CT Perfusion (CTP)

CT perfusion imaging calculates CBF, CBV, and MTT; it helps clinicians differentiate viable tissue from the infarcted tissue. Reduced CBF but with preserved CBV is captured in the ischemic penumbra that distinguishes brain regions that may be benefited by reperfusion therapies. CTP is especially valuable for extending the time of the intervention in patients presented beyond the regular 4.5 hours for thrombolysis (Chung, 2023).

4. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

MRI gives better contrast of soft tissues than CT and provides good anatomical as well as functional details. Examined MRI sequences demonstrated D WI as the most sensitive sequence when detecting acute ischemia, with infarction detectable within minutes of onset. With ADC maps, DWI separates acute and chronic infarctions (Al Murdef et al., 2024).

Magnetic resonance angiography (MRA) and perfusion-weighted imaging (PWI) added to stroke assessment. MRA does not involve invasion into the cerebral vessels; the PWI on the other hand fills the gap left by DWI in delineation of hypoperfused areas in order to identify penumbra. However, the availability of MRI is still limited, the acquisition time is longer, and due to contraindications such as patients with implanted metal items, it can be used in emergency cases (Al Murdef et al., 2024).

Role of Imaging in Differentiating Ischemic and Hemorrhagic Stroke

Ischemic and hemorrhagic strokes are two major types of stroke diagnosis that must be done, to start with, since the form of management depends on whether it is an ischemic or hemorrhagic stroke. Non contrast Computed CT angiography or NCCT continues to be the ideal modality for diagnosis of intracranial hemorrhage because of its sensitivity and specificity. CT hyperdense suggests blood and help clinicians to start necessary management which may include the control of hypertension in hemorrhagic strokes or surgical removal of clots when necessary (Lin & Liebeskind, 2016).

While in ischemic strokes initially the NCCT can be normal or may show early signs such as hypodensity in the region of the affected brain or the absence of gray white distinction. Timing of perfusion is the main reason that additional imaging like CTA and MRI are frequently needed for the evaluation of ischemiya and collateral flow.

These imaging technologies facilitate proper diagnosis and exclude other treatments like giving thrombolytic therapy in hemorrhagic stroke (Tang & Tang, 2020).

Imaging in Therapeutic Decision-Making

1. Intravenous Thrombolysis

Currently for patients who present within 4.5 hours of the onset of the ischemic stroke, intravenous tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) stays the treatment of choice. Imaging is imperative to rule out any contraindication to tPA such as hemorrhage that predisposes upon treatment as well as extensive infarction. It can be usually managed with the guidance of NCCT and CTA (Fernandez-Gotico et al., 2017).

2. Mechanical Thrombectomy

Interventional mechanical thrombectomy has made a significant shift in the management of LVOs and shows benefits in locations beyond the traditional 4.5-hour therapeutic cut-off. Imaging procedures like CTA and CTP remains critical in the selection for thrombectomy since they help to indicate the occlusions, collaterals and ischaemic penumbra (Guarisco, 2020).

Sorts of advanced imaging like DAWN and DEFUSE-3 has been used in the recent past to show the extra benefits of using thrombectomy within 24 hours for selected patients with good perfusion scans. This shift of paradigm makes it clear that radiology can play a crucial role in optimising both selecting the patient and outcome (Heit et al., 2024).

Imaging for Prognostication and Secondary Prevention

Apart from just disease intervention, imaging offers important prognostic data and helps in development of further secondary management. MRI, with its capability to see microbleeds, small vessel disease, and chronic infarcts , provides etiological information on stroke. CTA and MRA facilitate the detection of stenosis, aneurysm or any other kind of vascular disease that requires surgical or medical treatment (Blankstein & Chandrashekhar, 2023).

Notably, imaging findings have implications for the subsequent duration of antithrombotic therapy, carotid endarterectomy, or changes in the lifestyle. For instance, the severe stenosis identified on CTA of the carotid artery may be an indication for revascularization that will help to decrease the rates of subsequent strokes (Blankstein & Chandrashekhar, 2023).

Challenges in Radiology for Acute Stroke

Unfortunately, complicated by certain challenging issues, the use of application of radiology to manage acute stroke appear to be critical. Another challenge is inadequacy of access to advanced imaging meaning that where there is availability the application is limited by resource constraints. Also, several aspects such as imaging protocols in use, their variability and interpretation may impact diagnosis and treatment choices to be made (Bhat et al., 2021).

And so to these issues in radiology, comes artificial intelligence (AI) as powerful solutions. Artificial intelligence computational models can quickly review imaging information, recognize potential incongruities, and supply the clinicians with valuable contributions, thereby improving efficacy and quality. Nevertheless, integrating AI in clinical practice would need to go through some validated steps in order to be integrated into current practice (Recht et al., 2020).

Future Directions in Stroke Imaging

In the field of stroke imaging, new data are still accumulating regarding the enhancement of diagnostics, extension of therapeutic time windows and individualization of treatment. Newer developments in the functional imaging include vessel wall imaging, arterial spin labeling, and advanced diffusion imaging reveals the potential of providing further understanding of stroke pathophysiology (Liu et al., 2024).

OEF and metabolic imaging could be pivotal to improve tissue viability evaluation and providing treatment strategies. Furthermore, the availability of point of care MRI and mobile CT scanners may deliver imaging capabilities to those patients in prehospital and rural care, where access may remain limited, and outcomes may be successfully shifted (Liu et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The role of radiology in the emergency management of acute stroke cannot be overstated. Imaging is the cornerstone for differentiating ischemic from hemorrhagic stroke, assessing the extent of brain injury, and determining eligibility for potentially life-saving interventions such as thrombolysis or mechanical thrombectomy. Modalities like non-contrast CT, CT angiography, and CT perfusion are indispensable for rapid evaluation, while MRI provides superior sensitivity for detecting early ischemic changes and offers advanced insights into stroke etiology and prognosis. Together, these imaging techniques guide clinicians in making timely and informed decisions, directly impacting patient outcomes.

The advent of advanced imaging has extended therapeutic windows, particularly for mechanical thrombectomy, and has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the ischemic penumbra and infarct core. Studies such as DAWN and DEFUSE-3 have demonstrated the ability of imaging to identify patients who may benefit from intervention even beyond traditional timeframes, revolutionizing the treatment paradigm for acute ischemic stroke.

Despite its critical importance, the application of radiology in acute stroke management faces challenges, including limited access to advanced imaging modalities, resource constraints, and variability in imaging interpretation. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence hold promise in addressing these challenges by streamlining workflows and improving diagnostic accuracy. Furthermore, ongoing advancements in functional and portable imaging may enhance accessibility, particularly in prehospital and rural settings, where timely diagnosis remains a challenge.

In conclusion, radiology is integral to the prompt and effective management of acute stroke. Continued innovation, coupled with efforts to improve accessibility and standardization, will be essential for optimizing stroke care worldwide. As imaging technology advances, the potential for improved diagnosis, personalized treatment, and better patient outcomes will only continue to grow, underscoring the indispensable role of radiology in modern emergency medicine.

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