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SHANK3 variant as a cause of non syndromal autism in an 11-year
old boy and review of published literature

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Abstract:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encompasses a spectrum of pervasive neuropsychiatric disorders characterised by deficits in social interaction, communication, unusual and repetitive behaviour. The aetiology of ASD is believed to involve complex interactions between genetic and environmental factors; it can be further classified as syndromic or non-syndromic, according to whether it is the primary diagnosis or secondary to an existing condition where both common and rare genetic variants contribute to the development of ASD or are clearly causal.

The prevalence of ASD in children is increasing with higher rates of diagnosis and an estimated 1 in 100 affected in the UK.¹ Given that heritability is a major contributing factor, we aim to discuss research findings to-date in the context of a high risk autism candidate gene, SHANK3 (SH3 and multiple ankyrin repeat domain 3), with its loss resulting in synaptic function disruption.

We present a 10-year old patient with a pathogenic de novo heterozygous c.1231delC, p.Arg411Val frameshift variant in SHANK3. He presented with severe autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and pathological demand avoidance, on a background of developmental impairment and language regression.

The number of genes associated with autism is ever increasing. It is a heterogeneous group of disorders with no single gene conferring pathogenesis in the majority of cases. Genetic abnormalities can be detected in approximately 15% of ASD and these range from copy number variants in 16p11.2 and 15q13.2q13.3 to several well-known genetic disorders including Tuberous Sclerosis and Fragile X syndrome. Further high confidence autism genes include but are not limited to: NRXN, NLGN 3, NLGN 4, SHANK 2 and SHANK3.

Introduction:

Autism has a worldwide childhood prevalence of approximately 1 in 160 childrenⁱⁱ and has become a frequent reason for referral to paediatric genetic services. Due to its clinical and genetic heterogeneity, the underlying cause for ASD remains unclear. However, advances in genetic testing have led to the discovery of several high risk autism candidate genes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here, we focus our attention on one of these high risk genes, SHANK3. This gene is strongly expressed in the cerebral cortex and cerebellum and encodes a scaffold protein involved in the postsynaptic density (PSD) of excitatory synapses.^{iv}

It is widely known that microdeletions of 22q13 region involving SHANK3 are responsible for the clinically recognizable Phelan-McDermid syndrome (PMS)^v characterised by global developmental delay, intellectual disability (ID), absent or severely delayed speech, autism spectrum disorder, hypotonia, and distinctive facial dysmorphic features. However, SHANK3 variants have also been reported in individuals with autism and/or intellectual disability.^{viii}

The SHANK3 protein is a crucial component of the postsynaptic density that takes part in the neuroligin-neurexin interaction at glutamate synapses. Genetic studies show that the neurexin-neuroligin (NRXN-NLGN) pathway genes contribute susceptibility to ASD, which include cell adhesion molecules NLGN3, NLGN4 (also named NLGN4X), NRXN1 and scaffolding proteins SHANK2 and SHANK3^{viii}

Clinical report:

This 10-year old boy was the fifth pregnancy to healthy non-consanguineous, Caucasian parents. There had been two miscarriages prior to this pregnancy. He was born at term with a birth weight of 4.5kg. There was bleeding throughout pregnancy but antenatal scans were normal. There was an increased risk of Down syndrome reported on antenatal screening.

In terms of his development, he could sit unaided at 7 months and walked at 10 months. He had multiple words at 11 months, but subsequently lost speech until the age of 4. At his 2 year check, there were concerns regarding poor eye contact and limited speech. Following a clinical psychologist assessment, he fulfilled the criteria for severe autism. His parents reported episodes consistent with absence seizures at this stage too.

At age 5, he was attending mainstream school with additional support of two teaching assistants. Communication and social skills were noted to be poor. In terms of behaviour, frustration and violent traits were noted. He was late to develop imaginary play and weakness in social interaction with peers was noted. At age 10, he was attending a special needs school. He was exhibiting pathological demand avoidance and complex social impairments.

Clinical examination did not reveal any dysmorphic features (Figure 1).

Investigations so far have included: an EEG which was unremarkable; Cytogenetics showing a normal male karyotype (46XY) and Fragile X testing which was also negative. A microarray revealed no clinically significant imbalances, after which the patient was enrolled in the Deciphering Developmental Delay (DDD) study which identified a de novo heterozygous c.1231delC, p.Arg411Val frameshift variant in SHANK3.

Discussion:

Patients with ASDs and ID carrying SHANK3 variants have been described in the literature. Several papers have reported SHANK3 variants in ASD patients, consisting of copy number variants,^{ix} point variants,^{xxixixiii} and polymorphisms.^{xiv}

De novo pathogenic variants in SHANK 3 accounted for 1.4% and 0.75% of ASD cohort subjects in studies conducted in 2007 by Durand et al and Moessner et al respectively.^{xv}

Bozdagi et al in 2011 reported that the loss of one copy of SHANK3 correlates with behavioural issues reproducing most of the ASD traits, such as deficits in social interaction, social communication, and compulsive/repetitive actions.^{xvi}

Buccuto et al in 2013 assessed the prevalence of variants in SHANK3 in two cohorts of patients with different subtypes of ASD.^{xvii} Pathogenic alterations in SHANK3 were found in 2.3% of cases (5 patients): one 106 kb deletion encompassing the SHANK3 gene, two frameshift variants leading to premature stop codons, one missense variant (p.Pro141Ala), and one splice site variant (c.1820-4G>A). It was also noted that in the cases of the SHANK3 deletion and frameshift variants, the patients showed some degree of speech or developmental delay in association with autistic traits, similar to the patient we report here. It is plausible that the overall level of functional SHANK3 protein is lower as a result of these variants compared to cases with different types of variants.

Nemirovsky et al in 2015 described three siblings with ASD, intellectual disability and absence of language to have germline mosaicism for a heterozygous deletion of a cytosine in the exon 21 of the SHANK3 gene. This resulted in the substitution of five amino acids followed by a premature stop codon (NM_033517:c.3259_3259delC, p.Ser1088Profs*6).^{xviii}

Terrone et al in 2017 went on to describe a family with four members carrying an interstitial microdeletion within SHANK3 leading to intellectual disability^{xix}. This involved a mother and three children and was the first report of a familial microdeletion. Each carrier in this family presented with symptoms of autism.

However, Liu et al in 2013 did not find any significant association between four high risk genes (NLGN3, NLGN4, SHANK 2 and SHANK 3) and ASD cases in a Chinese population.^{xx} This perhaps highlights the heterogeneous nature of ASD, variability of gene function in different populations but also the role of environmental factors and their potential contribution to the phenotype.^{xxi}

Conclusion

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) describes a heterogeneous spectrum of disorders with no single causal gene conferring pathogenicity in the majority of cases. The disease process comprises great genetic and phenotypic complexity.

Our report details a 10-year old boy with a de novo heterozygous c.1231del, p.Arg411Val frameshift variant in SHANK3, a high risk candidate autism gene. We report significant speech delay and seizures as an association with this phenotype.

Our case findings appear to be in line with previous findings for SHANK3 and other genes involved in the neuroligin-neurexin complex. Further case reports of this nature will continue to expand the phenotype and understand the variable expressivity of SHANK3.

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Conflicts of interest

None to declare

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