

Neurology[®]

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The Official Journal of the American Academy of Neurology



Neurology Publish Ahead of Print
DOI: 10.1212/WNL.000000000207444

Teaching NeuroImage: Sudden Bilateral Sensorineural Hearing Loss Due to Vertebrobasilar Ischemia

Author(s):

Marina Buciu, MD¹; Hamid Ali, MD¹; Paulo Gonzalez, DO¹; Cassie Lee Nankee, MD¹; Christine Anne Holmstedt, DO¹

Corresponding Author:

Marina Buciu, buciu.marina@mayo.edu

Affiliation Information for All Authors: 1. Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

Equal Author Contribution:

Contributions:

Marina Buciu: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content, including medical writing for content; Major role in the acquisition of data; Study concept or design; Analysis or interpretation of data

Hamid Ali: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content, including medical writing for content; Major role in the acquisition of data; Analysis or interpretation of data

Paulo Gonzalez: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content, including medical writing for content; Major role in the acquisition of data

Cassie Lee Nankee: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content, including medical writing for content; Major role in the

acquisition of data; Study concept or design; Analysis or interpretation of data
Christine Anne Holmstedt: Drafting/revision of the manuscript for content, including medical writing for content; Major role in the acquisition of data; Study concept or design; Analysis or interpretation of data

Figure Count:

2

Table Count:

0

Search Terms:

[2] All Cerebrovascular disease/Stroke, [119] CT, [120] MRI, [210] Audition, [212] Vertigo

Acknowledgment:

Study Funding:

The authors report no targeted funding.

Disclosure:

The authors report no relevant disclosures.

Preprint DOI:

Received Date:

2022-11-06

Accepted Date:

2023-04-07

Handling Editor Statement:

Submitted and externally peer reviewed. The handling editor was Resident and Fellow Section Editor Whitley Aamodt, MD, MPH.

A 56-year-old woman with history of uncontrolled hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and tobacco use developed sudden bilateral hearing loss preceded by one week of persistent vertigo. Physical examination demonstrated saccadic pursuit with spontaneous bilateral horizontal and vertical down-beating nystagmus, profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss (bSNHL) confirmed by audiogram, and truncal ataxia. Neuroimaging showed occlusion of the right vertebral artery, basilar artery, and near-occlusion of bilateral anterior inferior cerebellar arteries (AICAs) (**Figure 1**) causing acute/subacute ischemic strokes (**Figure 2**). AICAs give rise to internal auditory artery, almost a sole blood supply to inner ear, and supply anterior part of cerebellum, middle cerebellar peduncle, and flocculus. Sudden bSNHL is a rare phenomenon representing < 5% of all acute SNHL cases dominated by unilateral presentation. In contrast to the latter, sudden bSNHL represents a medical emergency warranting immediate evaluation for life-threatening and/or reversible causes such as stroke, autoimmune disorders (e.g. Susac, Cogan syndromes, scleroderma), drug toxicities (e.g. gentamicin), etc.¹ Occlusion/hypoperfusion of AICA in isolation or as part of vertebrobasilar ischemia can lead to sudden SNHL.²

Figure 1. CT angiography of head and neck (maximum intensity projections, [MIP]) with three-dimensional reconstruction. The following structures are indicated: occlusion of right V4 vertebral artery (**black arrowhead**), patent left V4 vertebral artery (**white arrowhead**), occlusion of basilar artery (**white arrow**), near-occlusion of bilateral AICAs (**black arrows**).

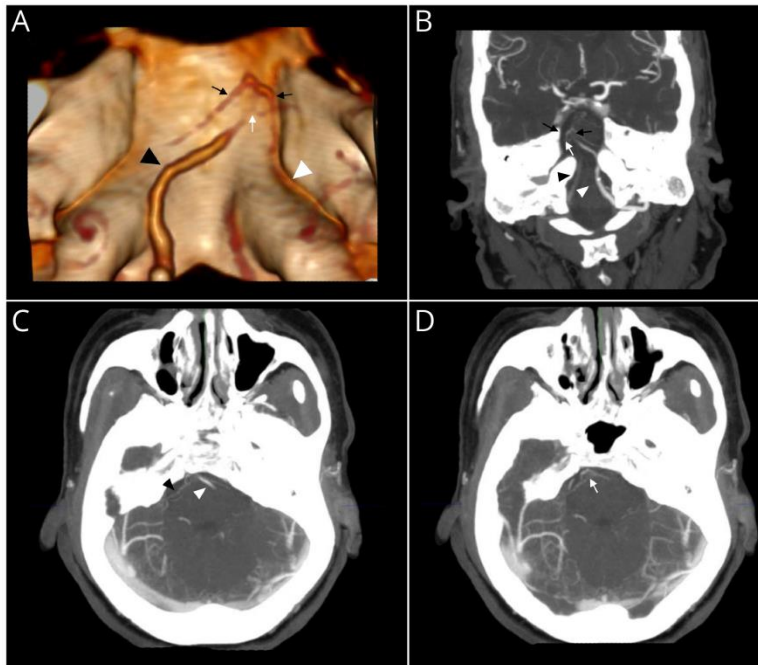
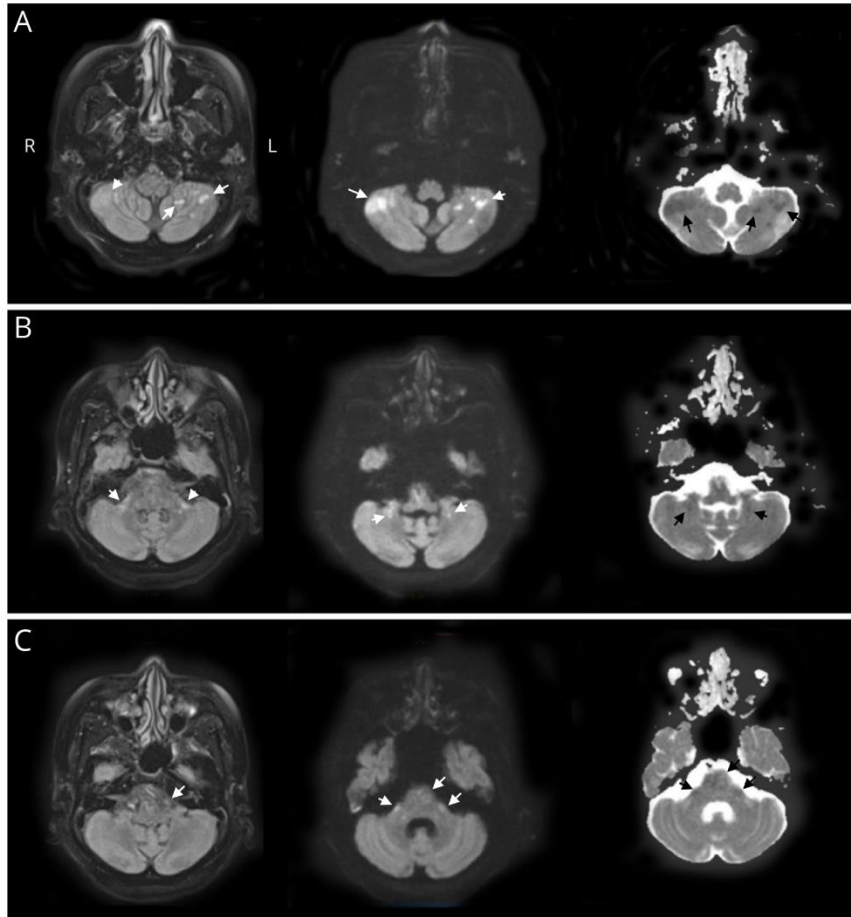


Figure 2. MRI brain without contrast showing subacute/acute areas of infarction. From right to left hyperintense signal on FLAIR, hyperintense areas of restricted diffusion on DWI with correlating hypointense areas on apparent diffusion coefficient maps in bilateral anterior cerebellum (**panel A**), middle cerebellar peduncle, flocculus and pons (**panels B&C**).



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Neurology published online June 5, 2023

DOI 10.1212/WNL.0000000000207444

This information is current as of June 5, 2023

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