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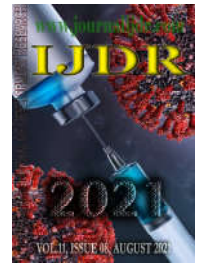
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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CAPACITY OF LEXICAL ACCESS IN ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH HIV VIRUS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: HIV/AIDS frequently affects the Central Nervous System and may cause a cognitive decrease, and compromise the functions of working memory, especially the lexical access that affects the performance of daily activities. **Goal:** The purpose was to evaluate the ability of lexical access in seniors with HIV, in comparison with HIV-positive elderly. **Method and Methods:** Comparison of the performance of the experimental and control group, after the application of the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) and the Verbal Fluency Test (VFT) and analysis of the correlation of TCD4 lymphocyte count, time of diagnosis and time using ART. This research was approved by the REC with opinion number 1000359. **Results:** The elderly with HIV/AIDS had a lower performance with statistical significance in the MMSE tests, obtaining an average score of 25.6 when compared to the control group that obtained the score of 27.6 and VFT. The average was 15.9 points for the experimental group and 18.1 for the control, showing a worse performance in lexical access in the HIV group. When correlating the tests with the TCD4 lymphocyte rate with the MMSE, they showed significance for improved performance and the shorter the time of diagnosis, the higher the scores. **Conclusion:** The low performance in the lexical access capacity of the experimental group when compared to the control group reinforces the importance of assessing and intervening early in cognitive functions to maintain the independence and quality of life of the elderly with HIV/AIDS.

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INTRODUCTION

AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) appeared worldwide between 1977 and 1978, when the first cases were recorded in the USA, Central Africa and Haiti^{1,2}. In Brazil, the first case appeared in São Paulo in 1980 and was only classified in 1982, when the new syndrome, AIDS³, was officially defined. Human acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is caused by two lentiviruses: human immunodeficiency virus types 1 and 2 (HIV-1 and HIV-2). Both are the result of multiple interspecies transmissions of viruses

found in African primates. Thus, it is clear that HIV-1 and HIV-2 were the result of the transfer of viruses infecting primates in Africa⁴. HIV infection is characterized by the destruction of TCD4+ lymphocytes (LT-CD4+) and continuous viral replication. In view of this, there is a suppression of the immune system, which favors the appearance of opportunistic infections⁵, until reaching the last stage of the infection, which is AIDS, representing one of the serious public health problems⁶. The manifestation of AIDS in the elderly is a growing problem in Brazil and reinforces the need to establish public policies for the prevention, early diagnosis and appropriate clinical treatment of this group⁶. With the advance of the disease, there are

several clinical manifestations, such as degeneration of the central nervous system, muscle hypotrophy, and malignant processes⁷, with this, the appearance of speech-language disorders in these individuals also occurs, among these neurocognitive disorders, affecting the superior mental functions, such as language, attention, memory, perception, emotion and thought⁸. Speech therapy as a health science deals with issues relevant to mental functions and their repercussions on language, cognition and speech. A prevalent complaint in the elderly in general are the difficulties of memory and lexical access, which refers to the search for words existing in our mental vocabulary, called lexicon, which sometimes affects their communication, their daily activities and consequently the quality of life^{9,10}. HIV infection often affects the Central Nervous System (CNS). Studies report that this infection occurs in the first years of virus infection, due to the tropism of the virus by the CNS, which replicates and releases the virions (viral particle outside the cell) in the cerebral parenchyma¹¹⁻¹³. The virus uses infected macrophages and manages to cross the blood brain barrier, which functions as a kind of filter, which authorizes or denies the entry of certain substances into the CNS. Once inside the SN, the virus infects glial cells, which ultimately secrete neurotoxins, leading to neuronal damage and death^{14,15}. Although the use of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) has resulted in a remarkable decline in infectious conditions, morbidity and mortality in AIDS patients, it is not so efficient in the nervous system, because the main antiretrovirals have insufficient or zero access to the CNS, due to the presence of the blood brain barrier, making the brain more susceptible to HIV infection^{16,17}. The agreement of the main neurological disorders described in the literature on cases of HIV dementia are: visuospatial memory loss, loss of visuomotor coordination, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating and attention, slow thought, including understanding and processing and verbal memory deficit^{11,18}. Neurocognitive disorders associated with HIV vary among HIV-positive individuals, according to the stage in which they are, whether symptomatic or asymptomatic. They are more frequent in the symptomatic population, usually manifested by altered memory, concentration and low processing speed, possibly associated with sensory neuropathy and muscle disorders¹⁹⁻²¹. Taking into account that the treatment of HIV/AIDS has been evolving over the years, since its initial description, the improvement in treatment has led to a significant increase in the life expectancy of individuals with the virus, developing the need to investigate the difficulties related to aspects of language, memory and lexical access, because they directly affect the performance of activities of daily living, treatment adherence, and consequently may impair patients' quality of life²².

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a descriptive, cross-sectional, quantitative study, the main objective was to investigate the influence of the HIV virus on the performance of cognitive function, through the assessment of lexical access capacity. The participants were 40 elderly people recruited for the experimental group and 40 recruited for the control group. In the recruitment of the experimental group, we selected the elderly aged over 60 years, HIV carriers, who were under follow-up at the Immunology Service of the Gaffrée and Guinle University Hospital, who were clinically basal, that is, without manifestation of opportunistic diseases and/or other clinical alterations. In the control group, healthy elderly from the Elderly Group, with HIV-negative serology, were recruited, obtained through HIV testing, performed at the Hospital's AIDS Testing Center. Among the inclusion criteria for the two groups evaluated were, of both sexes, with similarity in the mean age and years of schooling. In the experimental group with HIV, the average of the clinical information collected from medical records was added, such as: time of diagnosis, CD4 T lymphocyte count and time of use of antiretroviral treatment (ART). The following cognitive tests were applied: Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE), which is a fast and recognized instrument for the screening of cognitive deficits. The verbal fluency test (VFT) semantic category, which evaluates the cognitive executive functions of language and semantic memory, especially the ability and agility of

access to the mental lexicon, for the application of this test, a stopwatch was used to control the time of 1 minute required by the test. For statistical analysis, the Mann-Whitney U test was used for the correlations. A significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was considered, and the difference was considered significant when the p-value was below α . Pearson's correlation coefficient was used in the correlations between the parameters analyzed in the group of patients with HIV, which is the measure of the relationship between two numerical characteristics. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Gaffrée Guinle University Hospital, with the opinion number 1000359.

RESULTS

In this study, a convenience sample was used, and 80 patients were evaluated, 40 diagnosed with HIV infection, who were clinically stable, and who proposed to participate and 40 elderly people with HIV-negative serology, according to the inclusion criteria for analysis. Of these, $n = 62$ were female (77.5%) and $n = 18$ males (22.5%). The age of the individuals varied between 60 and 88 years, with a mean age of 68.7 years, showing no differential significance between the groups for the p value. Regarding schooling, it was considered in years of schooling, comparing both groups but it does not show statistical significance when compared (Table 1). In the VFT, the most used category was selected, which is that of animals, because it is believed to be the least vulnerable to the variable schooling²³. It is a test that evaluates the ability to evoke words under directed conditions, and the score corresponds to the total number of animal names produced in 1 minute, which is the focus of this study, to assess whether there was any difference in the performance, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the groups surveyed, distribution by education level and the tests applied

Variables	Control group (n=40)	HIV group (n=40)	P
Schooling (years)	10.2 ± 4.1	8.8 ± 3.7	ns
MMSE Test	27.6 ± 1.4	25.6 ± 2.8	<0.01
VFT Test	18.1 ± 4.2	15.9 ± 6.0	<0.02

MMSE – Mini Mental State Examination; VFT – The verbal fluency test.

Values were identified in the sample, demonstrating statistical significance in the results of comparison the application of the proposed cognitive tests and the MEEM as shown in Table 1. Regarding the specific variables of the experimental group, data were collected from medical records, based on the last examination performed up to the date of the interview, we obtained as a result for CD4, the mean nadir was 626.5 cel/mm³, with values of (SD±316.8) cel/mm³, of standard deviation. Only one patient presented CD4 <200 cel/mm³, representing 2.5% of the sample. We correlated CD4 with the MMSE (Figure 1A) significant differences were observed and, VFT tests to verify whether there would be an influence on the performance and no significant differences were observed. Regarding the time of diagnosis recorded in months, the mean was 174.6 months with standard deviation values of (± 69.8) months. This time was related to each test used in the sample to analyze the possibility of this variable influencing the expected normality values (Figure 1 B and Figure 1C). Regarding the treatment, the time of ART use was recorded in months, obtaining the respective means and standard deviation (140.1±69.4). The time of ART use was correlated with the tests performed to verify if there would be influence of this variable. However, in the Correlation Time of ART and Mini Mental, there was no correlation between the variables and in the correlation Time of ART and VFT there was a weak but significant correlation between the variables (Figure 1D).

DISCUSSION

In the present study, women prevailed in the global sample, for greater availability and female accessibility. Although there is a

higher incidence of HIV in males and the difference in incidence between the sexes has decreased substantially since the beginning of the epidemic¹, the influence of gender on cognition is less explored than the influence of age and schooling²⁴. Age ranged from 60 to 88 years in both groups, maintaining a near mean age, according to the results, showing no statistically significant difference, which shows the compatibility of comparison, since this variable influences cognitive performance²⁵. Although the older age population represents a small proportion among HIV-positive patients, this group has progressively increased and tends to maintain this growth, since the survival of patients using ART is increasing, and there is a higher life expectancy of the general population²⁶. Population aging is a worldwide demographic phenomenon and from the biological point of view, aging is associated with a series of physiological changes and adaptations, which, despite presenting a change in relation to a previous pattern of functioning, do not necessarily represent pathological changes. A better understanding of these is necessary for more precise identification, aiming at the development of treatment strategies for these changes^{27,28}. Schooling seems to have significant relevance in cognitive functioning, with the association of other variables such as lifestyle, participation in physical activities, eating, social engagement and neuronal development^{25,29}. In our sample, individuals with more years of schooling were present in G1, and a little less in G2, but did not present a statistically relevant difference even when compared to the Values of VFT, as shown in table 3 attached.

From the analysis of the results found with the application of the MMSE test, when comparing the performance of the groups, G1 obtained scores between 25 and 30 points, all with an average above the cutoff point established for the Literate Brazilian population, according to Almeida³⁰, while G2 presented scores from 20 to 30 points, obtaining statistical significance of $p < 0.01$, when comparing the performance of this group with G1 in this test. In another study from 2002, Brucki et al.³¹ proposed suggestions for MMSE use in Brazil, presented schooling as a factor with the greatest influence on test performance and suggested that MMSE scores varied according to years of schooling, from 1 to 4 years (score of 20), 5 to 8 years (score of 25), 9 to 11 (score of 27), 12 years or older (score 28 and 29). In another study, conducted by Lourenço and Veras, in 2006³², with 303 elderly people treated in general health outpatient clinics, they concluded that the best cutoff point for cognitive screening for illiterate individuals was 18/19 and for those with school education it was 24/25, which corroborated our cutoff point established for this study. However, it is necessary to make further studies, with a larger sample in the elderly population with HIV/AIDS in order to obtain greater specific scientific knowledge of this population studied and on the reliability of the established cutoff points. We also obtained $p < 0.02$ value in the application of the VFT test when comparing the groups, answering the hypotheses of this research, suggesting that HIV infection predisposes elderly individuals to reduced lexical access, when compared to the elderly with HIV-negative serology.

The findings of verbal fluency suggest the interference in working memory, especially concerning phonological awareness, since the speed and accuracy in access to the mental lexicon are phonological processing skills³³, which refer to how information is processed, stored and used^{33,34}. Some indicators reveal that working memory plays an important role in the tasks that request phonological awareness, because, during the performance of a task of this nature, verbal material need to be kept in the working memory, in order to be successful in solving the requested task^{35,36}. This cognitive screening signals the different results presented among the groups studied, which also suggests referral to other health services that can better elucidate the diagnosis of cognitive deficit and reaffirms the need for applying neurocognitive tests in their routine consultations and the value of multidisciplinary care to these patients, the verbal fluency test is recommended because it is a widely used test for screening cognitive deficits, dementia scans such as Alzheimer's dementia, neurological damage after cerebrovascular accident, since the execution of the task proposed in the test requires integrity of cognitive skills such as memory (semantics) and executive functions

(selection and search)^{29,37-42}. The application of the VFT routinely can also enable early attention to cognitive issues and enable various therapeutic interventions, when verifying the effectiveness of cognitive stimulation and memory training, which can contribute significantly to the well-being of the elderly and their families, since they produce the maintenance of autonomy^{10,43-46}. This corroborates the design for this study, since the geriatric population and HIV/AIDS carrier present with a high chance of developing cognitive impairments. Regarding the specific variables of G2, the CD4 T rates were analyzed, with due knowledge of its influence on the general clinical status of these patients, when correlating their values with the verbal fluency test, no correlation was found. However, in relation to the MMSE test, there was moderate significance. This suggests that thinking of the best clinical condition promotes an improvement in cognition. In the analysis of the time of diagnosis with the tests, there was no correlation with the MMSE, but there was a weak and significant correlation between this variable and the VFT. The same happened when analyzing the correlation of the time of ART use with the tests, for the MMSE there was no correspondence, but there was a weak and significant influence on the verbal fluency test. For all these variables, except for the CD4 rate, it was measured in months (time of diagnosis and time of ART). Although statistically significant and relational results have been found, such data cannot be taken as absolute, as further studies are needed for real standardization. This research suggests that further studies with larger samples should be performed, especially in relation to secondary objectives, which was the correlation of the CD4 T lymphocyte, time of diagnosis and use of ART with VFT. We had a restricted sample in this study, seen the large number of patients that refused to be participants in the research, for personal reasons and mainly because they were investigated in numerous studies conducted in the immunology sector of the hospital and in addition to the difficulty of availability of the control group of volunteers and especially the refusal to have to take the HIV test, factors that limited the n of this study to 80 participants.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that patients aged over 60 years living with HIV followed up in HUGG's immunology service have good control of the disease, but with significant changes in lexical access and minimal state examination when equating with the control group of the HIV-negative elderly, which reinforces the importance of this type of evaluation and other early speech-language interventions, language stimulation and cognition, in order to contain or delay possible cognitive declines. The research also suggests the need for further investigations of cognitive alterations in elderly patients with HIV/AIDS and studies with a larger sample for data consolidation.

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