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# Contents

#### Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 29 October 16, 2021

#### **REVIEW**

8627	Time to give up traditional methods for the management of gastrointestinal neuroendocrine tumours
	Yozgat A, Kekilli M, Altay M

#### **MINIREVIEWS**

- 8647 Healthcare practice strategies for integrating personalized medicine: Management of COVID-19 Liu WY, Chien CW, Tung TH
- 8658 Clinical application of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation for post-traumatic stress disorder: A literature review

Cheng P, Zhou Y, Xu LZ, Chen YF, Hu RL, Zou YL, Li ZX, Zhang L, Shun Q, Yu X, Li LJ, Li WH

8666 Pros and cons of continuous glucose monitoring in the intensive care unit Sun MT. Li IC. Lin WS. Lin GM

#### **ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

#### **Clinical and Translational Research**

8671 Prognostic implications of ferroptosis-associated gene signature in colon adenocarcinoma Miao YD, Kou ZY, Wang JT, Mi DH

#### **Retrospective Study**

8694 Cefoperazone sodium/sulbactam sodium vs piperacillin sodium/tazobactam sodium for treatment of respiratory tract infection in elderly patients Wang XX, Ma CT, Jiang YX, Ge YJ, Liu FY, Xu WG

8702 Modified Gant procedure for treatment of internal rectal prolapse in elderly women Xu PP, Su YH, Zhang Y, Lu T

- 8710 Clinical and imaging features of desmoid tumors of the extremities Shi Z, Zhao XM, Jiang JM, Li M, Xie LZ
- 8718 Retrospective analysis of surgically treated pT4b gastric cancer with pancreatic head invasion Jin P, Liu H, Ma FH, Ma S, Li Y, Xiong JP, Kang WZ, Hu HT, Tian YT

8729 Development of a random forest model for hypotension prediction after anesthesia induction for cardiac surgery

Li XF, Huang YZ, Tang JY, Li RC, Wang XQ



World Journal of Clinical Cases		
Conten	Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 29 October 16, 2021	
	Clinical Trials Study	
8740	Effects of mindful breathing combined with sleep-inducing exercises in patients with insomnia	
	Su H, Xiao L, Ren Y, Xie H, Sun XH	
	Observational Study	
8749	Chronic hepatitis-C infection in COVID-19 patients is associated with in-hospital mortality	
	Ronderos D, Omar AMS, Abbas H, Makker J, Baiomi A, Sun H, Mantri N, Choi Y, Fortuzi K, Shin D, Patel H, Chilimuri S	
8763	Midazolam dose is associated with recurrence of paradoxical reactions during endoscopy	
	Jin EH, Song JH, Lee J, Bae JH, Chung SJ	
	CASE REPORT	
8773	Isolated mass-forming IgG4-related sclerosing cholangitis masquerading as extrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma: A case report	
	Song S, Jo S	
8782	Samonella typhi infection-related appendicitis: A case report	
	Zheng BH, Hao WM, Lin HC, Shang GG, Liu H, Ni XJ	
8789	ACTA2 mutation is responsible for multisystemic smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome with seizures: A case report and review of literature	
	Yang WX, Zhang HH, Hu JN, Zhao L, Li YY, Shao XL	
8797	Whole-genome amplification/preimplantation genetic testing for propionic acidemia of successful pregnancy in an obligate carrier Mexican couple: A case report	
	Neumann A, Alcantara-Ortigoza MA, González-del Angel A, Zarate Díaz NA, Santana JS, Porchia LM, López-Bayghen E	
8804	Is mannitol combined with furosemide a new treatment for refractory lymphedema? A case report	
	Kim HS, Lee JY, Jung JW, Lee KH, Kim MJ, Park SB	
8812	Successful treatment of floating splenic volvulus: Two case reports and a literature review	
	Sun C, Li SL	
8820	Removal of "ruptured" pulmonary artery infusion port catheter by pigtail catheter combined with gooseneck trap: A case report	
	Chen GQ, Wu Y, Zhao KF, Shi RS	
8825	Isolated neutropenia caused by copper deficiency due to jejunal feeding and excessive zinc intake: A case report	
	Ohmori H, Kodama H, Takemoto M, Yamasaki M, Matsumoto T, Kumode M, Miyachi T, Sumimoto R	
8831	Diagnosis and treatment of eosinophilic fasciitis: Report of two cases	
	Song Y, Zhang N, Yu Y	
8839	Familial left cervical neurofibromatosis 1 with scoliosis: A case report	
	Mu X, Zhang HY, Shen YH, Yang HY	



World Journal of Clinical Cases				
<b>Contents</b> Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 29 October 16, 2				
8846	Successful treatment after toxic epidermal necrolysis induced by AZD-9291 in a patient with non-small cell lung cancer: A case report			
	Li W, He X, Liu H, Zhu J, Zhang HM			
8852	Anesthesia management in a pediatric patient with Becker muscular dystrophy undergoing laparoscopic surgery: A case report			
	Peng L, Wei W			
8858	Diagnosis of upper gastrointestinal perforation complicated with fistula formation and subphrenic abscess by contrast-enhanced ultrasound: A case report			
	Qiu TT, Fu R, Luo Y, Ling WW			
8864	Adenomyoepithelioma of the breast with malignant transformation and repeated local recurrence: A case report			
	Oda G, Nakagawa T, Mori M, Fujioka T, Onishi I			
8871	Primary intracranial synovial sarcoma with hemorrhage: A case report			
	Wang YY, Li ML, Zhang ZY, Ding JW, Xiao LF, Li WC, Wang L, Sun T			
8879	Lumbar infection caused by Mycobacterium paragordonae: A case report			
	Tan YZ, Yuan T, Tan L, Tian YQ, Long YZ			
8888	Primary intratracheal neurilemmoma in a 10-year-old girl: A case report			
	Wu L, Sha MC, Wu XL, Bi J, Chen ZM, Wang YS			
8894	Ovarian pregnancy rupture following ovulation induction and intrauterine insemination: A case report			
	Wu B, Li K, Chen XF, Zhang J, Wang J, Xiang Y, Zhou HG			
8901	Delayed diagnosis of imperforate hymen with huge hematocolpometra: A case report			
	Jang E, So KA, Kim B, Lee AJ, Kim NR, Yang EJ, Shim SH, Lee SJ, Kim TJ			
8906	Acute pancreatitis with hypercalcemia caused by primary hyperparathyroidism associated with paraneoplastic syndrome: A case report and review of literature			
	Yang L, Lin Y, Zhang XQ, Liu B, Wang JY			
8915	Use of a modified tracheal tube in a child with traumatic bronchial rupture: A case report and review of literature			
	Fan QM, Yang WG			
8923	Isolated liver metastasis detected 11 years after the curative resection of rectal cancer: A case report			
	Yonenaga Y, Yokoyama S			
8932	Severe bleeding after operation of preauricular fistula: A case report			
	Tian CH, Chen XJ			
8938	Secondary aortoesophageal fistula initially presented with empyema after thoracic aortic stent grafting: A case report			
	Wang DQ, Liu M, Fan WJ			



Contor	World Journal of Clinical Cases
Conter	Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 29 October 16, 2021
8946	Disruption of sensation-dependent bladder emptying due to bladder overdistension in a complete spinal cord injury: A case report
	Yoon JY, Kim DS, Kim GW, Won YH, Park SH, Ko MH, Seo JH

# Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 29 October 16, 2021

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CASE REPORT

# ACTA2 mutation is responsible for multisystemic smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome with seizures: A case report and review of literature

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# Abstract

## BACKGROUND

ACTA2 gene is a specific gene that encodes actin  $\alpha$ 2. Multisystem smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome (MSMDS) is a multisystem disease characterized by aortic and cerebrovascular lesions caused by ACTA2 gene mutations. There have been many reports of cardiac, pulmonary and cerebrovascular lesions caused by MSMDS; however, few studies have focused on seizures caused by MSMDS.

## CASE SUMMARY

Our patient was a girl aged 7 years and 8 mo with recurrent cough, asthma and seizures for 7 years. She was diagnosed with severe pneumonia, congenital heart disease, cardiac insufficiency, and malnutrition in the local hospital. Cardiac ultrasonography revealed congenital heart disease, patent ductus arteriosus (with a diameter of 0.68 cm), left coronary arteriectasis, patent oval foramen (0.12 cm), tricuspid and pulmonary regurgitation, and pulmonary hypertension. Cerebral magnetic resonance imaging and magnetic resonance angiography indicated stiffness in the brain vessels, together with multiple aberrant signaling shadows in bilateral paraventricular regions. A heterozygous mutation (c.536G>A) was identified in the ACTA2 gene, resulting in generation of p.R179H. Finally, the girl was diagnosed with MSMDS combined with epilepsy. The patient had 4 episodes of seizures before treatment, and no onset of seizure was reported after oral



conflict of interest.

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administration of sodium valproate for 1 year.

## **CONCLUSION**

MSMDS has a variety of clinical manifestations and unique cranial imaging features. Cerebrovascular injury and white matter injury may lead to seizures. Gene detection can confirm the diagnosis and prevent missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis.

**Key Words:** Multi-systemic smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome; *ACTA2* gene; Seizures; Gene detection; Case report

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Core Tip: Multisystem smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome (MSMDS) is a disease caused by ACTA2 gene mutation. We report a case of MSMDS complicated with epilepsy. Since birth, the child developed several system dysfunctions, including dyspnea, congenital heart disease, and malnutrition. Brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and magnetic resonance angiography showed cerebrovascular stiffness. It was accompanied by multiple abnormal signaling shadows around the bilateral ventricles, which may have been the focus of the seizures. Reviewing the literature and imaging reports, head MRI shows that abnormal signals and vascular malformations should be paid more attention to, which may lead to seizures in older patients.

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# INTRODUCTION

Multisystem smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome (MSMDS), initially reported by Milewicz *et al*[1] in 2008, is a serious genetic disease caused by mutations in the *ACTA*2 gene. It is characterized by aortic and cerebrovascular diseases, persistent ductus arteriosus, congenital mydriasis and organ dysfunction dependent on smooth muscle function, including the bladder and intestinal tract<sup>[2]</sup>. The diagnosis and treatment are still a challenge as few cases induced by ACTA2 mutation are available. In this case report, we present a patient with MSMDS induced by ACTA2 mutation combined with seizures. We summarize the clinical manifestations, laboratory test findings and molecular features. At the same time, we searched PubMed for related cases from 1980 to 2020 by using the keywords "multi-system smooth muscle dysfunction" and " ACTA2", and summarized the clinical characteristics, laboratory results and molecular characteristics of these cases.

# CASE PRESENTATION

## Chief complaints

A girl aged 7 years and 8 mo came to our department for repeated cough, shortness of breath for 7 years and one convulsion. There were four convulsions within 2 d after admission. No fever, vomiting, diarrhea and other symptoms were found.

## History of present illness

The patient had convulsions shortly after waking up in the morning, for no obvious reason. They were characterized by generalized tonic-clonic seizures and relieved spontaneously within 2 min.

#### History of past illness

The patient had a paroxysmal cough after catching a cold, combined with cyanosis in the mouth and lips, and shortness of breath since 8 mo of age. Chest radiography indicated increased pulmonary markings in both lungs. Cardiac ultrasonography indicated congenital heart disease, patent ductus arteriosus (PDA), patent oval foramen and pulmonary hypertension. She was admitted to the local hospital several times for the treatment of severe pneumonia, congenital heart disease, heart insufficiency, and malnutrition. These conditions showed remission after symptomatic treatment.

#### Personal and family history

The child was born by cesarean section at 38 wk. Her parents and one of her brothers were healthy.

#### Physical examination

After admission, the patient's temperature was  $37.0^{\circ}$ C; pulse, 112 bpm; respiration, 29 breaths/min; blood pressure, 98/60 mmHg; body weight, 18 kg; height, 118 cm; and head circumference, 50 cm. She was conscious, but presented with an appearance of malnutrition. The subcutaneous fat was thin. No swelling was noticed in the tonsils. No cyanosis was identified in the mouth and lips. No obvious edema was observed. her language, intelligence and movement showed slight delay. Congenital mydriasis was noticed. The pupils showed a diameter of 5 mm, and were no longer sensitive to light reflex. The heart rate was 112 bpm. The cardiac sound was loud, P<sub>2</sub>showed accentuation. Persistent machinery murmur (III/6) was identified in the left sternal border. The pulmonary respiration in both lungs was coarse, without dry or moist rales. The abdomen was soft, and the liver was palpable under the ribs (1.0 cm). The boundary was sharp, and the texture was soft. No tenderness was felt. For nervous system examination, the neck was soft, and the pathological signs were negative. The myodynamia and muscular tension were normal, and the tendon reflex was normal. Appetite, sleeping, urination and defecation were normal.

#### Laboratory examinations

Blood analysis revealed leukocytosis  $8.58 \times 10^{\circ}/L$  with the neutrophils as the major cells (68%). The hematocrit and platelet count were normal. The level of procalcitonin increased slightly (1.42 ng/mL). Serum C-reactive protein was 33.84 mg/L (normal range < 8 mg/L). Stool occult blood test was positive. Electrocardiography showed sinus rhythm and axis deviation to the right. Chest X-ray showed thickened texture in both lungs, together with patchy blurred shadows and enlarged heart shadow. There was obvious protrusion in the pulmonary artery segment, plump edge of the right heart, and left heart margin beyond the midline of the clavicle. There were no abnormalities in liver and renal function determination, cardiac enzymes, electrolytes, blood glucose and organic acid. The score based on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale was 75.

#### Imaging examinations

The video electroencephalogram findings showed background activity of 6–7 c/s in consciousness. The bilateral activity was symmetric, with no obvious spike/sharp wave. No paradoxical discharge was noticed in the presence of flash stimulation. Cardiac ultrasonography revealed congenital heart disease: PDA with a diameter of 0.68 cm, left coronary arteriectasis, patent oval foramen with a diameter of 0.12 cm, tricuspid and pulmonary regurgitation, and pulmonary hypertension. Cranial magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and magnetic resonance angiography (MRA) indicated stiffness in the brain vessels, together with multiple aberrant signaling shadows in bilateral paraventricular regions (Figure 1).

#### Gene sequence analysis

For the gene sequencing, venous blood samples (3 mL) were collected from the patient and her parents using a tube containing EDTA after obtaining informed consent. The study protocols were approved by the Ethical Committee of our hospital (approval No. 2016066). The pathogenic gene was detected by whole exon sequencing, and verified by Sanger technique. A heterozygous mutation (c.536G>A) was identified in the *ACTA2* gene, which resulted in generation of p.R179H (Figure 2, Table 1). No mutations were identified in the *ACTA2* gene in her parents.

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#### Table 1 Gene sequencing data of the ACTA2 in the patient

Item	Results			
Nucleotide changes	c.536G>A			
NM No.	NM_001613.2			
Homozygous/heterozygous mutation	Heterozygous mutation			
Amino acid changes	р.R179Н			
Minor allele frequency	N/A			
Pathogenicity	Pathogenic mutation			
Disease/phenotype	Multi-systemic smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome			
Genetic type	Autosomal dominant			
Mutation source	Newly identified			

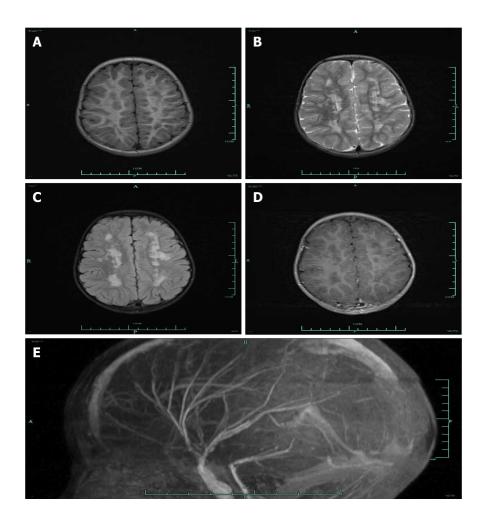


Figure 1 Cerebral magnetic resonance imaging (axial T1-weighted, T2-weighted, fluid attenuated inversion recovery images) for the patient with multi-systemic smooth muscle dysfunction syndrome multiple. A-C: Cerebral Magnetic resonance imaging showed multiple aberrant signal shadows in bilateral paraventricular; D: There was no enhancement in contrast-enhanced scan; E: Lateral projection of magnetic resonance angiography indicated abnormally straight course of intracranial arteries.

## **FINAL DIAGNOSIS**

MSMDS.

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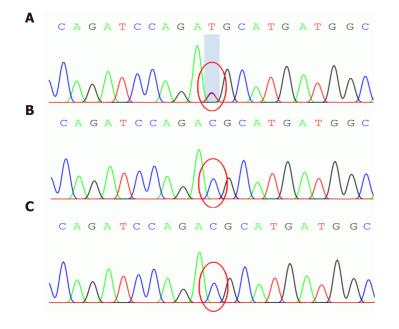


Figure 2 Sequencing analysis results for the patient and her parents. The gene sequence map of the child showed the change of c.536G>A (the nucleotide cytosine mutation of coding region 536 became thymine). No mutation was identified in the sequencing data of her father and mother. A: The patient; B: Her father; C: Her mother; Green shadow indicated mutation sites.

#### TREATMENT

To date, there is no standardized treatment for MSMDS. For children with MSMDS, we reviewed and screened the conventional treatment strategies for related symptoms, and administered the following treatments to alleviate the patient's conditions. Sildenafil was utilized to decrease pulmonary hypertension[3]. Fructose diphosphate sodium was used to nourish the cardiac muscles<sup>[4]</sup>. Oral administration of sodium valproate was given for the treatment of epilepsy[5].

#### OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

The patient was followed up every 3 mo after discharge. Recurrent coughing and purplish relapse could usually be improved after anti-infective treatment, and she has not shown seizures until now, through oral administration of sodium valproate (5 mL, bid).

#### DISCUSSION

We searched "multiple system smooth muscle dysfunction" and "ACTA2" in PubMed and Medline, and reviewed the clinical symptoms and imaging of the previous cases. Besides our case, we searched PubMed for a total of 19 published articles involving 37 MSMDS patients. Details of these cases are summarized in Table 2[1,2,6-22]. According to the analysis of these patients, the youngest was age 3 d[8] and the oldest 41 years [12]. The main clinical manifestations were congenital fixed mydriasis and PDA. Thirty-seven patients had congenital pupil dilation and 35 had PDA. Four patients had convulsions. Twenty-five patients had abnormal signals of white matter on MRI findings. Thirty-seven patients underwent gene sequencing analysis. In total, 28 cases had Arg179His mutation, five Arg179Cys mutation, and two each Arg179Leu and Asn117Lys mutation.

ACTA2 gene is located in the long arm of chromosome 10q23.31, which encodes the expression of actin  $\alpha$ 2. MSMDS is a serious disease caused by ACTA2 mutation, which is characterized by familial thoracic aortic aneurysm and cerebrovascular lesions. Milewicz et al[1] summarized the clinical symptoms of the disease in 2010: (1) Visual system: congenital nonreactive mydriatic fixation; (2) Cardiovascular system: PDA, pulmonary artery dilatation or hypertension, thoracic aortic aneurysm; (3) Nervous system: cerebral infarction, hemiplegia, motor/mental delay; (4) Respiratory system:



Table 2 Clinical characteristics of 37 patients with multiple smooth muscle disorder syndrome						
	Mutation type	Arg179His <sup>1</sup>	Arg179Cys	Arg179Leu	Asn117Lys	
Total number of patients (unit: example)		28	5	2	2	
Clinical features						
Visual system symptoms						
	Congenital mydriasis	28	5	2	2	
	Retinal vessels twists and turns	13	1	1	0	
Cardiovascular system						
	Patent ductus arteriosus	26	5	2	2	
	Pulmonary hypertension	12	2	0	0	
	Thoracic aortic aneurysm	9	0	0	0	
	Pulmonary artery dilatation	10	1	0	0	
Nervous system						
	Underdevelopment	11	1	0	0	
	Cerebral infarction or hemiplegia	5	1	0	1	
	White matter lesion	21	3	0	1	
	Manifestations of moyamoya-like disease	19	4	1	0	
	Epileptic seizure	4	1	0	0	
Respiratory system						
	Dyspnea	14	3	1	0	
	Asthma	3	0	0	0	
Digestive system						
	Intestinal malrotation	5	2	0	0	
	Poor intestinal peristalsis	5	1	0	0	

<sup>1</sup>Including our patient. Data collected from references: Arg179His[1,2,6-10,15,17-21]; Arg179Cys[11,13,16,22]; Arg179Leu[14,17]; Asn117Lys[12].

shortness of breath, recurrent respiratory infection, bronchial asthma; (5) Digestive system: intestinal malrotation or intestinal dyskinesia; and (6) Other systematic manifestations: hypotonic bladder, congenital absence of abdominal muscle.

To date, the clinical pedigree of neurological manifestations of ACTA2 mutations is not well described. The main symptoms are motor and/or mental delay, cerebral infarction and/or hemiplegia[11]. In the literature review, we found three patients with neurological epilepsy besides our case. The main imaging manifestations were cerebrovascular abnormalities and white matter signaling changes. The specificity of cerebrovascular disease was mainly epidural artery dilatation, intradural artery stiffness, large artery and distal microvascular malformation[10,15,22]. In our case, initial MRI showed that the blood vessels in the brain were stiff, and the white matter showed multiple signals. No changes in gray matter were found. With the increase of age, further attention should be paid to the occurrence of gray matter infarction. For the four convulsions in our case, we speculate that the possible mechanism is as follows: (1) Cerebrovascular rigidity and occlusion led to low regional cerebral blood flow and ischemic penumbra, in which surviving neurons repeatedly produced epileptic discharges; (2) Cerebrovascular lesions led to the loss of small vascular smooth muscle cells, thickening, stenosis and hardness of vascular wall, decrease of vasomotor activity, change of blood-brain barrier permeability and decrease of neuronal response threshold. It triggered increase in the excitability of neurons and albumin exudation. In the presence of albumin absorbed by astrocytes, the ability to buffer extracellular K<sup>+</sup>and reuptake extracellular glutamate was affected, which eventually triggered the changes in neuronal microenvironment and epileptic electricity generation[23]; and (3) The change in signaling in the white matter. The white matter is an important part of the central nervous system and the gathering



place of nerve fibers in the brain, which undertake the functions of neural information sharing and information communication in various brain areas. The pathological changes in cerebral vessels cause ischemia and hypoxia in the white matter, which promotes the death of nerve cells. This facilitates new synaptic connections between neurons to form a new abnormal neural network, leading to seizures.

## CONCLUSION

MSMDS caused by ACTA2 mutation showed different clinical symptoms. Seizures may be one of the neurological manifestations in the evolution of the disease. The disease is characterized by multiple system involvement with no obvious specificity. Its diagnosis is still a challenge. Cranial MRI and MRA examinations are recommended in children with convulsions, which have important diagnostic value for the diagnosis of the disease. Gene sequencing is crucial to evaluate the patient population in order to provide accurate prognosis and genetic counseling. Pediatricians should be familiar with this rare disease and its prognosis.

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