Table II. Characteristics of six patients with an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis.

Case no.	Diagnosis	Treatment	Time before treatment (days)	Hearing improvement
1	Cryptococcal meningitis	Antifungal drug	3	Improved
2	Chronic herpes meningitis + labyrinthitis	Steroid and anti-HSV agents	Unknown	Not improved
3	Meningial metastasis of lymphoma	Steroid and anticancer drug	6	Improved
4	Superficial siderosis	No treatment		Not improved
5	Cogan's syndrome	Steroid	90	Not improved
6	Sjögren syndrome	Steroid	4	Improved

intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis and ≥ 90 days in the four patients with an isolated inner ear disorder. The Mann–Whitney U test showed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between these groups (Figure 2). As shown in Table I, all patients with an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis complained of dizziness and/or noncochleovestibular symptoms in addition to hearing loss. Four of these six patients had dizziness and five of them had fever, headache, or altered mental state. These symptoms were not observed in patients with ANSD or an isolated inner ear disorder, who had only tinnitus as an associated symptom.

Hearing improvement after treatment for the causative diseases

The causative disease was treated in five patients with an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis, except in case 4 who had superficial siderosis (Table II). Hearing improved in three patients, who did not require hearing aids in daily life. The delay from the onset of hearing loss awareness to the beginning of treatment was within 1 week in cases 1, 3, and 6, who showed an improvement in hearing. However, it took as long as 90 days in case 5, who showed no change in hearing threshold after treatments. In case 4, the origin of bleeding that caused hemosiderosis was not determined despite radiographic evaluations, including brain and spinal MRI, and the patient showed no improvement in hearing at follow-up. Improvement in hearing loss did not occur in any of the patients with ANSD or an isolated inner ear disorder, despite systemic administration of steroids and/or circulation activators.

Discussion

This study was performed as a retrospective review of 12 cases with progressive bilateral SNHL who complained of difficulty in daily conversation within 4 days to 1 year after the onset of hearing loss awareness. The patients with bilateral SNHL presenting this time course of deterioration were relatively rare and accounted for only 1.3% of those with bilateral SNHL in this study. However, retrospectively, distinguishing this type of SNHL from others was meaningful because 6 of these 12 patients (50%) developed SNHL from an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis, which can be fatal without appropriate treatment. It is also noteworthy that all three patients with an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis, who showed improvement in hearing, underwent early treatment of the causative diseases, suggesting that accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatments for the causative disease at its early stage may be important to restore hearing as well as to lower the mortality. In the present study, the rapidly progressive SNHL was also caused by ANSD or an isolated inner ear disorder, but clinical manifestations of intracranial lesions and systemic vasculitis were different from those observed in other categories of causative diseases. Our study showed that in patients with intracranial lesions and systemic vasculitis, the time from onset of hearing loss to difficulty in daily life was within 2 months and significantly shorter than that in patients with an isolated inner ear disorder. In addition to the rapidly progressing hearing loss, noncochleovestibular symptoms and/or dizziness were always associated with intracranial lesions and systemic vasculitis, while all five patients with an isolated inner ear disorder or ANSD complained of only tinnitus. Among noncochleovestibular symptoms, fever was the leading symptom (6 of 12 patients), followed by headache and an altered mental state. In all cases with fever, the origin of fever was difficult to identify at first and systemic inflammation or intracranial infection was identified later based on systemic evaluations by otologists, internal medicine specialists, and radiologists. The presence of headache and an altered mental state also suggests that lesions may

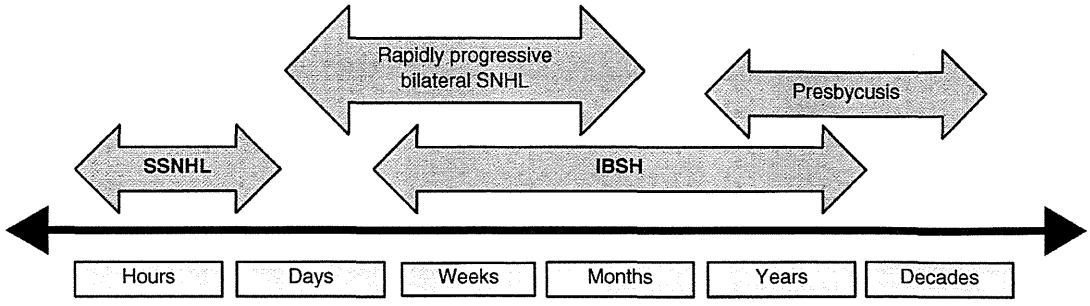

Figure 3. The time course in various types of bilateral sensorineural hearing loss (SNHL). IBSH, idiopathic bilateral SNHL; SSNHL, sudden SNHL.

involve other areas of the central nervous system in addition to the auditory neural pathway. Interestingly, obvious vestibular dysfunction was not observed in patients with an isolated inner ear disease, although four of the six patients with an intracranial lesion or systemic vasculitis had dizziness. The inner ear lesions in the present series may have been limited to the cochlea, with central compensation possibly making the vestibular symptoms less prominent despite the presence of some vestibular involvement.

We performed brain MRI in nine patients including all seven with a noncochleovestibular symptom or dizziness. Headache, altered mental state or other abnormal neurological findings in addition to the eighth cranial nerve dysfunction suggests the presence of an intracranial lesion. In this situation, brain MRI is necessary to evaluate intracranial diseases. Even though the neurological disorders were limited to the eighth cranial nerve, association of dizziness with SNHL might be caused by labyrinthitis or lesions in internal auditory canals and brain MRI may be recommended. Prolonged unknown origin of fever associated with bilateral SNHL is also an indication for brain MRI to evaluate labyrinthitis and nonbacterial meningitis.

In the present study, pure-tone hearing thresholds were improved in case 1 with Cryptococcus meningitis and case 3 with meningeal metastasis of lymphoma after the intracranial administration of antifungal and anticancer drugs, respectively. Hearing recovery is usually difficult in patients with Cryptococcus meningitis [5], although a patient with this disease was reported to show partial recovery of hearing after treatment [5]. Hearing improvement after treatment has also been reported in patients with bacterial and viral meningitis [6,7]. Vasculitis causes SNHL in patients with connective tissue diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus and polyarteritis nodosa [8], with this type of hearing loss reported to improve following plasmapheresis or immunosuppressive therapy using steroids or cyclophosphamide [2,9]. In our study, case 6, who had Sjögren syndrome, showed hearing improvement after steroid treatment. In contrast, hearing loss in case 5, who had Cogan's syndrome, was not improved by steroids. Although hearing improvement has been described in a patient with Cogan's syndrome [10], it is often difficult to improve hearing loss in such patients.

Previous case reports indicate that the etiology of bilateral SNHL, which deteriorates more slowly than sudden deafness and more quickly than presbycusis, also includes meningeal carcinomatosis [11], metastasis of carcinoma in the bilateral internal auditory canal [12], mitochondrial neurogastrointestinal encephalopathy (MINGIE) [13], and polyarteritis nodosa [14]. These diseases were not found in the present study due to the small size of the study. The rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL can be induced by various types of diseases with different etiologies described above and, moreover, within each type of a disease, severity of symptoms may vary widely between patients. Therefore, further study investigating more patients with rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL is needed to lead to definite conclusions about the importance of clinical manifestations and indications for MRI for diagnosis of the causative diseases.

The definition of rapidly progressive SNHL in previous reports varies, including SNHL deteriorating in days [15] or in weeks to months [14,16–18]. However, the disease entity described in these reports is almost identical, which is the SNHL that progresses more slowly than sudden deafness and more rapidly than presbycusis. Thus, in line with those previous reports, we defined rapidly progressive SNHL as the one that deteriorates in days to months. The time course of rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL compared with that of other types of common bilateral SNHL is illustrated in Figure 3. Idiopathic bilateral SNHL (IBSH) is a progressive bilateral SNHL of unknown etiology and

was proposed as a clinical entity in 1976. In IBSH, hearing loss usually progresses over several years; therefore, deterioration in hearing loss is slower than that observed in the current patients [19], suggesting different etiologies. In the current study, the four patients with isolated inner ear disorders showed a significantly slower deterioration in hearing loss compared with the other patients. IBSH sometimes shows rapid progression of hearing loss within several days or weeks; therefore, patients with similar pathology to that observed in IBSH could meet our criteria for rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL if they visit a hospital in the rapid phase of the disease.

A noteworthy aspect of the patients reported in this study was that early treatment of intracranial lesions and systemic vasculitis improved hearing loss, suggesting the importance of early diagnosis of the causative disease, although further investigation of large numbers of patients is necessary to prove the effectiveness of early treatment. Early diagnosis is also important because the causative diseases for rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL include fatal conditions such as meningitis or malignant diseases, or diseases that may result in irreversible neurological deficits such as superficial siderosis. In patients with superficial siderosis, decreasing the risk for a poor outcome requires early diagnosis of the disease and identification and ablation of the bleeding source [20].

Conclusion

Rapidly progressive bilateral SNHL is rare, but it often develops as a symptom of intracranial disease or systemic vasculitis, both of which are potentially fatal. Hearing may recover in patients who undergo treatment at an early stage of the causative disease. This indicates that early diagnosis followed by appropriate treatment of the causative disease is critical for the management of these patients.

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Notice of correction

The Early Online version of this article published online ahead of print on 21 Nov 2013 was missing information about the authors.
The corrected version is shown here.