Original research

Brain age gap in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorders and multiple sclerosis

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ABSTRACT

Objective To evaluate the clinical significance of deep learning-derived brain age prediction in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD) relative to relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS).

Methods This cohort study used data retrospectively collected from 6 tertiary neurological centres in China between 2009 and 2018. In total, 199 patients with NMOSD and 200 patients with RRMS were studied alongside 269 healthy controls. Clinical follow-up was available in 85 patients with NMOSD and 124 patients with RRMS (mean duration NMOSD=5.8±1.9 (1.9–9.9) years, RRMS=5.2±1.7 (1.5–9.2) years). Deep learning was used to learn ‘brain age’ from MRI scans in the healthy controls and estimate the brain age gap (BAG) in patients.

Results A significantly higher BAG was found in the NMOSD (5.4±8.2 years) and RRMS (13.0±14.7 years) groups compared with healthy controls. A higher baseline disability score and advanced brain volume loss were associated with increased BAG in both patient groups. A longer disease duration was associated with increased BAG in RRMS. BAG significantly predicted Expanded Disability Status Scale worsening in patients with NMOSD and RRMS.

Conclusions There is a clear BAG in NMOSD, although smaller than in RRMS. The BAG is a clinically relevant MRI marker in NMOSD and RRMS.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ The deep learning-derived brain age gap (BAG) is associated with various clinical risk factors and can be used for risk stratification of various neurological and psychiatric diseases, including multiple sclerosis (MS).
⇒ The clinical significance of BAG prediction in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD) relative to relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) is not known.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

⇒ A deep learning model was able to estimate BAG from three-dimensional structural MRI scans and is robust across multiple centres and multiple scanners.
⇒ A significant BAG was found in patients with NMOSD compared with healthy controls, although it was less marked than in patients with RRMS.
⇒ Higher disability and advanced atrophy were associated with a larger BAG in both NMOSD and RRMS.
⇒ BAG was a predictive biomarker of Expanded Disability Status Scale worsening in NMOSD and RRMS.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND/OR POLICY

⇒ BAG is a comprehensive and relevant disease marker in NMOSD and RRMS.

INTRODUCTION

Age is an independent marker for disease progression in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD)1 and multiple sclerosis (MS),2 two major inflammatory demyelinating diseases of the central nervous system.3 4 However, ageing does not affect everyone in the same way, so researchers have sought biological markers of ageing processes that may explain some of these individual differences and are more reflective of age-related disease processes. The so-called ‘brain age’ paradigm has been designed to determine the brain’s biological age,5 which can be estimated from anatomical brain MRI scans. By analysing the similarity of a given brain scan with scans from a range of healthy individuals, machine-learning techniques can predict a person’s brain age from neuroimaging features, providing a novel way of indexing deviations from normal brain ageing. Compared with calendar age, brain age may provide more comprehensive information for understanding disease impact in NMOSD and relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS).

The brain age gap (BAG) is the difference between calendar age and predicted brain age. BAG thus represents the deviation from an expected healthy ageing trajectory. This MRI biomarker integrates structural alterations across the brain associated with the ageing process.6 7 Previous studies have suggested that BAG is associated with various clinical risk factors and can be used for risk stratification of various neurological and psychiatric diseases including MS.7 However, no one has investigated BAG in patients with NMOSD and its ability to understand and predict Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) worsening.
In this study, we used a novel deep-learning brain age model to investigate the utility of BAG as a neuroimaging biomarker to predict EDSS worsening in NMOSD and RRMS in a large multicentre dataset.

METHODS

Participants

Data from patients with NMOSD and RRMS were retrospectively collected from six tertiary neurological centres in China covering the period between November 2009 and April 2018. Patients who fulfilled the following criteria were included: (a) confirmed diagnosis of NMOSD according to 2015 revised diagnostic criteria \(^1\) or RRMS according to 2017 McDonald criteria \(^1\); (b) complete demographic and clinical information, including baseline EDSS score and disease duration and (c) good quality baseline three-dimensional (3D) T1-weighted structural images (T1WI). Clinical evaluation, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up assessments of the participants were conducted at each centre by local neurologists with expertise in demyelinating diseases. EDSS worsening was defined as an increase in EDSS score ≥1.0 for baseline EDSS ≤5.5 or an increase in EDSS score ≥0.5 for baseline EDSS >5.5, as previously published.\(^10\)

Data for deep learning model training

Training data for our deep learning-derived brain age included MRI scans from healthy controls (HCs, \(n=9794\)) from publicly available datasets, including Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI), \(^11\) The Australian Imaging, Biomarkers and Lifestyle (AIBL), \(^12\) Brain Genomics Superstruct Project (GSP) \(^13\) and Southwest University Longitudinal Imaging Multimodal (SLIM), \(^14\) as well as a group of healthy people scanned at Beijing Tiantan Hospital from January to December 2019 (online supplementary table 1). After training, the model was tested on two further independent datasets. Internal validation data comprised another group of healthy participants (\(n=462\)) scanned at Beijing Tiantan Hospital from January to April 2020 on two different scanners (see online supplementary table 1). The external validation dataset included HCs from the multicentre NMOSD and MS cohorts (\(n=267\)).

Image acquisition and data preprocessing

All the MRI scans of participants as well as the validation dataset were acquired using 3.0 T scanners at 1.0 mm isotropic resolution using Magnetization Prepared-RAPidGradient Echo imaging (MP-RAGE) or similar sequences. Non-contrast 3D T1-weighted scans were affinely registered to Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) space. Skull stripping was performed by HD-BET on the registered scans.\(^14\) The signal intensity of the resulting images was normalised by dividing by the mean intensity within the cerebral mask. Scans were then resampled to 1 mm isotropic resolution using linear interpolation and served as the input of the proposed convolutional neural network (CNN).

Age at each scan was determined by either of two methods: (1) the demographic metadata (in years) provided by owners of the dataset; (2) calculated from the difference between date of birth and image acquisition date recorded in DICOM metadata, which was done in days and converted to years. Inconsistent data were omitted from the study.

Brain volume measurement

Brain volume segmentation was performed using the automated recon-all procedure in FreeSurfer package (V.6.0.0) as described by Fischl et al.\(^15\) The total brain volume was calculated and normalised by dividing by the estimated total intracranial volume.\(^16\)

Model construction, training and prediction

We built a 3D CNN called the 3D Simple Fully Convolutional Neural Network (SFCN) network as per the work of Peng et al.\(^17\) We modified the output structure so that the network could predict age across a larger range of 6–90 years. Model training and mathematical details are described in the online supplementary material.

BAG was calculated by subtracting chronological age from predicted brain age, with a positive BAG indicating an older-looking brain. To investigate the possible influence of brain lesions on age prediction, we performed a correlation analysis between raw and lesion-filled 3D T1WI images. Lesion filling was performed by default pipeline of Lesion Segmentation Tool (V.3.0.0, https://www.applied-statistics.de/lst.html).

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using R (V.3.6.3). Graphs were plotted with ggplot2 package. Intergroup comparison was conducted using the \(\chi^2\) test (for categorical variables), Wilcoxon signed-rank test (for EDSS) and Student’s \(t\)-test or analysis of variance with Tukey’s range test as post hoc analysis (for continuous variable). Survival analysis with Kaplan-Meier curve and Cox proportional hazards model were used to analyse time-to-progression data. Other details are described in the online supplementary material. All statistical tests were two-sided, and \(p<0.05\) was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Participants

In total, 199 patients with NMOSD, 200 patients with RRMS and 269 age-matched and sex-matched HC subjects were included (table 1). Patients with NMOSD were older at baseline (41.0±13.0 years vs 37.1±11.4 years, \(p=0.005\)), had a longer disease duration (4.5±5.1 years vs 3.2±4.4 years, \(p=0.006\)) and had less severe disability measured by EDSS at baseline (2.0 vs 3.5, \(p<0.001\)) than patients with RRMS. Of the patients with NMOSD included, 52 (26.1%) patients received disease-modifying therapy (DMT), others received immunosuppressants including cyclophosphamide and azathioprine. In the RRMS group, 86 (43.0%) patients received an MS-specific DMT, others received the above other treatment.

Follow-up data were available for 85 patients with NMOSD and 124 patients with RRMS (median follow-up duration: 5.8±1.9 years and 5.2±1.7 years, respectively). During follow-up, 31 patients with NMOSD and 42 patients with RRMS experienced EDSS worsening.

Brain morphometry of the participants

Both the NMOSD and RRMS groups had lower brain volumes than the HCs (1080.1±121.5 mL and 1058.9±94.4 mL vs 1154.6±98.5 mL, both \(p<0.001\)). While the NMOSD and RRMS groups were not significantly different in raw brain volume (\(p=0.108\)), normalised brain volumes revealed less pronounced atrophy in patients with NMOSD (0.750±0.038 vs 0.731±0.045, \(p<0.001\)). The lesion load in the NMOSD group was lower than that in the RRMS group (4.9±8.1 mL vs 12.7±17.9 mL, \(p<0.001\)) (table 1).
BAG between the AQP4 seropositive and seronegative subgroups. We observed that there was no significant difference in as well as in patients with NMOSD with versus without brain lesions. We demonstrated that BAG was positively associated with EDSS in both the NMOSD and RRMS groups (NMOSD r=0.217, p=0.002; RRMS r=0.268, p<0.001; figure 2A).

Performance of the brain age prediction model

Model training (using 9794 HCs) was terminated at epoch 108. The mean absolute error (MAE) before inverse linear bias correction was 2.63 years in the developmental validation set, and this model was used as the final model for further analysis.

The model was then tested using 462 images for internal validation and 267 images for external validation. A Bl

Increased BAG in NMOSD and RRMS compared with healthy controls

The difference in BAG among patients with NMOSD, patients with RRMS and HCs was relatively consistent across baseline chronological ages (figure 1A). At baseline, patients with NMOSD had a significantly higher BAG than HCs (NMOSD−HC=4.6 years, 95% CI 2.4 to 6.9, p<0.001), but patients with RRMS had a markedly higher BAG than HCs (MS−HC=12.1 years, 95% CI 9.9 to 14.3, p<0.001). BAG was lower in NMOSD than in RRMS (NMOSD−RRMS=−7.5 years, 95% CI 5.2 to 9.9, p<0.001) (table 1, figure 1B).

Furthermore, we performed subgroup analyses of BAG in AQP4 seropositive versus seronegative patients with NMOSD, as well as in patients with NMOSD versus without brain lesions. We observed that there was no significant difference in BAG between the AQP4 seropositive and seronegative subgroups (5.8±8.8 vs 4.2±6.9 years, p=0.256). However, the BAG in patients with brain lesions was significantly higher than those without (7.1±8.5 vs 3.4±7.2 years, p=0.001) (online supplemental table 5).

Correlation of BAG with clinical variables

At baseline, univariate linear regression analysis demonstrated that BAG was positively associated with EDS3 in both the NMOSD and RRMS groups (NMOSD r=0.217, β=0.86, p=0.002; RRMS r=0.268, β=2.31, p<0.001; figure 2A). Normalised brain volume was inversely associated with BAG in both NMOSD and RRMS groups (NMOSD r=−0.202, β=−48.5, p<0.001; RRMS r=−0.384, β=−126.9, p<0.001; figure 2B). Multivariable linear regression found that BAG was positively predictive of baseline EDS3 independent of normalised brain volume and disease duration (NMOSD p=0.030; RRMS p=0.009; online supplemental table 3).

Table 1  Demographic characteristics, baseline status and deep learning-derived brain age of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>NMOSD</th>
<th>RRMS</th>
<th>HCs</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>269</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at baseline, year (min–max)</td>
<td>41.0±13.0 (16.9–66.0)</td>
<td>37.1±11.4 (16.6–66.9)</td>
<td>38.5±12.7 (17.0–69.0)</td>
<td>NMOSD versus HC 0.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, n (%)</td>
<td>176/199 (88.4)</td>
<td>128/200 (64.0)</td>
<td>152/269 (56.5)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seropositive for AQP4-IgG, n (%)</td>
<td>84/132 (63.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First on set to diagnosis, year (min–max)</td>
<td>4.5±5.1 (0.0–35.0)</td>
<td>3.2±4.4 (0.0–21.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline use of DMT, n (%)</td>
<td>52 (26.1%)</td>
<td>86 (43.0%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS at baseline, median (IQR) (min–max)</td>
<td>2.0 (2.0) (0.0–9.0)</td>
<td>3.5 (3.0) (0.0–9.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain segmentation volume without ventricles, mL (min–max)</td>
<td>1058.9±94.4 (798.7–1390.1)</td>
<td>1080.1±121.5 (742.6–1484.5)</td>
<td>1154.6±98.5 (910.7–1434.0)</td>
<td>NMOSD versus HC &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalised brain volume (min–max)</td>
<td>0.750±0.038 (0.647–0.891)</td>
<td>0.731±0.045 (0.590–0.858)</td>
<td>0.765±0.030 (0.700–0.894)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total volume of lesion, mL (min–max)</td>
<td>4.9±8.1 (0.0–43.9)</td>
<td>12.7±17.9 (0.0–134.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>&lt;0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted brain age, year (95% CI)</td>
<td>5.4±8.2 (4.3 to 6.5)</td>
<td>13.0±14.7 (10.9 to 15.0)</td>
<td>0.8±6.2 (0.1 to 1.6)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted brain age SD, year (95% CI)</td>
<td>6.0±3.0 (5.6 to 6.5)</td>
<td>7.2±4.2 (6.6 to 7.8)</td>
<td>4.8±1.1 (4.7 to 4.9)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>N with follow-up data, n (%)</td>
<td>85 (42.7)</td>
<td>124 (62.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean follow-up time, year (min–max)</td>
<td>5.8±1.9 (1.9–9.9)</td>
<td>5.2±1.7 (1.5–9.2)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS worsening, n (%)</td>
<td>31 (36.5)</td>
<td>42 (33.9)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continuous variables other than EDSS are reported as the mean±SD. EDSS is reported as the median (IQR).

*For all pairwise comparisons, that is, for NMOSD versus HC, RRMS versus HC and NMOSD versus RRMS.

DMT, disease-modifying therapy; EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; HC, healthy control; MS, multiple sclerosis; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.
The optimal cut-off for BAG in predicting progression was 0.599 in NMOSD. The area under the curve of the receiver operating character-
istic for BAG ≤6.1 years (p=0.003, figure 2C) was 5.79 years vs 7.99 years for BAG >6.1 years (sensitivity 38.7%, specificity 81.5%).

We performed 1:1 nearest neighbour propensity score matching (PSM) to exclude the possible confounding influence of clinical variables on BAG. This matching yielded adequate balance for all included coefficients. The mean BAG was 5.0±7.1 years in NMOSD and 11.1±12.7 years in RRMS after adjustment for sex, age at diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume, with an estimated difference of −6.1 years (95% CI −8.7 to −3.4) years between NMOSD and RRMS

We used the Cox proportional hazards model to investigate whether BAG could be used to predict time to EDSS worsening independent of age at diagnosis, sex, disease duration, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume. In univariate models, normalised brain volume and BAG were significantly associated with EDSS worsening in both patients with NMOSD and RRMS (table 3, univariate model). In a multivariable model, BAG was associated with EDSS worsening in patients with NMOSD (HR=1.02 (95% CI 1.00 to 1.04)), p=0.027, table 3), independent of normalised brain volume (p=0.158). However, neither normalised brain volume nor BAG was significant in the RRMS group in multivariable analysis. Interestingly, we found baseline EDSS to be negatively associated with EDSS worsening in NMOSD (multivariable model p=0.001, table 3).

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The area under the curve of the receiver operating characteristic for BAG in predicting progression was 0.599 in NMOSD and 0.670 in RRMS. The optimal cut-off of BAG was 6.1 (sensitivity 38.7%, specificity 81.5%) for NMOSD and 24 (sensitivity 50.0%, specificity 80.5%) for RRMS (online supplemental figure 4). Kaplan-Meier survival analysis indicated that BAG was predictive of progression in both groups. For patients with NMOSD, the median time to progression for BAG >6.1 years was 5.79 years vs 7.99 years for BAG ≤6.1 years (p=0.003, figure 2C). The median time to progression for BAG >24.0 years was 5.36 years vs 8.95 years for BAG ≤24.0 years in patients with RRMS (p=0.002, figure 2D).

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Table 2 Patients with NMOSD exhibit lower brain age gap over RRMS adjusted for sex, age at diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume with propensity score matching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NMOSD</th>
<th>RRMS</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N 119</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis, years 39.6±13.2</td>
<td>39.9±11.7</td>
<td>0.855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, n (%) 96 (80.7)</td>
<td>97 (81.5)</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First onset to diagnosis, year 3.8±4.0</td>
<td>3.5±5.1</td>
<td>0.661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS at baseline, median (IQR) 2.5 (2.0)</td>
<td>2.5 (2.0)</td>
<td>0.300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalised brain volume 0.745±0.038</td>
<td>0.742±0.042</td>
<td>0.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted brain age 44.5±15.5</td>
<td>50.0±16.9</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain age gap 5.0±7.1</td>
<td>11.1±12.7</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous variables other than EDSS are reported as the mean±SD. EDSS is reported as the median (IQR). EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.</td>
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</table>
Analysis of predicted SD in brain age prediction

The predicted SD was positively associated with BAG in all three groups (linear model p<0.001 in HC and NMOSD, p=0.011 in RRMS, online supplemental figure 5A). The mean SD in NMOSD was higher than HC and lower than RRMS (online supplemental figure 5B), which was consistent with the trend seen in BAG, indicating a higher model uncertainty in those images with greater discrepancy between apparent and chronological age. We examined scans with high model uncertainty and found that some of them could be attributed to low image quality or incomplete anatomical coverage (online supplemental figure 5C), while others were not visually distinguishable from those with lower model uncertainty (online supplemental figure 5D). To analyse whether the difference in BAG was driven by the difference in predicted SD, we performed PSM with predicted SD added as a covariate. The difference in BAG between NMOSD and RRMS, as well as NMOSD and RRMS versus HC, remained statistically significant after PSM adjusted for age, sex, duration to diagnosis, baseline EDSS, normalised brain volume and predicted SD (p<0.001, online supplemental table 4).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we developed a deep learning model to accurately predict age from 3D structural MRI scans and demonstrated its robustness in the context of multiple centres and MRI scanners. Using this model, the BAG was estimated to be approximately +5 years in NMOSD and +13 years in RRMS. Baseline BAG was independently predictive of EDSS worsening in both NMOSD and RRMS, suggesting its additional clinical value as a non-invasive biomarker for early triage, stratified follow-up management and clinical trial enrolment. Previous non-deep learning studies on age prediction tasks reported 2.9-year to 5.0-year MAEs on their validation sets, with some of which included multimodality-derived features, including functional MRI and diffusion tensor imaging, while deep learning studies reported validation MAEs as low as 2.14 years, such as in the original SFCN study. We reached 0.2022 years MAEs on their validation set, demonstrating the usefulness of our model and highlighting the versatility and potential of deep learning-based methods. We have also shown that the whole-brain CNN-based model was robust within scanners and centres, supporting the clinical use of the brain age paradigm.

BAG has been investigated extensively as a comprehensive biomarker for accelerated ageing. Increased BAG has been observed in dementia, epilepsy and traumatic brain injury. We report for the first time the meaningfulness of BAG in NMOSD as well as the difference between NMOSD and RRMS. We found a BAG of 5.4 (95% CI 4.3 to 6.5) years in patients with NMOSD, which, although lower than RRMS, is still marked compared with HCs. The degree of BAG increase in NMOSD is similar to what has been reported in epilepsy (4.5 years) and traumatic brain injury (4.7 years).

BAG in NMOSD was positively associated with baseline EDSS score and whole-brain atrophy, with associations comparable to those in RRMS but with a generally less steep slope. BAG was also predictive of EDSS worsening in NMOSD, which is in line with the idea that BAG is a composite marker of abnormal ageing and a disease-related brain. Furthermore, subgroup analysis of patients with NMOSD demonstrated that the BAG of patients with brain lesions was significantly higher than those without. This indicates that lesional brain involvement is associated with older appearing brains in patients with NMOSD. Future longitudinal studies are required to determine the possible causative factors.

In a recent study of brain age using Gaussian processes regression on MS, the authors reported 11.9 (95% CI 10.3 to 13.4) years BAG in patients with MS in the European Magnetic Resonance Imaging in Multiple Sclerosis (MAGNIMS) cohort, which is consistent with our result of 13.0 (95% CI 10.9 to 15.0) years BAG in Chinese patients with MS. Furthermore, increased BAG was predictive of EDSS worsening in MS, also consistent with previous work. Even though we used a fundamentally different methodology and datasets, these results provide additional evidence for the usefulness of BAG in the evaluation of patients with MS. Moreover, using deep learning can substantially shorten the runtime of the analysis pipeline. This acceleration in computation time is potentially of great benefit for widespread application in a clinical setting.

Comparing NMOSD and MS is difficult given the difference in confounding factors that may influence BAG. It has been reported previously that the atrophy patterns in NMOSD and MS are different. NMOSD exhibits more atrophy in the spinal cord but less atrophy in the brain, which can partially explain the lower BAG in NMOSD given the strong association between BAG and brain atrophy. To address the influence of confounding effects such as demographics and brain volume, we used propensity score matching to sample a subset with matched baseline confounding factors. In this matched subset, the difference in BAG between NMOSD and MS was still significantly different even when matched for normalised brain volume. This finding

Table 3 Univariable and multivariable Cox proportional hazards model analysis for predicting EDSS worsening by BAG, age at diagnosis, sex, duration between first onset to diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Univariable</th>
<th>Multivariable</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NMOSD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of events, n (%)</td>
<td>31 (36.5)</td>
<td>0.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis, years</td>
<td>1.04 (1.00 to 1.08)</td>
<td>0.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex, male</td>
<td>0.52 (0.07 to 3.90)</td>
<td>0.416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First onset to diagnosis, year</td>
<td>0.97 (0.89 to 1.05)</td>
<td>0.91 (0.73 to 1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS at baseline</td>
<td>0.68 (0.54 to 0.85)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalised brain volume (%)</td>
<td>0.90 (0.81 to 1.00)</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain age gap, year</td>
<td>1.06 (1.00 to 1.13)</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RRMS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of events, n (%)</td>
<td>42 (33.9)</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis, years</td>
<td>1.04 (1.00 to 1.08)</td>
<td>0.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex, male</td>
<td>0.52 (0.07 to 3.90)</td>
<td>0.416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First onset to diagnosis, year</td>
<td>0.97 (0.89 to 1.05)</td>
<td>0.91 (0.73 to 1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS at baseline</td>
<td>0.68 (0.54 to 0.85)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalised brain volume (%)</td>
<td>0.90 (0.81 to 1.00)</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain age gap, year</td>
<td>1.06 (1.00 to 1.13)</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

indicates that the brains of patients with RRMS appear older than those of patients with NMOSD even at the same level of atrophy, implying that BAG can be seen as a global estimation that integrates information beyond simple brain volumetry while being more accessible and informative than tables of volumetric measurements.

The uncertainty and distributional pattern of predicted brain age is an important field of research that has attracted little attention. A recent study modelled brain age uncertainty with a single-layer neural network that addressed aleatoric uncertainty with quantile regression and epistemic uncertainty with the Monte Carlo dropout technique. In contrast to other studies that use quantile regression, the novel method in our study renders aleatoric uncertainty a natural derivative since the model output itself is a distribution instead of the point estimate used in previous studies. Epistemic uncertainty was not derived in this study due to computational cost. Although the uncertainty correlated positively with BAG, the PSM analysis indicated that the BAG difference between NMOSD and RRMS remained statistically significant even after adjustment for predicted SD. We observed that the predicted SD were higher in those scans without enough information for brain age inference (i.e., low image quality, etc), and in those with a greater discrepancy between predicted and actual age. This observation suggests a potential use case for the predicted SD. The quantification of individual-level uncertainty in this way could provide an integrated, intuitive metric for image quality control, especially in healthy people, as well as a measure of ‘confidence’ for applications in clinical contexts.

Our study has a few limitations. First, the follow-up duration was relatively short, and the sample size of patients with follow-up was small, which may have introduced selection bias. Second, although previous studies have suggested the longitudinal utility of brain age in healthy cohorts and accelerated ageing measured by BAG has been observed in MS cohorts, our cohort lacked sufficient follow-up assessments for this type of analysis. Finally, the interpretability of the results needs to be further improved; specifically, the anatomical meaning of brain age remains ill-defined. Deep learning-based methods have been cast as ‘black boxes’; however, tools such as class activation mapping, guided backpropagation and occlusion analysis are emerging that aim to extract mechanistic information from the network. However, the translation of these methods to 3D data is complex, and they have yet to be validated for use in interpreting medical imaging data. Additionally, our study relied on 3D T1WI MRI, which is not always available in clinical contexts. Future work will take advantage of brain age models developed to work on routine clinical two-dimensional scans.

In conclusion, NMOSD demonstrated a significant BAG compared with HCs, although less marked than RRMS. BAG is a predictive biomarker of EDSS worsening in both NMOSD and RRMS.

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Collaborators Data used in preparation of this article were obtained from the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database (adni.loni.usc.edu). As such, the investigators within the ADNI contributed to the design and implementation of ADNI and/or provided data but did not participate in analysis or writing of this report. A complete listing of ADNI investigators can be found at: http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how_to_apply/ADNI_Acknowledgement_List.pdf

Contributors RW and XC: conception and design of the study, acquisition and analysis of data and drafting the manuscript. Y Liu acts as the guarantor of the study and takes full responsibility for the work. YD, NZ, JS, HL, Y Li, FB, JHC: conception and design of the study, acquisition and analysis of data. Y Li, CZ, XH, FZ, MH, RL, ZZ: acquisition and analysis of data. All authors revised the manuscript and approved the final draft.

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Competing interests FB acts as a consultant for Combinotics, Biogen-Idec, Janssen, IXICO, Merck-Serono, Novartis and Roche. He has received grants, or grants are pending, from the Amyloid Imaging to Prevent Alzheimer’s Disease (AMYPAD) initiative, the Biomedical Research Centre at University College London Hospitals, the Dutch Mams Society, ECTRIMS-MAGNIMS, EU-H2020, the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the UK MS Society and the National Institute for Health Research, University College London. He has received payments for the development of educational presentations from IXICO and his institution from Biogen-Idec and Merck. He is co-founder of Queen Square Analytics. He is on the editorial board of Radiology, Neuroradiology, Multiple Sclerosis Journal and Neurology. JHC is a scientific consultant to and shareholder in Brainkey and Clantas Healthcare, as has worked as a consultant to Queen Square Analytics.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

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