Improving Interrater Agreement About Brain Microbleeds
Development of the Brain Observer MicroBleed Scale (BOMBS)

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Background and Purpose—If the diagnostic and prognostic significance of brain microbleeds (BMBs) are to be investigated and used for these purposes in clinical practice, observer variation in BMB assessment must be minimized.

Methods—Two doctors used a pilot rating scale to describe the number and distribution of BMBs (round, low-signal lesions, <10 mm diameter on gradient echo MRI) among 264 adults with stroke or TIA. They were blinded to clinical data and their counterpart’s ratings. Disagreements were adjudicated by a third observer, who informed the development of a new Brain Observer MicroBleed Scale (BOMBS), which was tested in a separate cohort of 156 adults with stroke.

Results—In the pilot study, agreement about the presence of ≥1 BMB in any location was moderate (κ=0.44; 95% CI, 0.32–0.56), but agreement was worse in lobar locations (κ=0.44; 95% CI, 0.30–0.58) than in deep (κ=0.62; 95% CI, 0.48–0.76) or posterior fossa locations (κ=0.66; 95% CI, 0.47–0.84). Using BOMBS, agreement about the presence of ≥1 BMB improved in any location (κ=0.68; 95% CI, 0.49–0.86) and in lobar locations (κ=0.78; 95% CI, 0.60–0.97).

Conclusion—Interrater reliability concerning the presence of BMBs was moderate to good, and could be improved with the use of the BOMBS rating scale, which takes into account the main sources of interrater disagreement identified by our pilot scale. (Stroke. 2009;40:94-99.)

Key Words: brain microbleed ■ rating scale ■ interrater reliability ■ classification ■ stroke

In stroke medicine, the burning questions about brain microbleeds (BMBs) concern their diagnostic significance (for example, for the ante mortem diagnosis of cerebral amyloid angiopathy and other disorders) and whether BMBs should influence the use of antithrombotic and thrombolytic drugs.1 If the diagnostic and prognostic significances of BMBs are to be investigated and used for these purposes in clinical practice, then definitive research studies should fulfill a variety of prerequisites,2 including knowledge of the usefulness of the scales used to rate BMBs as well as the intrarater and interrater variation of the individual researchers using the scales.

Previous studies have reported variable levels of interrater agreement among 2 or 3 observers (Table 1).3–15 Studies of interrater reliability found kappa values ranging from 0.33 (fair)3 to 0.88 (excellent);10,11 however, most found κ>0.7, but sample sizes were small, 95% CIs were not always provided, and the properties of the rating scales used were not described.

In view of the variation in reported interrater agreement, the potential for a rating scale to improve levels of agreement, and the absence of a rating scale for BMBs, we further quantified interrater agreement about the presence, number, size, and location of BMBs to develop a simple BMB classification scheme that might minimize observer variation.

Subjects and Methods

Study Population
We studied a subset of patients from a hospital-based stroke register (the Edinburgh Stroke Study, http://www.dcn.ed.ac.uk/ess/)16 (Table 2). Consecutive consenting stroke and transient ischemic attack (TIA) patients were recruited to the register from outpatient clinics and hospital admissions (total n=2160). In the current study we included those patients who had undergone at least 1 MRI scan with gradient echo (GRE) sequences (n=264). If a patient had >1 MRI, then we used the earliest scan.

MRI Protocols
MRIs were performed on a GE Signa LX 1.5-Tesla machine with 22-mT/m¹ maximum strength gradients using the manufacturer-supplied quadrature birdcage head coil. Diagnostic MR imaging included (all axial sequences): diffusion-weighted (TR, 9999; TE, 98.8; matrix, 128×128; FoV, 24×24; slice thickness, 5 mm; slice gap, 1 mm; NEX, 1 [where TR indicates relaxation time; TE, echo time; FoV, field of view; NEX, number of excitations]); T2-weighted (TR, 6300; TE, 107; matrix, 256×256; FoV, 24×18; slice thickness,
the common sources of disagreement and other major problems encountered (see Supplemental Figure I, available online at http://stroke.ahajournals.org and www.sbirc.ed.ac.uk/imageanalysis.html). We re-evaluated agreement between the same 2 observers using BOMBS in a different set of patients undergoing identical MRI sequences and parameters to quantify BMBs subdivided by size, side of brain, and location (as before), but with the addition of a further subdivision into “certain” and “uncertain” BMB categories. The study population for the assessment of BOMBS was a series of 156 patients with stroke (different to the 264 in whom the pilot rating scale was tested) who had been recruited in 2 other stroke studies requiring MRI. Both studies recruited from the same hospital sources as the Edinburgh Stroke Study. One study recruited patients with lacunar or nondisabling cortical ischemic stroke (the Mild Stroke Study); the other included outpatients presenting >1 week after a mild stroke, in whom CT scanning would not discriminate between ischemic or hemorrhagic stroke, requiring MRI for stroke subtyping.

### Statistical Analyses

We quantified observer agreement using the unweighted $\kappa$ statistic for nominal data (such as dichotomized presence versus absence of $\geq 1$ BMB) analyzed in any brain location and in separate brain areas (lobar, deep, and posterior fossa). When using BOMBS, we calculated $\kappa$ for BMBs rated certain, and for BMBs rated certain or uncertain. Intraclass correlation coefficients were calculated to assess agreement between observers for the overall numbers of BMBs. When exploring interobserver reliability in measurements of BMB size, we restricted our analysis to MRI scans on which both raters encountered (see Supplemental Figure I, available online at http://stroke.ahajournals.org and www.sbirc.ed.ac.uk/imageanalysis.html).

### Development and Testing of the Brain Observer MicroBleed Scale (BOMBS)

After the assessment of interrater agreement with the pilot scale, a senior neuroradiologist (J.M.W.) reviewed MRI scans about which the 2 observers disagreed in their BMB ratings. We developed the Brain Observer MicroBleed Scale (BOMBS) to account for some of the common sources of disagreement and other major problems encountered (see Supplemental Figure I, available online at http://stroke.ahajournals.org and www.sbirc.ed.ac.uk/imageanalysis.html).
vals for $\kappa$, which were calculated using Confidence Interval Analysis software.\(^{17}\)

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by the Lothian Research Ethics Committee.

**Results**

**Study of Interrater Reliability Using a Pilot Rating Scale**

Agreement about the presence/absence of $\geq 1$ BMB in any location in the brain was moderate ($\kappa$, 0.44; 95% CI, 0.32–0.56), but it appeared to be better in deep and posterior fossa locations when compared to lobar areas (Table 2). The intraclass correlation coefficient for the overall number of BMBs was 0.91 (95% CI, 0.88–0.93). The 2 observers disagreed about the presence of $\geq 1$ BMB on 65 MRI scans. When these disagreements were reviewed by a third observer (J.M.W.), most were found to occur when there was doubt about whether there was 1 BMB on a scan or none. The main causes for disagreement were common BMB mimics such as vascular flow voids (cortical and perforator vessels), irregularly shaped lesions, lesions too pale to be confident about them being a BMB, partial volume artifacts from the petrous temporal bone or orbit, and variable signal dropout (Figure 2).

**Development and Testing of the BOMBS**

We revised the pilot rating scale on the basis of the causes of the observed disagreements to develop the BOMBS (Supplemental Figure I). Interrater agreement about the

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Table 2. Characteristics of the Study Populations and Interrater Agreement (simple [unweighted] kappa statistic) About the Presence of $\geq 1$ BMB in Separate Brain Areas or in Any Brain Location Using the Pilot Rating Scale and Using BOMBS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Pilot Population, $n=264$</th>
<th>BOMBS Population, $n=156$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age (IQR)</td>
<td>72 (60–78)</td>
<td>68 (56–75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischaemic stroke (%</td>
<td>235 (90%)</td>
<td>151 (97%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intracerebral hemorrhage (%)</td>
<td>10 (4%)</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA (%)</td>
<td>15 (6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of stroke or TIA (%)</td>
<td>79 (30%)</td>
<td>22 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of treated hypertension (%)</td>
<td>135 (51%)</td>
<td>81 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Locations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with $\geq 1$ BMB, % (95% CI)</td>
<td>105; 40 (34–46)</td>
<td>54; 20 (16–26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of lesions on all scans</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median N of lesions per patient (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1–3)</td>
<td>2 (1–7.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lobar</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patients with $\geq 1$ BMB, % (95% CI)</td>
<td>71; 27 (22–33)</td>
<td>39; 15 (11–20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of lesions on all scans</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median N of lesions per patient (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1–2)</td>
<td>2 (1–6.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deep</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with $\geq 1$ BMB, % (95% CI)</td>
<td>50; 19 (15–24)</td>
<td>30; 11 (8–16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of lesions on all scans</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median N of lesions per patient (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1–2)</td>
<td>2 (1–4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posterior fossa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with $\geq 1$ BMB, % (95% CI)</td>
<td>23; 9 (6–13)</td>
<td>18; 7 (4–11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of lesions on all scans</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median N of lesions per patient (IQR)</td>
<td>1 (1–2)</td>
<td>2 (1–4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IQR indicates interquartile range; TIA, transient ischemic attack; ICH, intracerebral hemorrhage; N, number.
using a maximum diameter of 10 mm, we found few BMBs sized from 2 to 5 mm, to half of BMBs in this study (Table 2). Problem, because it applied to between one-third to one-half of BMBs; uncertainty about BMBs may be an important factor in its main effect by differentiating certain from uncertain BMBs. Observer variation persists, even when mimics are carefully considered. BOMBS had been related to the younger patients with milder strokes, when BOMBS was validated, which was likely to have contributed to improving agreement about BMB number, as well as determining what the numeric thresholds for BMB prognostic/therapeutic significance are. Furthermore, studying observers’ certainty in relation to their ratings of the presence/absence of BMBs as well as the number and size of BMBs seen will help in understanding whether small/uncertain BMBs are more likely to be counted in patients with multiple certain BMBs than those with a solitary certain BMB or multiple uncertain BMBs. BOMBS appeared to influence rater behavior in our study (Table 2); for example, observer A rated more BMBs than observer B in the pilot study, but this pattern was reversed with BOMBS.

Although studies have described the interrater reliability of BMB ratings (Table 1), we sought to improve agreement as our primary objective. We used κ and our study design fulfilled the assumptions inherent in the κ statistic: the subjects undergoing study and the observers were independent, and the categories in the scale were independent, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive. The design of BOMBS benefited from the lessons gleaned using the pilot scale and independent review of the scans about which the observers disagreed. This study also benefited from using consistent imaging parameters and the same range of sequences (including GRE T2* in all), and blinding of each observer to the other’s ratings.

The main weakness of this study was that these findings have not yet been validated in larger cohorts, in other disease groups, and among other observers. We encourage other researchers to do so to explore the generalizability of BOMBS. The influence of practice effects in our observers cannot be ruled out, but even before their ratings using the pilot rating scale both had experience of interpreting BMBs. The influence of practice effects in our observers cannot be ruled out, but even before their ratings using the pilot rating scale both had experience of interpreting BMBs. The influence of practice effects in our observers cannot be ruled out, but even before their ratings using the pilot rating scale both had experience of interpreting BMBs.
Figure 2. Examples of certain and uncertain BMBs, and BMB mimics. A, GRE T2* image showing a certain BMB in the right thalamus (arrow) in a patient with a left thalamic hemorrhage (not labeled). B, Uncertain BMB, GRE T2* image showing a pale lesion in the right thalamus (arrow). C and D BMB mimics. Small cortical vessels (arrows) in the left parietal lobe on GRE T2* (C) confirmed on T2 imaging (D) in this patient with a chronic right frontal cortical infarct (not labeled). E and F, BMB mimics. GRE T2* images showing partial volume artifact from right orbit (E, arrow) and left mastoid air cells (F, arrow).
expense of sensitivity) by identifying BMBs more reliably, which could improve the internal and external validities of research projects and encourage more reliable identification of BMBs should they become relevant in clinical practice. Investigators could also explore the robustness of their study findings using sensitivity analyses (by restricting analyses to either certain BMBs, or certain and uncertain BMBs, which would improve sensitivity at the expense of specificity). This dichotomization also permits the identification of a separate group of MRIs with uncertain BMBs to help improve understanding of why and how observers disagree about BMBs, and to follow-up such patients to determine if these uncertain BMBs mature into certain BMBs.

Our findings should be regarded as a baseline measure of observer agreement for future studies using BOMBS. Further work on ways of improving observer agreement about BMBs is needed, and training observers to recognize certain and uncertain BMBs, as well as their mimics, is an obvious priority (Figure 2). BOMBS will also enable others to study agreement about BMB size, number, brain location, and diagnostic certainty, as well as exploring the influence of these factors on the diagnostic and prognostic usefulness of BMBs.

Because the clinical implications of BMBs remain to be established, there is still an opportunity to improve the reliability of BMB assessments by the use (and further development) of the BOMBS rating scale, so that adequately powered, well-designed studies will be able to answer the outstanding clinical concerns about BMBs’ diagnostic and prognostic value, and whether they should influence the prescription of antplatelet, anticoagulant, or thrombolytic drugs. The use of a standard scale for BMBs is also essential for future studies to enable comparisons and meta-analyses.

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Professor Martin Dennis, along with a team of other stroke specialists, recruited and clinically characterized many of the patients in this study. Programming support for the datasets analyzed was provided by Mike McDowall and Aidan Hutchison.

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Disclosures
None.

References
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