Genetic Correlations of Brain Lesion Distribution in Multiple Sclerosis: An Exploratory Study

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE: In MS, the total brain lesion volume and spatial distribution of lesions across the brain vary widely among individual patients. We hypothesized that spatial distribution may be partially driven by genetic predisposition, and we aimed to explore relations among candidate genes and the spatial distribution of white matter brain lesions in MS.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: Genotypes of 69 SNPs in 208 patients with MS were related to the spatial distribution of T2 brain lesions. Lesions were manually outlined on MR images, and binary lesion masks were produced and registered to a common space. With Randomise software, the lesion masks were related to genotype by using a voxelwise nonparametric GLM approach, followed by clusterwise analysis. We used a DNA chip with SNPs selected from the literature on MS susceptibility, severity, and phenotypes.

RESULTS: For 11 of these SNPs, 1 of the genotypes expressed significant clusters of increased or decreased lesion probability in varying, predominantly periventricular, brain regions. When we statistically controlled the voxelwise analyses for effects of total brain lesion volume, only 1 SNP remained significant: rs2227139, located within the MHC class II region. This SNP retained its periventricular cluster of significantly increased lesion probability for the heterozygote genotype.

CONCLUSIONS: Heterozygosity of rs2227139 (MHC class II region) is associated with increased right frontal periventricular lesion probability (P < .01). Ten other SNPs showed associations between genotype and spatial lesion distribution that are partly explained by total lesion volume.

ABBREVIATIONS: BTNL2 = butyrophilin-like 2; CCL5 = chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 5; CCR5 = chemokine (C-C motif) receptor 5; CNS = central nervous system; CRYAB = α B crystallin; EAE = experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis; EDSS = Expanded Disability Status Scale; FAS = tumor necrosis factor receptor superfamily, member 6; FLIRT = FMRIB Nonlinear Image Registration Tool; FSL = FMRIB Software Library; FMRIB = Functional MR Imaging of the Brain; GLM = general linear model; HLA = human leukocyte antigen; HLA-DRB1 = major histocompatibility complex, class II, DRB1 (Homo sapiens); IFNGR2 = interferon gamma receptor 2 (interferon γ transducer 1); IQR = interquartile range; LPM = lesion probability mapping; MAF = minor allele frequency; MHC = major histocompatibility complex; MRS = multiple sclerosis; NADH = nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide; NDUFS7 = NADH dehydrogenase (ubiquinone) Fe-S protein 7; PNMT = phenylethanolamine N-methyltransferase; PPMS = primary-progressive MS; RRMS = relapsing-remitting MS; rs = RefSNP accession ID; SNP = single nucleotide polymorphism; SPMS = secondary-progressive MS; UCP2 = uncoupling protein 2

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spatial distribution differing from nonenhancing T2 lesions and from T1 hypointense lesions (black holes).\textsuperscript{8,9}

We hypothesized that spatial lesion distribution might depend on individual immunogenetic background. Although genotype has been shown to influence MS susceptibility in several studies,\textsuperscript{10-12} there are relatively few studies of genotype-phenotype associations in MS, and positive results await confirmation in larger studies.\textsuperscript{13-18}

We suspect a genetic influence on the anatomic distribution of MS lesions for 3 main reasons: First, studies confirm a tendency of patients to develop relapses in the same locations.\textsuperscript{19,20} Moreover, in relatives who have MS, lesions have been observed more frequently in similar locations.\textsuperscript{14} This tendency for localized exacerbations could be genetically predetermined. Second, in EAE (the animal model used to study MS), involvement of a genetic factor was already demonstrated in lesion distribution. Butterfield et al\textsuperscript{21} showed that in mice EAE, the lesions in the spinal cord and brain were controlled by different quantitative trait loci. Third, recently we found that carriage of HLA-DRB1*1501 is associated with more lesions within the spinal cord, but not with the total lesion volume in the brain.\textsuperscript{22} This allele, also known to be involved in MS susceptibility, is hence suggested to specifically affect lesion development in the spinal cord, a particular region of the central nervous system. Similarly, lesion development in certain regions inside the brain may be partially dependent on genetic parameters. A recent study found that the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele did not have an effect on lesion distribution.\textsuperscript{23} We hypothesized that an effect on lesion distribution may be even more likely for genes associated with disease phenotype.

To explore this hypothesis, the present study compared spatial lesion distribution on MR imaging between different genotypes of a set of genes selected on the basis of their potential contribution to phenotypes of MS in a large cohort of patients with MS, by using LPM.

Materials and Methods

Patients

This cross-sectional study used clinical and genetic data and MR images of 208 white patients sampled from MS natural history studies at our center. Patients were included on the basis of availability of brain MR imaging and DNA material. The selected patients are a subgroup of those in whom the clinical correlates of brain lesion distribution were studied previously.\textsuperscript{7} All had a diagnosis of MS according to the Poser criteria,\textsuperscript{24} McDonald criteria,\textsuperscript{25} or revised McDonald criteria,\textsuperscript{26} depending on the date of data acquisition. EDSS\textsuperscript{27} scores were obtained within a median interval of 0.0 (IQR, 0.0–4.8) months from MR imaging. Approval by the local ethics review board was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent.

Selection of SNPs

PubMed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez) and Genetic Association (http://geneticassociationdb.nih.gov) data bases were searched for genes and polymorphisms with suggested involvement in pathogenesis, prognosis, and treatment response in MS. Resulting polymorphisms were confirmed and associated with an identifier by using the dbSNP data base (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/SNP). Their frequency in the white population was assessed by using the HapMap project (http://www.hapmap.org/index.html.en). Nucleotide sequences for the design of allele-specific probes and polymerase chain reaction primers were retrieved in the SNPper data base (http://snpper.chip.org/bio). Sequence-specific probes and primers were designed by using Primer3 software (available free at http://frodo.wi.mit.edu). If a polymorphism was not present in the data base, position and sequences were established by performing a blast search (http://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi) by using data available in the literature. SNPs within the MHC class II region were predominantly selected on the basis of the described linkage disequilibrium with the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele.\textsuperscript{28,29} All genetic data bases were accessed in 2006. The SNP rs numbers and gene symbols were actualized on February 9, 2009.

A total of 80 validated polymorphisms located in 44 different genes were finally chosen (On-line Table). We excluded 11 of these 80 SNPs: 5 because they were monomorphic and 6 because they had a minor allele frequency below 5%. Deviations from Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium were determined by \(\chi^2\) testing.

Genotyping

Genomic DNA was isolated from anticoagulated blood with DNAzol reagent (Molecular Research Center, Cincinnati, Ohio). Genotyping was performed by using a previously described low-attenuation DNA microarray based on allele-specific probes with minor modifications.\textsuperscript{30}

Image Acquisition and Creation of Lesion Masks

Different image-acquisition protocols were used for the various clinical studies from which our patients were sampled. We used 2D conventional or fast spin-echo proton-attenuation and T2-weighted images, acquired by using either 1T Magnetom Impact (77.4% of patients) or 1.5T Magnetom Vision (Siemens, Erlangen, Germany) scanners by using standard head coils, with section thicknesses of 3–5 mm, in-plane resolution of \(1 \times 1\) mm\(^2\), and a maximum intersection gap of 0.5 mm. On these images, lesions were identified by an expert reader and then were outlined by using home-developed semiautomated seed-growing software (Show Images)\textsuperscript{31} based on a local thresholding technique, thus creating binary lesion masks. T2-weighted images were created from each patient’s T2-weighted image by using Brain Extraction Tool (FSL).\textsuperscript{32} We created a common-space template by using the nonparametric Randomise method as implemented in FSL 4.0 (FMRFIB Analysis Group). To bring all lesion masks to this common space template, we then registered all individual T2 brain images (allowing 12 degrees of freedom) to the International Consortium for Brain Mapping (Montreal Neurological Institute-152) brain image,\textsuperscript{33} by using the registration tool FLIRT (part of FSL, FMRFIB Analysis Group, University of Oxford; http://www.fmrib.ox.ac.uk),\textsuperscript{34} followed by averaging and smoothing by using a 4-mm full width at half maximum Gaussian kernel. To bring all lesion masks to this common space template, we then registered all individual T2 brain images to the common space T2 brain template (again by using FLIRT with 12 degrees of freedom), and we then applied the registration matrices thus obtained to the corresponding binary lesion masks. Nearest-neighbor interpolation was used to generate individual lesion maps that showed lesion presence or absence for each voxel.

Statistical Analysis

Voxel- and clusterwise statistical inference was accomplished by using the nonparametric Randomise method as implemented in FSL 4.0 (FMRFIB Analysis Group), by using a GLM design to model each voxel
independently from the other voxels (5000 permutations; clustering-
forming threshold pseudo-t = 2, corresponding to voxelwise
P-threshold = 0.01).34,35 For each SNP, we made 3 comparisons
to test the association of genotypes with voxelwise lesion probability,
always comparing 1 genotype with the combination of both other
genotypes (ie, the comparisons made were the following: homozygote
frequent allele versus heterozygote and other homozygote; homozy-
gote rare allele versus heterozygote and other homozygote; and het-
erozygote versus both homozygotes). The lesion masks of the patients
carrying a certain genotype were put together and compared with the
lesion masks of patients who did not carry this genotype. For each
comparison, we separately tested for both increased and decreased
lesion probability associated with that genotype.

Although SNP markers with low genotype frequencies may be of
importance in complex trait disorders like MS, such markers can
result in unreliable observations in voxelwise analyses. Therefore, ho-
mozygote genotypes with frequencies below 5% in our cohort were
combined with the heterozygote genotype and compared with the
other homozygote genotype.

Because total brain lesion volume has been found to influence
lesion distribution,7 we took the following 2 steps: First, for genotypes
showing significant clusters in the LPM analyses, these LPM analyses
were repeated while statistically controlling for total brain lesion vol-
ume. Second, we investigated the effect of genotype on the total brain
lesion volume at a patient level by directly comparing the total brain
lesion volume among genotypes, while statistically controlling for dis-
case duration (without taking anatomic distribution into account).

Finally, for the LPM and total brain lesion volume analyses, we
tested whether correction for disease duration affected the results by
using GLM (after log-transformation of the total lesion volume to
obtain a normal distribution).

Results

Patient Characteristics

Our cohort of 208 patients with MS was representative of the
general MS population regarding patient characteristics (Ta-
ble 1), with a slightly high proportion of patients with primary
progressive MS (19.2%). These patients had a quasisymmetric
brain lesion distribution typical for MS (Fig 1), with the high-
est lesion frequencies in the periventricular regions.

Correlations between Genotype and Spatial Lesion
Distribution

Of the 69 SNPs analyzed, 11 genotypes of 10 SNPs showed
significant clusters of either increased or decreased lesion probability, predominantly in periventricular clusters, for 1 of
the genotypes (Figs 2 and 3). All clusters were located periven-
tricularly, abutting the frontal or occipital horn of the lateral
ventricles, often in an asymmetric configuration.

An increased lesion probability, in different periventricular
regions, was observed for the heterozygous genotype of 3
SNPs: rs2227139 (within the MHC class II region), rs2076530
(within BTNL2), and rs876493 (within PNMT). Furthermore,
there were 2 SNPs in which the homozygous major allele was
associated with a higher lesion probability—that is, rs2107338
within CCL5 and rs9808753 within IFNGR2 (Fig 2).

For 6 SNPs, a genotype was associated with a decreased
lesion probability (for details on cluster location and geno-
types see Fig 3). These 6 SNPs were located within the follow-
ing genes: BTNL2 (MHC class II–associated), CRYAB,
NDUF57, UCP2, and 2 SNPs within FAS.

When total brain lesion volume was included in the statis-
tical model, only rs2227139 (within the MHC class II region)
retained a significant cluster in which the CT genotype was
associated with an increased local lesion probability compared
with the other 2 genotypes (Fig 2F).

This result of rs2227139 also remained after correction for
disease duration.

To corroborate our findings, we calculated the voxelwise
average lesion frequencies for each of the 3 genotypes of the
SNP rs2227139, the only SNP that remained significant after
controlling for total brain lesion volume. In the voxel with the
maximum pseudo-t value observed in the significant cluster
(voxelwise pseudo-t = 4.1), a lesion was present in 29% (n =
26/89) of the patients with the heterozygote genotype CT,
compared with 16% (n = 12 / 77) of the patients with the CC
genotype and 2% (n = 1/42) of the patients with the TT
genotype.

There were no genotypes of any SNP associated simulta-
neously with both a decreased lesion probability in 1 lo-
cation and an increased lesion probability in another, indi-
cating consistency of the observed relations across the
brain.

Influence of Genotype on Total Brain Lesion Volume

We assessed whether genotype was directly related to total
brain lesion volume for the SNPs with significant results in the
clusterwise analysis. Of the 11 genotypes associated with an
increased or decreased lesion probability at the described lo-
cations, 6 genotypes were significantly associated with total
lesion volume in the brain (Table 2). When we controlled
these results for disease duration, 3 SNPs were significantly
associated with total lesion volume. The results were consis-
tent with the LPM results—that is, genotypes associated with a
higher total brain lesion volume were also associated with an
increased local lesion probability and also a decreased local
lesion probability.

Table 1: Patient characteristics per MS subgroup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total MS Group: (N = 208)</th>
<th>RRMS (n = 126)</th>
<th>SPMS (n = 42)</th>
<th>PPMS (n = 40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. males (%)</td>
<td>77 (37%)</td>
<td>37 (29.4%)</td>
<td>25 (59.5%)</td>
<td>15 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (yr) (mean) (± SD)</td>
<td>41.1 (11.1)</td>
<td>35.6 (8.6)</td>
<td>47.8 (7.7)</td>
<td>51.6 (9.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease duration (yr) (median) (IQR)</td>
<td>6.3 (10.1)</td>
<td>3.9 (7.8)</td>
<td>11.8 (12.2)</td>
<td>8.3 (9.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesion volumea (mL) (median) (IQR)</td>
<td>12.4 (35.5)</td>
<td>10.3 (22.9)</td>
<td>30.8 (102.4)</td>
<td>13.5 (40.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS score (median) (IQR)</td>
<td>3.5 (2.9)</td>
<td>2.0 (2.0)</td>
<td>6.0 (2.5)</td>
<td>4.5 (2.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Lesion volumes were calculated in common space (therefore representing relative lesion volumes).*
Discussion
On the basis of the hypothesis that genetic background may determine spatial lesion patterns, this exploratory study combined lesion probability mapping with genetic data of 69 SNPs in 208 patients with MS. To our knowledge, this is the first study in a large cohort of patients with MS that tests the role of several genes on lesion distribution within the brain. Five SNPs showed a locally increased lesion probability in certain brain regions for 1 genotype, while 6 SNPs showed a decreased lesion probability for 1 of the genotypes. The most robust finding was the increased probability of having a lesion in the left periventricular region next to the frontal and, to a lesser extent, the occipital horn of the ventricles, for the heterozygous genotype of rs2227139 (Fig 2E–F). This was the only SNP for which a significant cluster remained after applying a correction for total brain lesion volume. Rs2227139 is located on chromosome 6 within the highly polymorphic MHC class II region, which is involved in self-versus-nonself immune recognition.36 These genes have consistently been shown to have a major effect on susceptibility to MS and other autoimmune diseases36 and may be involved in disease severity as well.15,37

No data are available on the effect of this SNP on region-specific differences in the brain. However, previously, multiple HLA alleles showed effects on several MR imaging severity markers, such as T2 lesion volume, T1 hypointense lesion volume, and atrophy measures,38,39 suggesting a role for several HLA alleles in the MS phenotype. These findings highlight the importance of HLA genes on MR imaging severity markers. Future studies on the genetic influence on lesion location should preferably include high-resolution HLA typing, enabling comparison of the effect of different HLA alleles on lesion distribution (taking possible interaction between genes into account) and detecting the true causative alleles.

As can be seen from Figs 2 and 3, the SNPs showed altered lesion probability in predominantly 4 regions: the bilateral periventricular white matter next to the frontal and occipital tip of the horns of the lateral ventricles. The periventricular clusters are distributed in an asymmetric manner. We have no explanation for these asymmetries, which persisted after post
hoc repeated analyses with a lower significance threshold. A priori, a genetic influence on this asymmetric distribution is theoretically unlikely. Another study also noted an asymmetric distribution of MS brain lesions at the individual patient level, possibly reflecting a different lineage pattern.\(^9\) Although our number of patients is relatively high, bias due to, for example, the high number of patients with progressive MS is possible and cannot be excluded.

Rs2076530 within the \textit{BTNL2} gene was the only SNP showing significant effects for more than 1 genotype. The AG genotype was associated with an increased lesion probability in the periventricular white matter adjacent to the right occipital horn,
while the GG genotype was associated with a decreased lesion probability in the periventricular white matter adjacent to the left occipital and frontal horns. Both effects were nonconflicting and disappeared after correction for total brain lesion volume.

The relation between HLA-DRB1*1501 (the MHC class II allele strongly associated with susceptibility to MS)\(^{12,40,41}\) and spatial lesion distribution within the brain was studied in 1 previous report\(^{23}\) demonstrating no significant influence of the allele. Our results (by using rs3135388, a SNP in the MHC region predicting the HLA-DRB1*1501 haplotype with very high sensitivity)\(^{28}\) confirmed, in a larger sample, the negative results of this previous study of Sepulcre et al.\(^{23}\)
the current patient group, we previously found the HLA-
DRB1*1501 allele to be related to increased lesion loads in the
spinal cord but not the brain. In the present study on a larger
patient group encompassing the former, we confirmed that the
HLA-DRB1*1501 allele was not related to the total volume of
brain lesions, and most important, we added the new find-
ing that it is also unrelated to their anatomic distribution
across the brain.

Limitations of this study include the relatively low field
strength of the MR imaging scanners we used, which, in gen-
eral, leads to lower sensitivity to lesions than current state-of-
the-art MR imaging scanners operating at 3T or above.42

Furthermore, the linear registration method used to warp
the lesion masks of individual patients to the template, by
definition, cannot correct for the variability in ventricular and
sulcal sizes that is present in patients with MS as a result of
differences in brain atrophy. Therefore, the matching between
individual patients’ brains will be imperfect; this discrepancy
leads to less accurate overlay of corresponding anatomic areas
and may explain, to some extent, why we only found clusters
in the periventricular region and not in areas with a lower
lesion frequency. Despite these limitations, we deliberately
chose a linear registration method (FLIRT) because of the dif-
ficulties associated with nonlinear registration methods. In
this study, we were limited in the sequences available (dual-
echo images only); this limitation poses problems for nonlin-
ear registration regarding the distinction between periven-
tricular lesions and ventricular CSF because of their similar
signal intensities. Second, nonlinear registration could result
in displacement of lesions inside the brain, thereby affecting
the very aspect of the disease that we intended to study
(namely lesion distribution).

The third limitation is the absence of gray matter lesions in
our study, because these lesions go mostly undetected when
using standard MR imaging techniques.35 From postmortem
studies we know that gray matter lesions are extensively pres-
ent in patients with MS, and it can be expected that a differ-
genetic background may influence the lesion distribution
between the white and gray matter compartments, as well as
the anatomic distribution within the white and gray matter.

Total brain lesion volume seems to be an important co-
variate in LPM analyses.7 Apart from the left frontal horn cluster
in rs2227139, no clusters retained significance when the model
was controlled for lesion volume. Thus, the influence of ge-
netic background on spatial lesion distribution, as assessed in
the current study, may partly act through total brain lesion
volume and come to expression in voxelwise analyses, espe-
sially in regions with relatively high frequencies of MS lesions,
where differences among groups can become statistically sig-
nificant (ie, the periventricular white matter). Therefore, in
future studies, when comparing groups, a correction for total
brain lesion volume should be considered.

The genes investigated in this study are putatively associ-
ated with susceptibility or disease severity in MS, and we hy-
pothesized that the variation in anatomic distribution of brain
lesions among patients with MS may be partly genetic in na-
ture. Our results suggest that such a genetic influence may
indeed be present. Independent studies should now be con-
ducted to confirm these findings, including studies using al-
ternative methodology in addition to LPM, for example, by
using predefined regions of interest defined on the basis of
LPM results to increase sensitivity in detecting differences. For
the genes with significant results, there are no obvious rela-
tionships between their functions and spatial MS lesion dis-
bution. However, several of the SNPs that were significantly
associated with lesion distribution were also significantly as-
associated with the total lesion volume in the brain. The previ-
ously reported effect of these genes on the overall lesion bur-
den (T2 lesion volume, T1 hypointense lesion volume, or
atrophy18,38,44,45), acting through their functions in different
processes such as mitochondrial energy metabolism and in-
flammation, is likely to generate differences in lesion distribu-
tion among the genotypes.

Our finding that statistically controlling for total brain le-
sion volume removes the observed effects on lesion distribu-
tion suggests that these genes possibly exert an effect mainly on

Table 2: Association of genotypes of the SNPs significant in LPM analyses with total T2 lesion volume in the brain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>rs No.</th>
<th>Genotype of Interesta</th>
<th>Other Genotypes</th>
<th>Mean Whole Brain T2 Lesion Volumes in mL (SD)</th>
<th>P Value of Differences in Total Lesion Volume Between Genotypes (Mann-Whitney U test)</th>
<th>Corrected for Disease Duration (using GLM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BTN2</td>
<td>rs2076530</td>
<td>AG 32.0 (32.9)</td>
<td>AA and GG 23.8 (27.4)</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
<td>0.01c 0.01c 0.08</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCL5</td>
<td>rs2107538</td>
<td>CC 28.2 (29.0)</td>
<td>CT and TT 20.9 (28.1)</td>
<td>0.02c 0.07</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFNGR2</td>
<td>rs9808753</td>
<td>AA 28.5 (30.0)</td>
<td>AG and GG 18.3 (22.6)</td>
<td>0.04a 0.29</td>
<td>0.04a 0.29</td>
<td>0.04a 0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNMT</td>
<td>rs876493</td>
<td>AG 28.1 (29.0)</td>
<td>AA and GG 23.2 (28.6)</td>
<td>0.15 0.13</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLA</td>
<td>rs2227139</td>
<td>CT 28.0 (29.9)</td>
<td>CC and TT 23.9 (28.0)</td>
<td>0.35 0.25</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
<td>0.04a 0.05b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Genotypes that are significantly associated with altered local lesion probability in LPM analyses.

b Generalized estimating equations were used to analyze the effect of the genotype on lesion volume.

P values of significant associations to total T2 lesion volume.

Because of the frequency of <5% of homozygote genotype, these genotypes (TT for CCL5 and GG for IFNGR2) were only analyzed when combined with heterozygote genotypes.

Acknowledgments
We thank all patients for participating.

References
5. van Walderveen MA, Barkhof F, Tas MW, et al. Patterns of brain magnetic resonance abnormalities on T2-weighted spin echo images in clinical
the overall lesion burden. However, to fully address this issue, a more focused approach should be applied, by using both an LPM approach and predefined areas of interest (hereby increasing the statistical power) and by selecting more homogeneous patients to limit the effect of confounding factors. In this context, a longitudinal study on the spatiotemporal development of new lesions (including T1 hypointense lesions and T1 gadolinium-enhancing lesions) would be valuable. Eventually, the insights gained from this approach may yield ways of predicting, from patients’ genotypes, whether they are likely to develop lesions in clinically eloquent areas.

Recently, pathway analysis in relation to susceptibility to MS revealed, not surprisingly, immune-related pathways.46 However, the same study also detected significant neural pathways, implicating a primary neural dysfunction in susceptibility to MS. This pathway-analysis approach may provide a basis for patient stratification (for instance, patients carrying a predominantly inflammatory profile versus patients carrying a more neurodegenerative profile), and it would be valuable to characterize these patient groups in terms of their lesion distribution. Previously, some of the SNPs selected for this study were found related, in relatively small studies, to a more neurodegenerative profile (CCCR5 and CYRAB),18,45 while others have found several HLA alleles associated with a more inflammatory profile.37,38 Such profile differences may be able to explain the previously described differences in lesion distribution between T1 gadolinium-enhancing lesions (acute inflammatory activity) and T1 persistent hypointense lesions (neurodegenerative activity).9

Conclusions
This exploratory study revealed an association between heterozygosity on rs2227139 in the MHC class II region and preferential periventricular lesion formation in MS. Other SNPs also showed associations between genotype and spatial lesion distribution, which are worth studying in future investigations by using a more focused approach and considering genetic pathways in addition to single genes. In these future studies, the potential role of lesion volume influencing the relation between genotype and lesion distribution should be explored further, as well as the distribution of gray matter lesions, contrast-enhancing lesions, and persistent T1-hypointense lesions.

We thank all patients for participating.


