Plasma glial fibrillary acidic protein is raised in progranulin-associated frontotemporal dementia

Authors

Carolin Heller BSc[1], Martha S. Foiani MRes[1], Katrina M. Moore BSc[2], Rhian S. Convery MSc[2], Martina Bocchetta PhD[2], Mollie Neason MSc[2], David M. Cash PhD[2], David L. Thomas PhD[3], Caroline V. Greaves BSc[2], Ione O.C. Woollacott MRCP[2], Rachelle Shafei MRCP[2], John van Swieten MD[4], Fermin Moreno MD[5], Raquel Sanchez-Valle MD[6], Barbara Borroni MD[7], Robert Laforce Jr MD PhD[8], Mario Masellis MD PhD[9], Maria Carmela Tartaglia MD[10], Caroline Graff MD[11], Daniela Galimberti PhD[12,13], James B. Rowe FRCP PhD[14], Elizabeth Finger MD[15], Matthis Synofzik MD[16,17], Rik Vandenberghe MD[18], Alexandre de Mendonça MD[19], Fabrizio Tagliavini MD[20], Isabel Santana MD[21], Simon Ducharme MD[22], Chris Butler FRCP PhD[23], Alex Gerhard FRCP PhD[24], Johannes Levin MD[25,26,27], Adrian Danek MD[25], Giovanni Frisoni PhD[28], Sandro Sorbi PhD[29], Markus Otto MD[30], Amanda Heslegrave PhD[1], Henrik Zetterberg PhD[1,31], Jonathan D. Rohrer FRCP PhD[2] on behalf of GENFI*

*List of consortium authors below

Affiliations

[1]UK Dementia Research Institute, [2]Dementia Research Centre, Department of Neurodegenerative Disease, and [3]Neuroradiological Academic Unit, UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, London, UK. [4]Department of Neurology, Erasmus Medical Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands. [5]Cognitive Disorders Unit, Department of Neurology, Donostia University Hospital, San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa, Spain. [6]Alzheimer's disease and Other Cognitive Disorders Unit, Neurology Service, Hospital Clínic, Barcelona, Spain. [7]Centre for Neurodegenerative Disorders, Neurology Unit, Department of Clinical and Experimental Sciences, University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy. [8]Clinique Interdisciplinaire de Mémoire du CHU de Québec, Département des Sciences Neurologiques, Université Laval, Québec, Canada. [9]Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Sunnybrook Research Institute, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada. [10]Tanz Centre for Research in Neurodegenerative Diseases, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada. [11]Department of Geriatric Medicine, Karolinska University Hospital-Huddinge, Stockholm, Sweden. [12]Dept. of Biomedical, Surgical and Dental Sciences, University of Milan, Centro Dino

Ferrari, Milan, Italy. [13]Fondazione IRCCS Ca' Granda, Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, Milan, Italy. [14]Department of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom. [15]Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario Canada. [16]Department of Neurodegenerative Diseases, Hertie-Institute for Clinical Brain Research and Center of Neurology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany. [17]German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE), Tübingen, Germany. [18]Laboratory for Cognitive Neurology, Department of Neurosciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium. [19]Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal. [20]Fondazione Istituto di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico Istituto Neurologica Carlo Besta, Milano, Italy. [21]Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal. [22]Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada. [23]Department of Clinical Neurology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom. [24]Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences, Institute of Brain, Behaviour and Mental Health, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK. [25]Department of Neurology, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, Germany. [26]German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE), Munich, Germany. [27]Munich Cluster for Systems Neurology (SyNergy), Munich, Germany. [28]Instituto di Recovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico Istituto Centro San Giovanni di Dio Fatebenefratelli, Brescia, Italy. [29]Department of Neuroscience, Psychology, Drug Research, and Child Health, University of Florence, Florence, Italy. [30]Department of Neurology, University of Ulm, Ulm.[31]Department of Psychiatry and Neurochemistry, the Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg, Mölndal, Sweden.

Corresponding author

Dr Jonathan Rohrer, Dementia Research Centre, Department of Neurodegenerative Disease, UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, London, WC1N 3BG, +4420 344 83039, j.rohrer@ucl.ac.uk

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List of GENFI consortium authors:

Martin N. Rossor MD FRCP[1], Jason D. Warren PhD FRACP[1], Nick C. Fox MD FRCP[1,2], Rita Guerreiro PhD[3], Jose Bras PhD[3], Jennifer Nicholas PhD[4], Simon Mead PhD[5], Lize Jiskoot PhD[6], Lieke Meeter MD[6], Jessica Panman MSc[6], Janne Papma PhD[6], Rick van Minkelen PhD[7], Yolanda Pijnenburg PhD[8], Myriam Barandiaran PhD[9,10], Begoña Indakoetxea MD[9,10], Alazne Gabilondo MD[10], Mikel Tainta MD[10], Maria de Arriba BSc[10], Ana Gorostidi PhD[10], Miren Zulaica BSc[10], Jorge Villanua MD PhD[11] Zigor Diaz[12], Sergi Borrego-Ecija MD[13], Jaume Olives MSc[13], Albert Lladó PhD[13], Mircea Balasa PhD[13], Anna Antonell PhD[13], Nuria Bargallo PhD[14], Enrico Premi MD[15], Maura Cosseddu MPsych[15], Stefano Gazzina MD[15], Alessandro Padovani MD PhD[15], Roberto Gasparotti MD[16], Silvana Archetti MBiolSci[17], Sandra Black MD[19], Sara Mitchell MD[19], Ekaterina Rogaeva PhD[20], Morris Freedman MD[21], Ron Keren MD[22], David Tang-Wai MD[23], Linn Öijerstedt MD[24], Christin Andersson PhD[25], Vesna Jelic MD[26], Hakan Thonberg MD[27], Andrea Arighi MD[28,29], Chiara Fenoglio PhD[28,29], Elio Scarpini MD[28,29], Giorgio Fumagalli MD[28,29,30], Thomas Cope MRCP[31], Carolyn Timberlake BSc[31], Timothy Rittman MRCP[31], Christen Shoesmith MD[32], Robart Bartha PhD[33,34], Rosa Rademakers PhD[35], Carlo Wilke MD[36,37], Hans-Otto Karnarth MD[38], Benjamin Bender MD[39], Rose Bruffaerts MD PhD[40], Philip Vandamme MD PhD[41], Mathieu Vandenbulcke MD PhD[42,43], Catarina B. Ferreira MSc[44], Gabriel Miltenberger PhD[45], Carolina Maruta MPsych PhD[46], Ana Verdelho MD PhD[47], Sónia Afonso BSc[48], Ricardo Taipa MD PhD[49], Paola Caroppo MD PhD[50], Giuseppe Di Fede MD PhD[50], Giorgio Giaccone MD[50], Sara Prioni PsyD[50], Veronica Redaelli MD[50], Giacomina Rossi MSc[50], Pietro Tiraboschi MD[50], Diana Duro NPsych[51], Maria Rosario Almeida PhD[51], Miguel Castelo-Branco MD PhD[51], Maria João Leitão BSc[52], Miguel Tabuas-Pereira MD[53], Beatriz Santiago MD[53], Serge Gauthier MD[56], Pedro Rosa-Neto MD PhD[57], Michele Veldsman PhD[58], Toby Flanagan BSc[60], Catharina Prix MD[61], Tobias Hoegen MD[61], Elisabeth Wlasich Mag. rer. nat.[61], Sandra Loosli MD[61], Sonja Schonecker MD[61], Elisa Semler Dr.hum.biol Dipl. Psych[62], Sarah Anderl-Straub Dr.hum.biol Dipl.Psych[62], Luisa Benussi PhD[63], Giuliano Binetti PhDi[63], Roberta Ghidoni PhD[63], Michela Pievani PhD[63], Gemma Lombardi MD [64], Benedetta Nacmias PhD[64], Camilla Ferrari[64], Valentina Bessi[64].

Affiliations

[1]Dementia Research Centre, Department of Neurodegenerative Disease, UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, London, UK; [2]Dementia Research Institute, Department of Neurodegenerative Disease, UCL Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, UK; [3]Center for Neurodegenerative Science, Van Andel Research Institute, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.[4]Department of Medical Statistics, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK; [5]MRC Prion Unit, Department of Neurodegenerative Disease, UCL Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, UK; [6]Department of Neurology, Erasmus Medical Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands; [7]Department of Clinical Genetics, Erasmus Medical Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands; [8]Amsterdam University Medical Centre, Amsterdam VUmc, Amsterdam, Netherlands; [9]Cognitive Disorders Unit, Department of Neurology, Donostia University Hospital, San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa, Spain; [10]Neuroscience Area, Biodonostia Health Research Institute, San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa, Spain; [11]OSATEK, University of Donostia, San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa, Spain; [12]CITA Alzheimer, San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa, Spain; [13]Alzheimer's disease and Other Cognitive Disorders Unit, Neurology Service, Hospital Clínic, Barcelona, Spain; [14]Imaging Diagnostic Center, Hospital Clínic, Barcelona, Spain; [15]Centre for Neurodegenerative Disorders, Neurology Unit, Department of Clinical and Experimental Sciences, University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy; [16]Neuroradiology Unit, University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy; [17]Biotechnology Laboratory, Department of Diagnostics, Spedali Civili Hospital, Brescia, Italy; [18]Clinique Interdisciplinaire de Mémoire Département des Sciences Neurologiques Université Laval Québec, Quebec, Canada; [19]Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Sunnybrook Research Institute, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; [20]Tanz Centre for Research in Neurodegenerative Diseases, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; [21]Baycrest Health Sciences, Rotman Research Institute, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; [22]The University Health Network, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, Toronto, Canada; [23]The University Health Network, Krembil Research Institute, Toronto, Canada; [24]Department of Geriatric Medicine, Karolinska

University Hospital-Huddinge, Stockholm, Sweden; [25]Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden; [26]Division of Clinical Geriatrics, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden; [27]Center for Alzheimer Research, Divison of Neurogeriatrics, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden; [28]Fondazione IRCCS Ca' Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, Neurodegenerative Diseases Unit, Milan, Italy; [29]University of Milan, Centro Dino Ferrari, Milan, Italy; [30]Department of Neurosciences, Psychology, Drug Research and Child Health (NEUROFARBA), University of Florence, Florence, Italy; [31]Department of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; [32]Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario Canada; [33]Department of Medical Biophysics, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada; [34]Centre for Functional and Metabolic Mapping, Robarts Research Institute, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada; [35]Department of Neuroscience, Mayo Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida, USA; [36]Department of Neurodegenerative Diseases, Hertie-Institute for Clinical Brain Research and Center of Neurology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; [37]Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE), Tübingen, Germany; [38]Division of Neuropsychology, Hertie-Institute for Clinical Brain Research and Center of Neurology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; [39]Department of Diagnostic and Interventional Neuroradiology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; [40]Laboratory for Cognitive Neurology, Department of Neurosciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; [41]Neurology Service, University Hospitals Leuven, Belgium, Laboratory for Neurobiology, VIB-KU Leuven Centre for Brain Research, Leuven, Belgium; [42]Geriatric Psychiatry Service, University Hospitals Leuven, Belgium; [43]Neuropsychiatry, Department of Neurosciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; [44]Laboratory of Neurosciences, Institute of Molecular Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [45]Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [46]Laboratory of Language Research, Centro de Estudos Egas Moniz, Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [47]Department of Neurosciences and Mental Health, Centro Hospitalar Lisboa Norte - Hospital de Santa Maria & Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [48]Instituto Ciencias Nucleares Aplicadas a Saude, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal; [49]Neuropathology Unit and Department of Neurology, Centro Hospitalar do Porto - Hospital de Santo António, Oporto, Portugal; [50]Fondazione IRCCS Istituto Neurologico Carlo Besta, Milano, Italy; [51]Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal; [52]Centre of Neurosciences and Cell biology, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal; [53]Neurology Department, Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal; [54]Department of Psychiatry, McGill University Health Centre, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada; [55]McConnell Brain Imaging Centre, Montreal Neurological Institute, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada; [56]Alzheimer Disease Research Unit, McGill Centre for Studies in Aging, Department of Neurology & Neurosurgery, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada; [57]Translational Neuroimaging Laboratory, McGill Centre for Studies in Aging, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada; [58]Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Medical Sciences Division, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; [59]Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences, Institute of Brain, Behaviour and Mental Health, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [60]Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, Division of Neuroscience and Experimental Psychology, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [61]Neurologische Klinik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany; [62]Department of Neurology, University of Ulm, Ulm; [63]Instituto di Recovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico Istituto Centro San Giovanni di Dio Fatebenefratelli, Brescia, Italy; [64]Department of Neuroscience, Psychology, Drug Research, and Child Health, University of Florence, Florence, Italy.

ABSTRACT

Background: There are few validated fluid biomarkers in FTD. Glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) is a measure of astrogliosis, a known pathological process of FTD, but has yet to be explored as potential biomarker.

Methods: Plasma GFAP and neurofilament light chain (NfL) concentration were measured in 469 individuals enrolled in the Genetic FTD Initiative (GENFI): 114 *C9orf72* expansion carriers (74 presymptomatic, 40 symptomatic), 119 *GRN* mutation carriers (88 presymptomatic, 31 symptomatic), 53 *MAPT* mutation carriers (34 presymptomatic, 19 symptomatic) and 183 non-carrier controls. Biomarker measures were compared between groups using linear regression models adjusted for age and sex with family membership included as random effect. Participants underwent standardized clinical assessments including the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE), Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration-Clinical Dementia Rating scale (FTLD-CDR), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship of plasma GFAP to clinical and imaging measures.

Results: Plasma GFAP concentration was significantly increased in symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers (adjusted mean difference from controls 192.3 pg/mL, 95% confidence intervals 126.5-445.6), but not in those with *C9orf72* expansions (9.0, -61.3-54.6), *MAPT* mutations (12.7, -33.3-90.4) or the presymptomatic groups. GFAP concentration was significantly positively correlated with age in both controls and the majority of the disease groups, as well as with NfL concentration. In the presymptomatic period, higher GFAP concentrations were correlated with a lower cognitive score (MMSE) and lower brain volume, whilst in the symptomatic period, higher concentrations were associated with faster rates of atrophy in the temporal lobe.

Conclusions: Raised GFAP concentrations appear to be unique to *GRN*-related FTD, with levels potentially increasing just prior to symptom onset, suggesting that GFAP may be an important marker of proximity to onset, and helpful for forthcoming therapeutic prevention trials.

INTRODUCTION

Frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is a progressive neurodegenerative condition with around a third of cases caused by an autosomal dominant gene mutation in progranulin (*GRN*), chromosome 9 open reading frame 72 (*C9orf72*) or microtubule-associated protein tau (*MAPT*)[1]. As clinical trials in genetic FTD are fast approaching, robust biomarkers that allow accurate measurement of disease onset and progression are becoming increasingly important. In particular, many trials will focus on the presymptomatic stage of disease where neuropathological alterations are already present[2] and yet few biomarkers have been shown to be abnormal in this phase[3–5].

Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) or plasma/serum progranulin levels in *GRN* mutation carriers[4,6] and CSF (poly)GP dipeptide repeat concentrations in *C9orf72* expansion carriers[5,7,8] are markers of specific protein abnormalities in genetic FTD but both are abnormal from early in the presymptomatic period (and potentially from birth). In contrast, neurofilament light chain (NfL) is a marker of neuronal death and axonal degeneration (measurable in CSF[3,9,10] as well as both plasma[11] and serum[12,13]) that is not specific to FTD[14] and has only been shown to be abnormal in the very late presymptomatic period prior to conversion to the symptomatic phase[3]. Glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) is a marker of astrogliosis, the abnormal proliferation of astrocytes due to neuronal damage[15], and has previously been shown to be increased in frontal cortical tissue in FTD[16], and raised in both the CSF and serum of patients with symptomatic FTD[17–19]. However, it has yet to be explored using ultrasensitive blood-based assays in genetic FTD mutation carriers.

In this study, we aimed to investigate within the Genetic FTD Initiative (GENFI) cohort whether plasma GFAP was abnormal in each of the different genetic FTD groups during the symptomatic period, and whether we could detect any presymptomatic changes. We also aimed to explore the relationship of GFAP with plasma NfL and with cognitive and neuroimaging measures.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from GENFI, a natural history study of genetic FTD involving 23 research centres across Europe and Canada (www.genfi.org.uk)[2] involving symptomatic carriers of mutations in *GRN*, *MAPT*, or *C9orf72*, and those at risk of carrying a mutation because a first-degree relative was a known symptomatic carrier. 469 consecutively recruited individuals from the GENFI study were included: 114 *C9orf72* expansion carriers (74 presymptomatic, 40 symptomatic), 119 *GRN* mutation carriers (88 presymptomatic, 31 symptomatic), 53 *MAPT* mutation carriers (34 presymptomatic, 19 symptomatic) and 183 non-carriers who acted as a control group. Demographic information is shown in Table 1: age and sex differed significantly between groups. All people in the study underwent a clinical assessment consisting of a medical history with the participant and informant, and physical examination, with symptomatic status diagnosed by a clinician who was an expert in the FTD field[20–24] specific diagnoses are shown in Table 1. All participants underwent a standardized examination including the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) and the Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration Clinical Dementia Rating scale (FTLD-CDR)[25]. Participants also performed 3D T1-weighted magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain: 432 scans were available for cross-sectional analysis, of which a subgroup of 243 participants had a follow-up scan (on the same scanner) for analysis [mean (standard deviation) interval 1.12 (0.29) years between baseline and follow-up]. Volumetric measures of whole brain and cortical regions were calculated using a previously described method that uses the geodesic information flow (GIF) algorithm, which is based on atlas propagation and label fusion (Supplementary Table 1)[3,26]. An annualized longitudinal rate of atrophy was found by calculating the difference in each specific measure between the baseline and longitudinal scan and expressing it as a percentage of the baseline volume over one year (Supplementary Table 2). Local ethics committees at each site approved the study and all participants provided written informed consent at enrolment.

Table 1: Demographic, cognitive and biomarker data from study participants. IQR – Interquartile range; MMSE – Mini-Mental State Examination; FTLD-CDR-SOB – Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration Clinical Dementia Rating scale Sum Of Boxes; GFAP – Glial fibrillary acidic protein; NfL – Neurofilament light chain protein. For sex, age, MMSE and FTLD-CDR-SOB, significant differences (p < 0.05) are shown in the table as follows: a. compared to controls, b. in *C9orf72* group between symptomatic and presymptomatic carriers, c. in *GRN* group between symptomatic and presymptomatic carriers, d. in *MAPT* group between symptomatic and presymptomatic carriers.

	Controls	Presymptomatic mutation carriers			Symptomatic mutation carriers		
		C9orf72	*GRN*	*MAPT*	*C9orf72*	*GRN*	*MAPT*
Number of participants	183	74	88	34	40	31	19
Sex: number male (%)	81 (44.3)	29 (39.2)	34 (38.6)	13 (38.2)	27 [a, b] (67.5)	16 (51.6)	11 (57.9)
Median (IQR) age (years)	43.8 (36.3 - 55.1)	44.1 (34.4 - 52.9)	42.4 (34.6 - 52.7)	36.2 [a] (31.6 - 44.9)	66.0 [a, b] (60.7 - 71.4)	64.3 [a, c] (59.9 - 70.2)	58.3 [a, d] (53.9 - 64.3)
Mean (range) age at onset (years)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	59 (34 - 71)	61 (49 - 76)	53 (37 - 66)
Median (IQR) disease duration (years)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5.6 (3.6 - 6.9)	2.6 (1.6 - 4.3)	4.3 (2.5 - 9.3)
Diagnosis	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	30 bvFTD, 8 ALS/FTD-ALS, 1 PPA, 1 PSP	15 bvFTD, 14 PPA, 1 CBS, 1 other	19 bvFTD
Median (range) MMSE	30 (26 - 30)	30 (25 - 30)	30 (26 - 30)	30 (27 - 30)	26 [a, b] (7 - 30)	22 [a, c] (0 - 29)	24 [a, d] (6 - 30)
Median (range) FTLD-CDR-SOB	0.0 (0.0 - 3.0)	0.0 (0.0 - 3.0)	0.0 (0.0 - 2.5)	0.0 (0.0 - 2.5)	10.0 [a, b] (0.0 - 22.0)	10.5 [a, c] (2.0 - 21.0)	8.5 [a, d] (1.0 - 21.0)
Median (IQR) plasma NfL (pg/mL)	9.3 (6.8 - 13.0)	11.3 (8.3 - 17.0)	9.2 (7.0 - 12.8)	8.4 (6.3 - 9.7)	46.0 (22.8 - 62.6)	92.7 (54.8 - 130.1)	20.5 (15.4 - 37.6)
Median (IQR) plasma GFAP (pg/mL)	105.8 (80.4 - 146.1)	116.1 (88.3 - 180.0)	113.4 (80.5 - 168.1)	89.1 (70.9 - 151.0)	165.7 (124.8 - 245.3)	272.2 (211.5 - 417.8)	123.3 (85.2 - 206.7)

Measurement of plasma markers

Plasma was collected, processed and stored in aliquots at -80°C according to standardised procedures. Samples were measured using the multiplex Neurology 4-Plex A kit (102153, Quanterix Corporation, Lexington, USA) on the SIMOA HD-1 Analyzer following manufacturer's instructions. The lower limit of detection of the assay for GFAP and NfL were 0.221 pg/mL and 0.104 pg/mL respectively. Measurements were carried out at the same study site on consecutive days and the operator was blinded to all clinical information, including genetic status. To keep sample processing and plating consistent, plasma samples were thawed at room temperature for two hours and subsequently centrifuged at 10,000g for five minutes. 150μL samples were aliquoted in a 96-well plate (Quanterix Corporation, Lexington, USA) and frozen at -80°C until analysis. Quality control (QC) samples had a mean intra-assay and inter-assay coefficient of variation (CV) of less than 10%.

Statistical analysis

Fisher's exact test was used to compare sex frequencies between groups. Distributions for demographic and biomarker data were investigated graphically using histograms and quantile-quantile plots and tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. As demographic data did not follow a normal distribution, group differences for age at sample collection and FTLD-CDR-SOB were compared using the Kruskal-Wallis test. A linear regression adjusting for age was used to compare MMSE scores between groups. The primary analysis in the study was to investigate whether there were any differences in plasma GFAP concentration from controls in the different genetic mutation groups both symptomatically and presymptomatically, as well as between genetic groups. As biomarker values were not normally distributed, group means were compared by performing a linear mixed regression model with 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals with 2000 repetitions in STATA (v.14; Texas, USA), adjusting for age and sex with family membership included as a random effect. Diagnostic performance of GFAP was assessed by areas under the curve (AUC) obtained by receiver operating characteristic (ROC) analyses, with optimal cut-off levels at the highest

Youden's index (sensitivity + specificity - 1) using GraphPad Prism V.6 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, California, USA). In order to investigate the relationship of GFAP concentration to demographic, cognitive and imaging measures as well as NfL concentrations, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used.

RESULTS

Plasma GFAP concentration

Plasma GFAP concentration was significantly higher in the symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers compared to controls (adjusted mean difference 192.3 pg/mL, 95% confidence intervals 126.5-445.6), but not in either the symptomatic *C9orf72* (9.0, -61.3-54.6) or *MAPT* (12.7, -33.3-90.4) groups (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 2). Within the symptomatic groups, concentrations in *GRN* were significantly higher than both *C9orf72* (183.3, 106.1-427.2) and *MAPT* (179.6, 99.8-348.1) mutation carriers.

A receiver operating characteristic curve analysis measuring the ability of GFAP to distinguish symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers from controls showed a sensitivity of 90.3% and specificity of 82.0% with a cut-off point of 163.2 pg/mL and an area under the curve (AUC) of 0.90. For distinguishing symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers from *C9orf72* mutation carriers there was a sensitivity of 71.0% and specificity of 70.0% with a cut-off point of 226.2 pg/mL and an AUC of 0.74, whilst for distinguishing symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers from *MAPT* mutation carriers there was a sensitivity of 79.0% and specificity of 77.4% with a cut-off point of 209.1 pg/mL and an AUC of 0.80 (Supplementary Figure 1).

In the presymptomatic groups, concentrations were not significantly increased in any of the groups compared to controls: *GRN* (14.2, -2.4-38.3), *C9orf72* (21.1, -18.8-66.5), *MAPT* (-7.0, -61.8-7.8) (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 2). There were also no differences across the presymptomatic groups.

Comparing symptomatic and presymptomatic carriers, a significantly higher concentration was also seen in the symptomatic versus the presymptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers (178.1, 114.3-365.2), but not in the other groups (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 2).

Table 2. Adjusted mean differences in plasma GFAP concentrations between groups with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Significant differences in bold: ** p < 0.01. PS – presymptomatic; S – symptomatic.

GFAP	*C9orf72* PS	*C9orf72* S	*GRN* PS	*GRN* S	*MAPT* PS	*MAPT* S
Controls	21.1 (-18.8, 66.5)	9.0 (-61.3, 54.6)	14.2 (-2.4, 38.3)	**192.3** (126.5, 445.6)	-7.0 (-61.8, 7.8)	12.7 (-33.3, 90.4)
C9orf72 PS		12.1 (-64.1, 85.1)	-6.9 (-51.0, 43.0)	**171.2** (88.5, 433.7)	-28.1 (-83.3, 8.0)	8.4 (-87.5, 74.5)
C9orf72 S			-5.2 (-79.4, 39.4)	**183.3** (106.1, 427.2)	-16.0 (-84.3, 32.9)	-3.7 (-104.5, 56.1)
GRN PS				**178.1** (114.3, 365.2)	-21.2 (-78.3, 1.5)	1.5 (-75.4, 49.1)
GRN S					**-199.3** (-439.2, -124.9)	**-179.6** (-348.1, -99.8)
MAPT PS						19.6 (-30.8, 114.4)

Correlation with age

GFAP concentration was significantly correlated with age at sample collection in controls (r=0.55, p<0.001), presymptomatic mutation carriers (all groups combined: r=0.53, p<0.001; *GRN*: r=0.58, p<0.001; *C9orf72*: r=0.50, p<0.001; *MAPT*: r=0.36, p= 0.036), and symptomatic mutation carriers for all genetic groups together (r=0.38, p<0.001) and the *GRN* group alone (r=0.65, p<0.001) (Figure 2). No significant correlation was seen for the symptomatic *C9orf72* (r=0.27, p=0.088) or *MAPT* mutation carriers (r=0.00, p=0.989).

Correlation with plasma NfL

Plasma NfL was increased in all three symptomatic groups compared with controls (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 3): *GRN* mutation carriers (adjusted mean difference 70.5 pg/mL, 95% confidence intervals 51.6-92.6), *C9orf72* mutation carriers (29.7, 18.7-47.5), and *MAPT* mutation carriers (12.6, 3.3-26.1). Within the symptomatic groups, concentrations in *GRN* were significantly higher than both *C9orf72* (40.7, 16.5-62.2) and *MAPT* (57.9, 36.8-81.5) mutation carriers, and *C9orf72* mutation carriers were higher than *MAPT* mutation carriers (17.2, 2.9-35.7). Concentration was also increased in presymptomatic *C9orf72* mutation carriers compared with controls (9.0, 1.3-26.8), but not in the *GRN* or *MAPT* presymptomatic groups (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 3). Comparing symptomatic and presymptomatic carriers, a significantly higher concentration was also seen in the symptomatic versus the presymptomatic mutation carriers in each of the groups (Figure 1, Tables 1 and 3): *GRN* mutation carriers (70.5, 52.5-92.2), *C9orf72* mutation carriers (20.7, 3.2-36.1), and *MAPT* mutation carriers (11.7, 0.8-23.4).

Plasma GFAP and NfL concentrations were significantly correlated in controls (r=0.66, p<0.001), presymptomatic mutation carriers (*GRN*: r=0.66, p<0.001; *C9orf72*: r=0.75, p<0.001; *MAPT*: r=0.41, p=0.017), and symptomatic mutation carriers (*GRN*: r=0.38, p=0.036; *C9orf72*: r=0.57, p<0.001; *MAPT*: r=0.76, p<0.001).

Table 3. Adjusted mean differences in plasma NfL concentrations between groups with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Significant differences in bold: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. PS – presymptomatic; S – symptomatic.

NfL	*C9orf72* PS	*C9orf72* S	*GRN* PS	*GRN* S	*MAPT* PS	*MAPT* S
Controls	**9.0*** (1.3, 26.8)	**29.7**** (18.7, 47.5)	0.0 (-3.1, 3.3)	**70.5**** (51.6, 92.6)	0.9 (-2.2, 6.4)	**12.6*** (3.3, 26.1)

	C9orf72 PS	C9orf72 S	GRN PS	GRN S	MAPT PS	MAPT S
C9orf72 PS		20.7* (3.2, 36.1)	-9.0* (-27.5, -1.4)	61.4** (37.7, 82.7)	-8.1* (-27.0, -0.6)	3.6 (-15.6, 17.0)
C9orf72 S			-29.8** (-47.7, -18.7)	40.7** (16.5, 62.2)	-28.9** (-46.2, -16.9)	-17.2* (-35.7, -2.9)
GRN PS				70.5** (52.5, 92.2)	-0.9 (-5.9, 2.9)	12.6* (2.9, 25.2)
GRN S					-69.6** (-91.7, -50.6)	-57.9** (-81.5, -36.8)
MAPT PS						11.7* (0.8, 23.4)

Correlation with cognitive measures

A significant negative correlation between GFAP concentrations and MMSE was seen in the presymptomatic *GRN* (r=-0.24, p=0.033) and *C9orf72* (r=-0.40, p<0.001) but not *MAPT* (r=0.05, p=0.801) mutation carriers. No significant correlation was seen during the symptomatic period in any of the genetic groups (*GRN*: r=-0.29, p=0.153; *C9orf72*: r=-0.24, p=0.146; *MAPT*: r=-0.48, p=0.080).

No significant correlations were seen between GFAP concentration and FTLD-CDR sum of boxes score in either the presymptomatic or symptomatic period in any group: *GRN*: r=-0.04, p=0.768 presymptomatic, r=0.18, p=0.409 symptomatic; *C9orf72*: r=-0.17, p=0.234 presymptomatic, r=0.21, p=0.321 symptomatic; *MAPT*: r=-0.17, p=0.446 presymptomatic, r=0.14, p=0.736 symptomatic.

Correlation with cross-sectional imaging data

A significant negative correlation was seen between GFAP concentrations and both *GRN* and *C9orf72* presymptomatic carrier brain volumes for frontal cortex (r=-0.23, p=0.039; r=-0.35, p=0.002), temporal cortex (r=-0.35, p=0.001; r=-0.27, p=0.024), cingulate cortex (r=-0.24, p=0.027; r=-0.44, p<0.001), and insular cortex (r=-0.27, p=0.016; r=-0.26, p=0.029) as well as whole brain (r=-0.45, p<0.001) and parietal cortex (r=-0.33, p=0.005) for the *C9orf72* group (Supplementary Table 3). No significant correlations

were seen in the presymptomatic *MAPT* mutation carrier group or any of the symptomatic genetic groups.

Correlation with longitudinal imaging data

No significant positive correlation of GFAP concentration with longitudinal rates of atrophy were seen in any of the groups except for in the temporal cortex of symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers (r=0.66, p=0.010) (Supplementary Table 4). However, within the same symptomatic *GRN* group there was also a trend in relationship between GFAP concentration and atrophy rates in the cingulate cortex (r=0.55, p=0.052).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we found that plasma GFAP concentration was significantly increased in genetic FTD but only in *GRN* mutation carriers, and not in those with *C9orf72* expansions or mutations in the *MAPT* gene. In the presymptomatic period, higher concentrations were correlated with a lower cognitive score (MMSE) and lower brain volumes (in regions characteristically affected in FTD), potentially suggesting GFAP is increased in the late presymptomatic period. In the symptomatic period, higher concentrations were associated with faster rates of atrophy, suggesting GFAP levels are associated with disease intensity, and therefore progression and survival.

GFAP is a major constituent of the astrocytic cytoskeleton and its expression pattern is highly brain-enriched[27]. Its levels increase following acute damage to astrocytes such as after a stroke[28] or traumatic brain injury[29], but also in relation to more chronic insults, such as in neurodegeneration, when astrocytes become reactive, increasing in size and proliferating, a process called astrogliosis[27]. In neurodegeneration, increased GFAP concentrations in biofluid have been reported in Alzheimer's disease[30] (in both CSF[17,19] and serum[19]) and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis[18]. Previous studies in FTD have found increased CSF concentrations in symptomatic patients within combined clinical[17,19] and

genetic cohorts[18] but have not previously found changes in blood[19], nor investigated individual genetic groups previously. Our results suggest that there are differential increases within FTD, with concentrations being higher in people with *GRN* mutations than in other groups. *GRN* encodes the progranulin protein, which is a secreted growth factor and known to be involved in many biological processes including inflammation, wound healing and cell proliferation[31,32]. However, progranulin is also taken up by astrocytes for storage or transportation to the lysosomal compartment[33–35], and studies of *GRN*-deficient mice have shown the presence of astrogliosis[35–37]. *In vitro*, progranulin seems to have a role of inactivating astrocytes with evidence that progranulin attenuates a pro-inflammatory phenotype of astrocytes[35]. This suggests that deficiency of progranulin in *GRN* mutation carriers, may lead to activation of pro-inflammatory phenotypes of astrocytes and subsequent astrogliosis, with increased levels of GFAP protein expression. People with *GRN* mutations have evidence of astrogliosis pathologically, including within areas of white matter damage[38] (visible in a proportion of people in vivo as white matter hyperintensities on MR imaging, which have been previously shown to be unique to *GRN* mutations within familial FTD[39]). Such damage increases as the neurodegeneration progresses[39], consistent with the pattern of increased plasma GFAP in our study. In contrast, levels were not increased in plasma in individuals with *C9orf72* expansions or *MAPT* mutations. Whilst astrogliosis is seen in animal models and at postmortem in both *C9orf72*[40]- and *MAPT*[41,42]-related FTD, this may well be a late feature of the disease, or the extent of astrogliosis may be less. Future work will be required to investigate this further.

It is well established that multiple biomarkers of neurodegeneration increase in concentration with age, attributed to the reduction of neural integrity in the ageing brain[43]. CSF GFAP concentrations have previously been shown to increase as one gets older[44], with multiple studies showing proliferation of astrocytes, increased GFAP immunoreactivity, and elevated levels of GFAP mRNA with age[45–49]. Consistent with this, we also found a significant positive correlation of plasma GFAP concentration with age in the majority of the groups. This highlights the importance of adjusting

plasma GFAP concentrations for age in statistical analyses: symptomatic mutation carriers in the *C9orf72* and *MAPT* groups (as well as the *GRN* group) in this study showed increased levels of plasma GFAP compared to controls and their presymptomatic counterparts, but significance was lost once adjusting for age.

NfL, part of the axonal cytoskeleton, is released following cellular damage. A previous study has shown that NfL concentrations are increased in both the CSF and blood of symptomatic genetic FTD in all three mutation groups, *C9orf72*, *GRN* and *MAPT*[3]. The results in this study replicate these findings in plasma, although we also found elevated levels in presymptomatic *C9orf72* mutation carriers. In this latter group, NfL concentrations correlated negatively with MMSE (r=-0.33, p=0.004: Supplementary Table 5) and with brain volumes (whole brain, r=-0.53, p<0.001 and cortical regions: frontal, -0.51, <0.001; temporal, -0.37, 0.001; parietal, -0.51, <0.001; occipital, -0.33, 0.005; cingulate, -0.49, <0.001; insula, -0.47, <0.001: Supplementary Tables 6 and 7), suggesting that NfL increases particularly towards the end of the presymptomatic period with increasing neurodegeneration. Although *GRN* NfL concentration was not significantly increased presymptomatically, a similar pattern of negative correlation with brain volumes was seen in this group (in whole brain and all cortical regions except the occipital lobe, r=-0.30 to -0.48, p≤0.006). NfL and GFAP concentrations were significantly correlated in all groups including controls, although the correlation coefficient varied from 0.38 to 0.76. A similar correlation has been shown in CSF previously[44]. As both increase with age (Supplementary Table 8 for NfL correlations with age), the correlation is not unexpected, but other unexplained factors are likely to affect the different patterns within genetic FTD; interestingly, the lowest correlation (r=0.38) was in the symptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers, suggesting that in this group astrogliosis and neurodegeneration are not so closely related.

Correlation of GFAP concentration with cognitive and imaging measures revealed a negative correlation i.e. higher concentration with a lower cognitive score and lower cross-sectional brain

volumes in FTD-related regions in presymptomatic *GRN* mutation carriers. This suggests that GFAP levels start to increase as the brain starts to decrease in volume, and as cognition starts to become affected thus in the later stages of the presymptomatic period in proximity to symptom onset. This would be an important biomarker for *GRN*-related FTD, as an increase in concentration from baseline during the presymptomatic period would identify a time around the onset of neurodegeneration, and potentially a time when therapeutic intervention may be optimal. Despite the lack of a significant increase in concentration in *C9orf72* mutation carriers, a similar pattern of negative correlation with cognition and brain imaging was seen in the presymptomatic period – it would be useful in future studies to investigate the subset of *C9orf72* expansion carriers that have increased GFAP concentrations, and how they differ from those with a lower concentration. In particular, it would be helpful to compare carriers with and without concomitant ALS. We also assessed whether GFAP correlated with the rate of brain atrophy measured with longitudinal brain imaging and found a significant positive correlation only in the symptomatic *GRN* carriers (in the temporal lobe), implicating an association of GFAP levels with the intensity of the disease process i.e. how fast the disease is progressing. With longitudinal follow-up of participants, it would therefore be hypothesized that higher GFAP concentration would be associated with shorter survival in *GRN*-related FTD.

Whilst the multicentre nature of the GENFI study allows collection of samples from a large genetic cohort of FTD worldwide, there remains a relatively small number of cases in each group (leading to low statistical power to detect differences), particularly in the symptomatic carriers, and replication in a larger dataset would be helpful. Due to the nature of the disease process, the mean age of the controls overall is lower compared to the symptomatic mutation carriers, but nonetheless the same results are found whether performing an age-adjusted comparison (as presented above) or when symptomatic mutation carriers are compared with an age- and gender-matched subset of older controls (see Supplementary Figure 2). The advantage of studying levels in plasma is that blood is

more easily accessible and a relatively cost-efficient way to access bodily fluids in comparison to performing a lumbar puncture; in this study, the use of the ultrasensitive Simoa assay allowed detection at a level in blood that other assays do not. However, it will be important to study CSF levels in more detail in this group, as concentrations can differ between blood and CSF[18]. Lastly, despite significant differences between the groups, there is a substantial overlap in concentrations between carriers and controls: longitudinal study of GFAP concentration over time, particularly in participants that convert from presymptomatic to symptomatic status, will therefore be important to truly evaluate whether changes do occur towards the end of the presymptomatic period and how levels change with progression of disease.

In summary, plasma GFAP levels appear to be uniquely increased in *GRN* mutation carriers in the current study, and importantly, concentrations may well be abnormal during the late presymptomatic period, suggesting that GFAP might act as marker of proximity to symptom onset.

Competing of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Figure 1. a) Plasma GFAP and b) plasma NfL concentrations (pg/mL) in control, presymptomatic and symptomatic FTD mutation carriers for each gene: *C9orf72, GRN* **and** *MAPT***. Median designated by blue line; interquartile ranges indicated by orange error bars. * = significant differences – only differences from controls and within the same genetic group are shown on the graph. Note that 29 data points fall outside the upper or lower limit using the interquartile range method, with factor** k **= 1.5 (i.e. outside the upper limit Q3 + 1.5 x IQR or lower limit Q1 - 1.5 x IQR): excluding these outliers does not change the significance of the results.**

Figure 2. Correlation between plasma GFAP concentrations (pg/mL) and age: a) presymptomatic, and b) symptomatic mutation carriers.