Atrial fibrillation after cardiac surgery (postoperative atrial fibrillation [POAF]) is a common problem, affecting 10% to 50% of all cardiac surgery patients, with the risks of POAF increasing as a function of patient age and the complexity of the surgery performed. POAF is associated with increased length of hospital stay, increased risk of comorbid conditions, and increased risk of mortality. Because surgeries that do not directly manipulate the heart (lung resection, etc) are also associated with POAF, it is clear that factors beyond atrial trauma and ischemia have a significant role in the development of POAF. Among these, surgery-related pericardial inflammatory processes, autonomic disturbance, and changes in plasma volume regulation are plausible mechanisms.

In the POAF substudy, Imazio and colleagues have assessed the impact of colchicine treatment on the incidence of POAF occurring between postoperative day 3 (after treatment onset) and 1 month after surgery. In their analysis, increased left atrial size, surgery other than coronary artery bypass graft surgery, and the presence of pericardial effusion were associated with increased risk of POAF; in contrast, use of perioperative β-blockers and colchicine treatment were protective. Baseline characteristics of the control and colchicine-treated patient groups were balanced, but the patients on colchicine had a reduced incidence of POAF (12.0% versus 22.0%; \(P=0.021\)), with a shorter in-hospital stay (\(P=0.04\)) and shorter stay in rehabilitation (\(P=0.009\)). There was no difference in the incidence of death or stroke (1.2% in both groups), and side effects were similar in the control and placebo-treated groups. These results are promising, and suggest that colchicine may be useful in the prevention of POAF. However, as acknowledged by the authors, there are some important caveats. In this study, 43% of the POAF episodes documented occurred before the onset of colchicine treatment. Because the study drug was not initiated until postoperative day 3, it is unclear whether colchicine would be equally effective in suppressing the earlier episodes of AF. Clinical studies have shown that the peak incidence of AF occurs on postoperative days 2 to 3, a time that is well correlated with the peak of plasma levels of C-reactive protein, an acute-phase reactant and sensitive marker of systemic inflammation. Circulating white cell counts are frequently elevated in patients who experience POAF. Imazio and colleagues have not reported the impact of colchicine treatment on either plasma C-reactive protein levels or leukocyte counts.

In animal studies, experimental sterile pericarditis (created with epicardial application of talc and gauze) has been used to create a reliable substrate for the induction of AF and atrial flutter. In this model, treatment with prednisone lowered postoperative plasma C-reactive protein levels, decreased pericardial adhesions, and significantly attenuated the inducibility of AF on postoperative days 3 to 4. Histological analysis revealed a reduction of neutrophil infiltration and epicardial injury. Experimental sterile pericarditis is characterized by profound epicardial neutrophil infiltration, which promotes gap junction remodeling. Areas with significant neutrophil infiltration displayed necrotic changes and had a lower abundance of connexins 40 and 43.

Consistent with this observation, atrial myeloperoxidase levels (which reflect neutrophil/macrophage infiltration) were associated with conduction slowing and conduction hetero-
generity in another canine cardiac surgery model. In this model as well, prednisone attenuated atrial myeloperoxidase levels, changes in conduction pattern and velocity, and the inducibility of AF. Myeloperoxidase is an oxidant-generating enzyme that consumes nitric oxide. Myeloperoxidase promotes matrix metalloproteinase activity, oxidant generation, fibroblast proliferation, and extracellular matrix production (interstitial atrial fibrosis)—important elements of the substrate for AF. In a translational study, it was observed that whereas control mice infused with angiotensin II developed extensive leukocyte infiltration and atrial fibrosis and had inducible AF, myeloperoxidase-deficient knockout mice developed less fibrosis and were protected from AF.

Plant extracts containing colchicine have been used to treat gout-associated arthritis for nearly 4000 years, and gout remains the primary indication for the use of colchicine. Colchicine blocks microtubule assembly and can actively disrupt microtubules. Microtubules have a significant role in numerous cellular cytoskeletal and intracellular transport activities. One of the most potent actions of colchicine (at nanomolar concentrations) is suppression of the release of a chemotactic factor from neutrophil lysosomes. As a result, colchicine attenuates neutrophil activation, endothelial cell adhesion, and migration to injured tissues. On the basis of the above preclinical studies and insights into the biological activity of colchicine, it is not unexpected that colchicine, an agent with potent anti-inflammatory activity, may have a significant antiarrhythmic effect in postsurgical patients.

In addition to the potential effects of colchicine on neutrophil activation/migration/infibration, colchicine may have relevant effects on atrial myocytes. Microtubules regulate the localization and interaction of adrenergic receptors and adenylyl cyclase in caveolae (specialized lipid domains in the cell membrane). As a result, microtubules modulate the phosphorylation of calcium channels and likely affect the response of the atria to autonomic stimulation. Because autonomic balance is altered in the postoperative state, agents that attenuate sympathetic activity (eg, beta-adrenergic receptor blockers or colchicine) or increase parasympathetic activity may decrease the risk of calcium overload–induced ectopy, which contributes to the initiation of POAF.

POAF has important clinical consequences (including increased risk of stroke and other embolic conditions) and is associated with a significant economic burden on the healthcare system. The results of the post hoc substudy presented in this issue by Imazio et al and colleagues are promising. It will be of great interest for the authors or others to prospectively evaluate the utility of perioperative colchicine treatment (beginning at the time of surgery or before) as a prophylactic approach that can reduce the morbidity associated with this very common postoperative complication. If colchicine is effective in preventing POAF, this treatment would constitute an important new indication for the use of a very old drug.

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References


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David R. Van Wagoner

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