Myocardial Contrast Echocardiography for Simultaneous Assessment of Function and Perfusion in Real Time

A Technique Comes of Age

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Contrast agents are now widely used in stress echocardiography (SE) to improve visualization of the endocardial border, improve confidence in wall motion assessment, and reduce the number of uninterpretable images. The use of contrast agents in SE has also been shown to improve accuracy of wall motion assessment for the detection of coronary artery disease (CAD) compared with unenhanced SE images.¹ Contrast stress echocardiography has been shown to impact positively on downstream costs.² The ability of contrast agents, which contain microbubbles that mimic red blood cell rheology, to enable visualization of myocardial perfusion resulted in rapid development of both microbubble and equipment technology that allowed the use of contrast echocardiography for the detection of myocardial perfusion in clinical cardiology.³ Numerous single and multicenter studies have proved that myocardial contrast perfusion stress echocardiography is now a clinical tool for the detection of CAD.⁴ The ability of myocardial contrast SE to assess function and perfusion simultaneously makes it a unique technique for the assessment of CAD.

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The study by Gaibazzi et al⁵ in this issue of Circulation adds to the growing literature of the prognostic value of perfusion and function assessed simultaneously during high-dose dipyridamole myocardial contrast perfusion SE for predicting hard outcomes over a mean period of 25 months in 1252 consecutive patients referred clinically for the evaluation of CAD. This study showed that perfusion and function assessed simultaneously during high-dose dipyridamole, mostly without the addition of atropine, provided incremental prognostic information compared with clinical prognostic markers and resting left ventricular function data. However, myocardial perfusion data contained most of the prognostic information. Thus, normal perfusion and normal function during SE portended an excellent outcome (97.9% 2-year event-free survival), but abnormal perfusion despite normal wall motion reduced event-free survival to 91.9% (4-fold increase in event rate). On the other hand, abnormal function (which was always accompanied by perfusion deficit) identified the highest-risk patients (16% annual hard-event rate, a further 4-fold increase compared with abnormal perfusion but normal wall motion). To put it in simple clinical context, during myocardial contrast SE, completely normal perfusion is very reassuring (0.99% annual hard-event rate), whereas abnormal perfusion, when it is accompanied by functional (wall motion) abnormalities, identifies very high-risk patients (15% annual event rate). This highlights the clinical value of simultaneous assessment of perfusion and function during SE.

The pathophysiological basis of these findings is not complicated. Perfusion abnormalities appear earlier in the ischemic cascade, followed by wall motion abnormality during stress testing.⁶ This phenomenon accounts for the better sensitivity of perfusion compared with wall motion.⁷ Thus perfusion abnormalities may be the only abnormality in mild CAD during adequate stress and in patients with inadequate stress (inability to exercise well, premature termination of pharmacological stress as a result of side effects, or inability to reach target heart rate) even with moderate-severe CAD. Outcome in such patients is likely to be compromised despite normal wall motion. However, in patients with severe CAD, wall motion abnormality follows rapidly after perfusion deficit onset, and therefore this combination identifies the worst CAD disease and hence worst outcome.⁷ Conversely, the specificity of myocardial perfusion during myocardial contrast SE is significantly poorer compared with wall motion for the detection of CAD.⁸ However, it is known that microcirculatory disorders occur with and without underlying myocardial disease in the absence of significant CAD, and prognosis in such patients is also compromised.⁸ Because microbubbles assess the microvasculature directly, perfusion defects may represent prognostically significant microcirculatory disorders in the absence of significant CAD.

However, one must be aware that in the study by Gaibazzi et al,⁴ dipyridamole—a vasodilator, albeit in high dose (0.84 mg/kg)—was used, and in most cases (66%) without atropine. It is possible that many patients did not achieve 85% of target heart rate (data not shown), which is necessary to ensure adequate stress for demand ischemia, which precipitates wall motion abnormality. However, perfusion deficit may occur during vasodilator stress in CAD without the need for increase in myocardial oxygen demand. Thus, it may be argued that inadequate demand by the very nature of the stress test used may have impacted on the higher annual event

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Circulation is available at http://circ.ahajournals.org
DOI: 10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.112.129031

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rate of close to 1.5% seen with a normal wall motion. At least 2 large studies with pharmacological stress with dobutamine, which is commonly used during SE for wall motion assessment, have shown hard event rates varying between 1.1% to 1.3%, which is lower (though only marginally) than that seen in this study for wall motion assessment.5,10 Nevertheless, normal perfusion in this study portended a reassuring annual event rate mark (low-risk group). Another intriguing issue in this study was the lack of predictive value of multivessel ischemia for both perfusion and wall motion assessment.9,10 Nevertheless, normal perfusion in this study portended a reassuring annual event rate mark (low-risk group). Another intriguing issue in this study was the lack of predictive value of multivessel ischemia for both perfusion and wall motion assessment.9,10

In conclusion, myocardial contrast SE now has a plethora of data from diagnosis4 to prognosis (Table)5,11–21 in large patient cohorts from multiple investigators in patients with known and suspected CAD, establishing its value in clinical cardiology. Its unique ability to assess function and perfusion simultaneously, both during rest and stress, combined with the significant advantages over other existing techniques in terms of availability, portability, lack of ionizing radiation, and cost, should result in greater use of myocardial contrast perfusion SE in clinical cardiology for the evaluation of CAD.

### Disclosures

Dr Senior has received honoraria from Bracco diagnostics in the past 2 years, and Dr Shah received a travel grant, also from Bracco, within the past 2 years.

### References


KEY WORDS: Editorials ■ contrast echocardiography ■ perfusion ■ prognosis ■ stress echocardiography
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Circulation. 2012;126:1182-1184; originally published online August 7, 2012;
doi: 10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.112.129031

Circulation is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0009-7322. Online ISSN: 1524-4539

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the
World Wide Web at:
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