Angiotensin Converting Enzyme Inhibition in Patients with Congestive Heart Failure

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SUMMARY The etiology of afterload elevation in congestive cardiac failure is unclear, but experimental evidence suggests a role for the renin-angiotensin system in maintaining elevated peripheral vascular resistance. The angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitor SQ20,881 was administered to eight patients with congestive cardiac failure (four hypertensives, four normotensives) during or one day after diagnostic cardiac catheterization. Various hemodynamic measurements performed before and during blockade indicate that this agent caused improvement in cardiac function in all patients by decreasing afterload. This improvement correlated with the decrease in total vascular resistance but was independent of the baseline blood pressure and plasma renin activity. These results suggest that inhibition of angiotensin converting enzyme is a worthwhile approach to the treatment of congestive heart failure, although its exact mechanism of action remains unclear.

THE ROLE OF THE renin-angiotensin system in congestive cardiac failure is not fully understood. This condition is usually characterized by decreased cardiac output and increased left ventricular end-diastolic pressure accompanied by raised peripheral resistance. Measurements of plasma renin activity and angiotensin in experimental or clinical heart failure have yielded conflicting results, with reports of either high, normal or low levels. Recent experimental study seemed to reconcile these contradictory findings by using angiotensin blockade in different stages of congestive cardiac failure. The data have suggested that the renin-angiotensin system remained activated only when circulatory impairment was severe or compensation was inadequate. Thus, uncompensated cardiac failure, like other low cardiac output states, may exhibit elevated plasma renin activity leading to raised peripheral vascular resistance in order to maintain effective arterial pressure. However, the resulting increased impedance to left ventricular outflow could, conceivably, further depress cardiac performance. Elimination of angiotensin in this case might induce a fall in peripheral vascular resistance resulting in left ventricular unloading and thus constitute a rational form of therapy.

In this study, we studied the effects of angiotensin blockade by the converting enzyme inhibitor SQ20,881 (teprotide) on cardiovascular hemodynamics in eight patients — four hypertensive and four normotensive — undergoing conventional medical therapy for congestive cardiac failure and varying degrees of coronary insufficiency.

Methods

Patients with recent severe congestive heart failure were studied either at the time of diagnostic cardiac catheterization (six patients) or the day after catheterization in the coronary care unit (two patients). All patients received conventional doses of digitalis and diuretics. Vasodilating agents were withheld for 48 hours. They were maintained on a 2,000 mg NaCl diet. At the time of the study their functional class ranged from II–IV. Indications for catheterization included evaluation of valvular heart disease, left ven-

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tricular function, determination of the presence and extent of coronary occlusive disease and/or the presence of a discrete ventricular aneurysm. Their clinical profiles are shown in Table 1. The experimental nature of this study was duly explained to the patients and informed consent was obtained. Medications were omitted on the morning of the study.

Cardiac catheterization was performed in the fasting state after premedication with 10 mg diazepam orally. A Cournand needle was inserted percutaneously into the left brachial artery and catheters were positioned in the pulmonary artery, coronary sinus, and left ventricle. Control measurements, obtained in the steady state after manipulation had ceased for 10 minutes, included heart rate, right atrial, pulmonary artery, left ventricular, and brachial artery pressures. Cardiac output determinations were made simultaneously by the thermodilution and direct Fick techniques. Coronary flow was measured by the thermodilution technique utilizing thermistor (Wilton Webster Lab) catheters placed in the coronary sinus 2 cm from its orifice in the right atrium, as verified by angiography. Flow measurements were made in duplicate and showed a variability of less than 15%. Blood oxygen and lactate content were measured in samples obtained from the left ventricle, pulmonary artery and coronary sinus. Plasma renin activity in peripheral venous blood was measured by radioimmunoassay of generated angiotensin I (normal range 2-10 ng/ml/hr). From these measurements the following calculations were derived: left ventricular stroke work index, systemic vascular resistance, coronary resistance and myocardial oxygen consumption. Subsequently, 1 mg/kg teprotide was injected rapidly into an antecubital vein, and the above measurements were repeated 30-35 minutes after injection. Following this study, the patients had diagnostic left ventricular and coronary angiography, after which they were restarted on conventional medical treatment.

Two patients (7 and 8) were studied in the cardiac care unit 24 hours after left ventriculography, at which time the resting hemodynamic measurements had returned to levels identical to those obtained at catheterization before angiography. They received 0.3 and 0.2 mg/kg I.V. teprotide, respectively, and had serial hemodynamic measurements at 15, 30, 60 minutes and hourly thereafter for the next 5 hours. Measurements were carried out via a Swan-Ganz thermodilution catheter and a radial arterial line. In these two patients, coronary blood flow was not measured and cardiac output determinations were made in triplicate by the thermodilution technique only. This method has been found to correlate closely with the Fick method in our laboratory ($r = 0.95$). Except for these two patients, reported values for cardiac output are those obtained by the Fick method.

The paired t test was used to determine statistical significance of the data. Results are expressed as mean ± SEM and were considered significant at the $P < 0.05$ level.

**Results**

The hemodynamic data and plasma renin levels before and after injection of teprotide are shown in Table 2. It is apparent that the control levels of plasma renin activity were unrelated to the patients' blood pressure. One hypertensive patient had high plasma renin activity, one patient had normal plasma renin activity and two patients had low plasma renin activity. Of the four normotensive patients, one had low-normal plasma renin activity and three with severe decompensated heart failure had elevated levels. All patients exhibited abnormal cardiac function as shown by markedly elevated left ventricular end-diastolic pressures and decreased or low normal cardiac out-

**Table 1. Clinical Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Clinical Data</th>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Age/SEX</th>
<th>Functional Class</th>
<th>Other diagnoses</th>
<th>Medication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hypertensive 52/F</td>
<td>II-III</td>
<td>s/p MI, angina pectoris, peripheral vascular occlusive disease s/p bypass</td>
<td>Digoxin, thiazides, methyldopa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hypertensive 59/F</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Attacks of atrial fibrillation, questionable angina pectoris</td>
<td>Digoxin, thiazides, reserpine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hypertensive 63/F</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>s/p MI, diabetes mellitus, mitral regurgitation</td>
<td>Lanoxin, spironolactone methyldopa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hypertensive 57/M</td>
<td>III-IV</td>
<td>Multiple admissions with pulmonary edema</td>
<td>Digoxin, furosemide, prazosin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Normotensive 70/M</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>s/p MI X 3, angina pectoris, left ventricular aneurysm</td>
<td>Digoxin, furosemide, nitrol paste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Normotensive 63/F</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>s/p MI, angina pectoris, diabetes mellitus, valvular heart disease</td>
<td>Digoxin, furosemide, nitrol paste, insulin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Normotensive 66/M</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Coronary artery disease, s/p mitral valve replacement and left anterior descending bypass</td>
<td>Digoxin, furosemide, nitrol paste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Normotensive 75/M</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Coronary artery disease</td>
<td>Digoxin, furosemide, nitrol paste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: MI = myocardial infarction.
puts at the time of study. Left ventricular stroke work index was depressed in five of the eight patients. In the control state, total pulmonary vascular resistance was significantly elevated in each patient and in six of the eight, systemic vascular resistance was elevated irrespective of the resting blood pressure.

All patients exhibited a fall in blood pressure within minutes after injection of teprotide, and the decrease in mean arterial pressure (from 102 ± 11 to 92 ± 9 mm Hg) was significantly correlated with the pretreatment levels of plasma renin activity (r = 0.844). The left ventricular end-diastolic pressure also declined significantly, but became normal in only one (patient 1). The change in left ventricular end-diastolic pressure or pulmonary capillary wedge pressure also correlated with the level of baseline plasma renin activity (r = 0.862), as well as the change in systemic blood pressure (r = 0.754).

The cardiac index and stroke volume index showed a substantial increment in all patients and correlated significantly with the fall in total peripheral vascular resistance (r = 0.726) (fig. 1). These changes were unrelated to the pretreatment plasma renin activity. The increase in cardiac index ranged from 6.5%–36% with a mean of 21.5 ± 4.2%. The systemic and pulmonary vascular resistance decreased consistently in all patients, the reduction varying between 8%–33% for the former and 12%–47% for the latter. There was no correlation between the fall in systemic vascular resistance or pulmonary vascular resistance and the pretreatment level of plasma renin activity.

Changes in coronary blood flow and coronary resistance varied during blockade, but were not signifi-
cantly overall. Myocardial oxygen consumption declined in all but one patient. Patients who had the highest resting renin levels showed the greatest decrease in mean arterial pressure, left ventricular end-diastolic pressure, coronary flow and $MVO_2$.

Myocardial performance was significantly improved in all patients as shown by either a decrease in left ventricular end-diastolic pressure or a significant increase in left ventricular stroke work index, implying that their left ventricular function curve had shifted to the left (fig. 2). In addition, all but one patient demonstrated an increase in cardiac index despite a fall in $MVO_2$.

Variable and mostly insignificant changes were observed in the arterial lactates, from $12 \pm 3$ to $14 \pm 3$ mg/100 ml and the coronary sinus lactates from $15 \pm 5$ to $11 \pm 4$ mg/100 ml. Likewise, arterial-coronary sinus lactate differences showed no consistent change. Arterial oxygen content remained unchanged, from $15.7 \pm 1.2$ to $15.6 \pm 1.2$ ml/100 ml.

In the two patients (7 and 8) who had hemodynamic indices measured for up to 5 hours after the administration of teprotide, there was persistence of the lowered mean arterial pressure and increased cardiac output with decreased systemic vascular resistance. There was a gradual return to pretreatment

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**Figure 2.** Left ventricular end-diastolic pressure decreased in all but one patient, with no significant increase in left ventricular stroke work index, indicating a shift of the left ventricular function to the left. Dotted line indicates mean change for the group. Circles indicate baseline values and triangles indicate values during blockade. * = hypertensive; O = normotensive subjects.
levels of all measurements, but baseline values were not attained at 5 hours postmedication (fig. 3).

**Discussion**

Therapy for heart failure consisting of reducing the afterload with vasodilator drugs has recently been advocated either as an alternative or adjunct to the traditional approach of using diuretics and inotropic agents. It has been shown that diuretics which reduce ventricular filling pressure may in fact decrease the cardiac output. Inotropic drugs which increase the velocity of fiber shortening and the systolic arterial pressure will augment the oxygen demands of the myocardium, whereas drugs which reduce the impedance to left ventricular outflow may increase the cardiac output and relieve the left ventricular wall tension. A variety of parenteral and oral vasodilator agents have been studied, including sodium nitroprusside, phentolamine, nitroglycerin, hydralazine, and prazosin. Their effects vary in terms of duration of action, degree of dilatation of the venous or arterial vessels, sympathetic stimulation, and influence on regional blood flows, particularly coronary flow.

In keeping with the principle of unloading the left ventricle by reducing the peripheral vascular resistance, we have successfully treated the heart failure of a known high-renin hypertensive patient with the specific angiotensin antagonist saralasin. The results were gratifying, but it was argued that such an approach would probably only be appropriate

**Figure 3.** Hemodynamic changes over a 5-hour period after a single injection of SQ20,881 in a normotensive patient (no. 28) with congestive cardiac failure.
for highly selected cases of pump failure due to angiotensinogen hypertensive agent. The reduction in blood pressure correlated with the baseline plasma renin activity and this relationship held true for both the hypertensive and normotensive subjects. However, the resulting elevation in stroke volume index and cardiac index, which was observed to variable degrees in all patients, did not correlate with the pretreatment levels of plasma renin activity. The increase in cardiac index was unrelated to the baseline systemic vascular resistance, but correlated well with the fall in systemic vascular resistance, suggesting that it was partly the mechanical effect of vasodilatation which caused this increase. The possibility of influencing the direct effect of angiotensin on the myocardium by this agent is difficult to assess since some experimental studies have suggested that angiotensin increases myocardial contractility while others indicated the opposite. The fact that the fall in systemic vascular resistance did not correlate with the baseline plasma renin activity raises the question as to whether angiotensin elimination per se was the sole cause of these findings, or whether some additional effects of converting enzyme inhibition (i.e., accumulation of bradykinin) might contribute in a way that is still poorly understood.

Although the elevated systemic vascular resistance found in congestive heart failure is well-recognized, its mechanisms remain unclear. Zelis et al. have shown that there appear to be at least two major mechanisms producing alterations in the peripheral vasculature. The first mechanism is augmented sympathetic activity which produces arteriolar constriction and redistribution of blood flow. The second mechanism is a component of arteriolar stiffness. It has been suggested that the stiffness of the capacitance vessels may be related to sodium and water retention in the vascular walls. The present study suggests that a third mechanism, the activity of the renin-angiotensin system, may play a role in maintaining an increased systemic vascular resistance in some patients with congestive heart failure.

In conclusion, our preliminary experience with the use of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibition in the treatment of congestive heart failure indicates that this approach is worthwhile. Cardiac function improved in all patients by decreasing afterload, and lasted for several hours after a single injection. This improvement did not depend on the baseline blood pressure or plasma renin activity, but correlated with the fall of the peripheral vascular resistance. Regardless of its exact mechanism of action, inhibition of the converting enzyme has no adverse effects and appears to be a promising therapeutic modality for congestive heart failure.

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