Correspondence

Letters to the Editor must not exceed 400 words in length and may be subject to editing or abridgment. Letters must be limited to three authors and five references. They should not have tables or figures and should relate solely to an article published in Circulation within the preceding 12 weeks. Only some letters will be published. Authors of those selected for publication will receive prepublication proofs, and authors of the article cited in the letter will be invited to reply. Replies must be signed by all authors listed in the original publication.

Percutaneous Treatment of Left Main Coronary Stenosis

To the Editor:

The multicenter report by Dr Ellis and colleagues1 of 107 patients with left main coronary obstruction who were not candidates for surgery and in whom an attempt was made to reopen the left main coronary vessel by percutaneous techniques with different devices has significant implications for the cardiac surgeon when the patient is a candidate for a surgical procedure. Ellis et al deserve to be congratulated for this important piece of information.

There have been numerous reports of patients who have undergone direct attempts to widen the left main trunk of the coronary artery to provide antegrade flow when the distal branches are not significantly involved with obstructions. One of the main complications of this approach is early restenosis of the vessel and, occasionally, total occlusion, with fatal consequences for the patient.

It appears that the main trunk of the coronary artery reacts unfavorably to endarterectomy procedures or any type of trauma damaging the intima. Occlusion of the left main artery has been reported after radiofrequency ablation for left-sided tachycardias2–4 and after PTCA5 done in the left coronary system.5–6 This has been seen after plain cardiac catheterization when the tip of the catheter injures the intima or when perfusion cannulas are positioned in coronary arteries directly to infuse cardioplegia during aortic valve surgery.7–10

In our institution, we had a case in which the left anterior descending artery (LAD) and the circumflex had separate origins from the aorta, both showing ostial obstructions. The LAD was given a saphenous patch at the ostia to widen its diameter, and the circumflex vessel was treated with an endarterectomy because its orifice was immediately below the LAD origin. Within a few days, the artery undergoing endarterectomy developed severe obstruction that required reoperation, but not so the LAD.

My question addresses this issue: In 53 patients, stents were implanted; in the other 54, only balloon angioplasty was performed. At the time of repeated angiography, 14.3% of the case patients who underwent stent implants were restenosed versus 50% of patients in whom only PTCA was performed (Table 6).1

The authors mention under “Post–Hospital Discharge Outcome” that 9 survivors (10.6%) died of cardiac causes within 6 months. I wonder whether the important factor is not the presence of unstable angina or age but the fact that these patients did not have stents placed. In this same section, we read: “Of patients eligible for >4-month angiography, 70% had known studies, of whom 22.0% had restenosis (stenosis ≥50%).” The only variable related to risk of restenosis was ostial left main trunk, but I wonder whether the complication occurs due to lack of use of stents.

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Response

Dr Molina addresses a key issue with regard to assessment of the clinical safety and utility of percutaneous interventions for patients with unprotected left main coronary stenoses. In experienced centers and in patients with relatively well-preserved left ventricular function, a percutaneous approach (either stenting or directional atherectomy) seems to be reasonably safe, at least in the short run. A better understanding of the risk of cardiac death within the first year after treatment is needed, however, and Dr Molina suggests that perhaps the 11% incidence of this untoward outcome in our initial series is due to the fact that only half the patients received coronary stents. This issue has certainly drawn our attention also, and in fact, we have extended our registry to include over 270 consecutively treated patients and specifically addressed this issue in a recent analysis (J Am Coll Cardiol. 1998;31:214A). In this analysis, 9% of patients died within 9 months after initially successful treatment, and in multivariate logistic regression analysis, left ventricular ejection fraction ≤30% and initial presentation with rest or progressive angina were both significant independent correlates of death (multivariate odds ratios 17.1 and 4.3, respectively). Stenting and directional atherectomy tended to be offered to lower-risk patients more often than was balloon angioplasty. After adjustment for the aforementioned risk factors, there was only a trend suggesting added risk with balloon angioplasty (P=0.13) compared with both stenting and directional coronary atherectomy. There was no discernible difference with regard to outcome between stenting and atherectomy. We recognize that this sort of analysis cannot always fully adjust for unmeasured variables, but short of a randomized trial, this is the best answer we have. Given that the
Acetylcholine and Endothelial Function

To the Editor:

Hasdai et al. reported that myocardial perfusion defects are produced in response to acetylcholine $10^{-4}$ mol/L IC. However, acetylcholine has dual effects on coronary artery tone depending on the intracoronary concentration of acetylcholine and the presence of coronary atheroma. In normal coronary arteries, vasodilatation, mediated by the endothelial cells, occurs at low concentrations and vasoconstriction, mediated by a direct action on the smooth muscle cells, at higher concentrations. In atheromatous coronary arteries, constriction and dilation occur at low concentration and only constriction occurs at high concentrations of acetylcholine.\(^2\)^\(^3\)

We have studied the responses of epicardial coronary arteries to intracoronary infusion of acetylcholine in 15 patients with normal coronary arteriograms, chest pain, and risk factors for coronary artery disease.\(^4\) In 53% of patients, there was both constriction and dilation of proximal and distal segments coexisting not only in different coronary arteries but also in different segments of the same artery at $10^{-4}$ to $10^{-6}$ mol/L acetylcholine. At $10^{-4}$ and $10^{-3}$ mol/L, the dilatation response was blunted and constriction predominated.

We also studied the responses of stenotic and nonstenotic segments to intracoronary infusion of acetylcholine in 18 patients with coronary artery disease and stable angina.\(^5\) In all the patients and in 90% to 100% of the stenotic segments, vasoconstriction occurred at $10^{-5}$ to $10^{-3}$ mol/L acetylcholine (Figure). In particular, in response to $10^{-7}$ mol/L acetylcholine, both the stenotic segments and the adjacent reference segment constricted significantly ($-26.7 \pm 4.3$ and $-11.4 \pm 2.0\%$, respectively; Figure) with evidence of myocardial ischemia (ST segment change and/or chest pain in $\approx 50\%$ of patients).

These findings indicate that when acetylcholine is infused in high doses in the presence of atherosclerosis, its direct smooth muscle cell constrictor effects are dominant compared with the endothelial vasodilator effects. These smooth muscle cell responses to acetylcholine may be exaggerated and contribute to a reduction of the myocardial perfusion. Furthermore, our preliminary observations indicate that atherosclerotic segments that constrict in response to acetylcholine may vasodilate in response to substance P (an endothelium-dependent vasodilator).\(^6\) Substance P may therefore be a better test of endothelial function than a high dose of acetylcholine. It is difficult to conclude from either our studies or that of Hasdai et al that myocardial ischemia in these patients is due to microvascular endothelial dysfunction.

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Response

We have read with interest the letter to the editor by Dr Tousoulis and colleagues. They raised several very important issues regarding the coronary response to infusion of acetylcholine in humans. Tousoulis and colleagues demonstrated in 15 patients that acetylcholine infusion resulted in epicardial coronary vasoconstriction. Moreover, they emphasize an important point: that the response of the coronary vasculature to acetylcholine may be heterogeneous.
Heart Rate Variability Standards

The special report on heart rate variability by the European Society of Cardiology and North American Society of Pacing and Electrophysiology presented important standards of measurement for heart rate variability analysis. In the report, the frequency range of the total power was defined as 0.04 to 0.4 Hz, the low-frequency (LF) component as 0.04 to 0.15 Hz, and the high-frequency (HF) component as 0.15 to 0.4 Hz. There are several problems in the calculation of specific spectral powers using these standards of measurement in heart rate variability analysis.

As stated in the report, the HF component is respiration related, and the distribution of the power and the central frequency of LF and HF components are not fixed but vary in relation to changes in autonomic modulations of heart period in the short-term recordings. Therefore, integrating the HF power within the all-frequency range of 0.15 to 0.4 Hz might have inherent error, especially when the respiration rate does not fall within this range for patients who have tachypnea or are under controlled respiration. Because the maximum frequency in the spectrum is the Nyquist frequency (half the sampling frequency), it might be better to use the Nyquist frequency as the upper limit of both HF power and total power.

When the direct current is excluded by baseline or trend removal in the calculation of spectral powers, the nonharmonic components in the very-low-frequency (VLF) region (<0.04 Hz) can be removed. In this case, it is not necessary to set a cutoff limit (0.04 Hz in most instances) for LF power or total power. In addition, the purpose of normalization of the LF and HF powers by the total power is to minimize the effect of the changes in total power on the values of LF and HF components. The placement of a cutoff at 0.04 Hz to the lower limit of total power will result in incomplete normalization of the LF and HF components. Finally, if a lower limit (0.04 Hz in most instances) was set to the LF power, the VLF power (≤0.04 Hz in most instances) must be dealt with for the sake of completeness. However, the physiological explanation of the VLF component is much less defined than other components in the spectrum. The existence of a specific physiological process attributable to these heart period changes might even be questioned. The VLF is then a dubious measure and should be avoided.

In spectral analysis used in sciences such as physics or chemistry, integration of the area under the peak rather than fixed-range integration is usually suggested to evaluate the relative contribution of a specific frequency to total power. Thus, a peak-related integration according to the respiration rate might be a better method of representing HF power. Fixed-range integration is justified only if no apparent peak can be identified in the HF range.

Because of the above considerations, it seems that the area of spectral peaks within the entire range of 0 Hz to the upper limit of HF power or to the Nyquist frequency can be used as the total power, the area of spectral peaks within the range of 0 to the lower limit of HF peak as the LF power, and the area under the HF peak as the HF power. If no apparent peak related to respiration can be identified, the total power can be defined as the area of spectral peaks within the entire range of 0 Hz to the Nyquist frequency, the LF power as the area of spectral peaks within the range of 0 to 0.15 Hz, and the HF power as the area of spectral peaks within the range of 0.15 Hz to the Nyquist frequency.

Response

Drs Kuo and Chen suggest a substantial modification to the standards for computing low-frequency and high-frequency spectral components of heart rate variability. While I appreciate their theoretical and technical reasoning, I am afraid that Drs Kuo and Chen ignore many practical and physiological issues that make their proposal inappropriate. Actually, the discussion about proper definitions of spectral components of heart rate variability...
Role of Lymphocytes in Heart Disease

To the Editor:

Recently, Ommen et al. published in Circulation a very important observation: that relative lymphocyte concentration could be a prognostic marker in patients with symptomatic heart failure. I would like to add something about the importance of the cellular immune system in cardiovascular disease. I have shown that in acute myocardial infarction (AMI), a low CD4/CD8 ratio and low CD4 cell count on the first day of AMI strongly correlated with low ejection fraction and high myocardial mass destruction, as reflected by high creatine kinase levels. Patients with the lowest CD4 counts on admission and those whose CD4 counts did not rise had a reinfection or death.2 Another study3 demonstrated that patients with AMI had significantly diminished delayed-type hypersensitivity and reduced numbers of T lymphocytes.

One possible explanation for the “lymphopenia” phenomenon is the increase in cortisol during a stress response, which causes a decrease in the relative concentration of lymphocytes.1 Another possible explanation is that T lymphocytes modulate smooth muscle proliferation during vascular repair. Rats that lacked T lymphocytes had larger myocardial lesions than normal rats.5 It is assumed that T lymphocytes produce interferon-γ, which inhibits smooth muscle cell proliferation. Thus, it might be that the relative depletion in T lymphocytes is not just a marker but also a causative factor in the deterioration of myocardial function in AMI and heart failure.

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Response

We appreciate Dr Blum’s interest in our article. He raises the intriguing hypothesis that the relative lymphocytopenia observed in acute myocardial infarction (AMI) and in chronic congestive heart failure (CHF) may be a cause rather than an effect.

We have documented decreases in the total and relative number of circulating lymphocytes during AMI1 and advanced CHF.2 However, the kinetics of these changes may be different. In AMI, most patients have a rise in endogenous cortisol with associated lymphocytopenia and granulocytosis.3,4 In our experience, these changes in the peripheral blood rapidly returned to normal if the patient had an uncomplicated AMI (unpublished observations). In contrast, only a minority of patients with CHF have lymphocytopenia. We do not have any information about its duration.

Additional studies are necessary to determine if the relative lymphocytopenia is an effect of the stress response, as we have suggested, or a cause of myocardial dysfunction, as Dr Blum suggests.

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Acetylcholine and Endothelial Function
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