Journal of Surgery and Trauma 2016; 4(3-4): 51-57.

www.jsurgery.bums.ac.ir

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Associations between preoperative P-wave characteristics, C-reactive protein levels, and atrial fibrillation after coronary artery bypass graft surgery

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Received: May 13, 2017 ***Revised: July 2, 2017*** ***Accepted: July 5, 2017***

Abstract

Introduction: Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common complication of cardiac surgery which may cause remarkable morbidity and complications. Identifying predicting factors of this arrhythmia can help prophylactic therapy. The present study is designed to investigate the hypothesis that HsCRP level and P-wave characteristics are associated with the incidence of post-operative AF.

Methods: In this prospective study, 50 consecutive patients undergoing coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) operation during a 1-year period at Vali-e-asr Hospital, Birjand, Iran were enrolled. All the patients underwent electrocardiography (ECG) before surgery and P-wave duration and height were measured. In addition, blood samples were collected the day before surgery as well as 12, 24 and 72 hours after surgery to measure CRP serum levels. Patients were monitored after surgery to detect probable AF rhythm. Data was analyzed using SPSS 16.

Results: Of the 50 patients, 10 (20%) developed AF in the postoperative phase during days 1 to 5, while the other 40 patients (80%) had stable sinus rhythm. P-wave duration and height were significantly different in patients who subsequently developed postoperative AF with the mean values of 109.5±15.7 and 0.14±0.03, respectively. Mean HsCRP levels before and 12, 24, and 72 h after operation showed no significant difference.

Conclusions: Patients prone to AF arrhythmia can be identified by measuring P-wave duration and height in preoperative ECG. Hs.CRP levels before and after CABG surgery may not contribute to AF prediction.

Key Words: Coronary Artery Bypass; Atrial Fibrillation; Electrocardiogram; C - reactive protein

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Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common arrhythmia following cardiac surgery with an incidence of 25 to 60% (1-4). Even though it is not life-threatening and potentially self-limited, it has considerable medical and economic implications. This arrhythmia may impact cardiac function and lead to increased risks of stroke and thromboembolism as well as possible iatrogenic complications because of additional treatment efforts, prolonged length of hospitalization, and increased treatment costs (5, 6). While there exists effective pharmacological prophylaxis (7, 8), significant adverse events such as heart block and bradycardia, confine prophylactic therapy for patients who are at high risk of developing postoperative AF (POAF) (7). Prediction models have not been strong enough, according to clinical and paraclinical variables, to allow POAF prophylactic therapy (9). Thus, several studies have been performed to identify both the pathogenesis of POAF and the predisposing factors. Still, the exact etiologic pattern stands unclear. However, there has been an increasing number of variables suggested as predictors of POAF among which are inflammation and electrocardiographic changes that have recently been introduced and studied as risk factors and predictors of POAF (4, 5, 10-12).

High-sensitivity C-reactive protein (hsCRP) is an acute phase protein and an established marker of inflammation. Moreover, high CRP levels have been associated with the risk of coronary events, severity of atherosclerosis, and even long-term outcome following CABG. The role of CRP concentrations in identifying risks for complications after cardiac surgery has received increasing attention (5, 13, 14).

In addition, some studies have reported several P-wave characteristics that increase the risk of POAF (4, 15, 16). According to the Framingham Heart Study cohort, for instance, a significant correlation has been reported between maximum P-wave duration and incidence of AF (16).

The goals of the present study were to identify the role of HsCRP level and P-wave characteristics in predicting the incidence of POAF in order to promote prediction models and prophylactic treatment.

Methods

In this prospective, single-centered study, 50 consecutive patients undergoing coronary artery bypass graft operation (CABG) during a 1-year period at Vali-e-asr Hospital, Birjand, Iran, were enrolled upon approval from the Ethical Committee of Birjand University of Medical Sciences (code: Ir.bums.rec.1394.400) and provision of informed consent.

Indications for CABG surgery comprised of significant (>60%) disease of the left main coronary artery stem, ostial stenosis of left anterior descending artery, two- or three-coronary-vessel disease, and symptomatic coronary artery disease unsuitable for percutaneous coronary intervention.

Patients considered to be at high risk for the development of POAF, like those with a history of AF on anti-arrhythmic medical therapy, congestive heart failure at the time of preoperative evaluation, and/or concomitant valve surgery, those suffering from a chronic inflammatory condition, and/or those under medical treatment with amiodarone, corticosteroids, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs within 30 days prior to CABG surgery were excluded from the study.

All cases were operated on an elective basis. Based on the surgeon's preference, all operations were performed "On-Pump". The decision to use intra-aortic balloon pump, cardiac inotropic support, or temporary pacing was made by the anesthesiologist and/or the surgeon and was determined according to the patient's hemodynamic status and rhythm in the operating room and the postoperative heart surgical unit. Efforts were made to extubate patients within 24 hours after surgery. All patients underwent ECG before surgery using CARDIOTOUCH Machine at a rate of 25 under standard conditions. P-wave duration and height in all related ECG leads were measured with a ruler and the highest duration and height of P-wave in all the leads were used for analysis.

Blood samples were collected from all patients the day before surgery and 12, 24 and 72 hours after the operation. Sera samples were collected in clot vacutainer tubes and centrifuged within 30 minutes of vein puncture at 3500 rpm for 10 min and stored at −20ºC until measurement was completed. CRP serum levels were measured using human Hs.CRP Glory Kit.

POAF was defined as irregular arrhythmia lasting for ≥ 5 min before discharge. In our center, all patients were monitored in the intensive care unit after surgery with a 5-lead monitoring system using the standard lead II configuration. After

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discharge from the intensive care unit, the patients were followed up 6–8 times daily in the service. Following surgery, if a patient manifested with symptoms of palpitations or an irregular pulse, a 12-lead ECG was performed to diagnose the arrhythmia.

Episodes of AF were treated according to clinical routines which included pharmacological interventions with intravenous amiodarone or, if contraindicated, with an oral β-blocker (metoprolol) and/or with electrical therapies like cardioversion.

All the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows (version 16.0; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Continuous variables were tested for normal distribution using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and reported as means±standard deviations or median if not normally distributed. Continuous demographic data, CRP levels and P-wave duration and height were compared between groups using Student t test or Mann-Whitney if not normally distributed. Categorical demographic data were summarized as percentages and compared using the chi-square test. Cohen's d was calculated as the difference between the means divided by the pooled SD to indicate the standardized difference between two means (17). Precision (SD of difference between estimated and actual variable) was also calculated (18). All P-values < 0.05 were accepted as statistically significant.

Results

Fifty patients fulfilled our criteria and were enrolled in the study. Regarding their demographic characteristics 62% were male and Mean±SD of the patients' mean age was 61.86±9.60 years. Half of them were hypertensive and one third were diabetic. Dyslipidemia had the same prevalence as diabetes. Smoking and addiction existed in 24 and 18 percent of patients, respectively. From among the participants, 26 percent had a family history of coronary artery disease (CAD) and 6 percent had a history of vascular accidents such as CVA.

Of the 50 patients, 10 (20%) developed AF in the postoperative phase during days 1 to 5, while the other 40 patients (80%) had stable sinus rhythm during the same period. Table 1 shows baseline characteristics and intra-operative parameters of patients, compared between AF and non-AF groups. Based on the table, the difference in mean age was statistically significant (Precision=6.29; p=0.013; Effect Size=0.49). Other baseline and intra-operative characteristics did not show a statistically significant difference between the groups.

Table 1: Baseline characteristics and intra operative parameters of patients

Variable	AF (N=10)	Non-AF (N=40)	P-value
Age	68.50±9.02	60.20±9.11	0.013[a]
Sex [n (%)]	7 (70)	24(60)	0.421
HTN[6]	7 (70)	18 (45)	0.145
DM[7]	3 (30)	14 (35)	0.539
DLP[8]	5 (50)	11 (27.5)	0.162
Smoking	3 (30)	9 (22.5)	0.449
Addiction	0 (0)	9 (22.5)	0.109
CAD[9] family history	4 (40)	9 (22.5)	0.229
CVA[10] history	1 (10)	2 (5.0)	0.496
Perfusion time	121.50±17.78	115.38±25.18	0.473[a]
Cross clamp time	71.10±13.86	22.17±3.15	0.504[б]

[a] independent T test
[б] Mann-Whitney test
$\chi 2$ test used for other comparisons
[1]Hypertension / [2]Diabetes / [3]Dyslipidemia / [4]Coronary artery Disease / [5]Cerebrovascular Accident

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Concerning P-wave characteristics, P-wave duration and height were significantly different in patients who subsequently developed postoperative AF with the mean values of 109.5±15.7 and 0.14±0.03, respectively (Table 2).

HsCRP had the same trend in both AF and non-AF groups. It decreased 12h after operation, had a rise after 24h, and remained elevated until the third day after operation. Comparison of hsCRP levels at different time points using Friedman test showed statistically significant differences in both AF and non-AF groups (P <0.001) (Table 3, Figure 1). Bonferroni post-hoc test results showed that preoperative and 12h-postoperative hsCRP levels were significantly different from serum levels detected 24 and 48h after operation (P <0.001). Furthermore, Mean HsCRP levels at different time points (before and 12, 24, and 72 h after operation) were compared between AF and non-AF groups, which showed no significant difference (Table 3).

Table 2: P-wave characteristics in AF and non-AF patients

Variable	AF	Non AF	Effect size (Cohen D)	SD Error Precision	Independent T test results
P-wave duration	109.5±15.7	89.2±26.7	0.82	17.07	t=-2.32 p-value=0.025
P-wave height	0.14±0.03	0.11±0.04	0.72	0.03	t=-2.03 p-value=0.048

Table 3: CRP changes by postoperative AF status

Hs.CRP	Preoperative	12 h postop	24 h postop	72 h postop	Friedman test results
AF	0.613±1.181	0.481±0.875	6.865±3.918	7.088±3.416	Chi-square=23.16 df=3 p-value<0.001
Non-AF	0.625±1.445	0.476±0.961	6.340±2.608	6.534±4119	Chi-square=96.55 df=3 p-value<0.001
SD Error Precision	0.96	0.64	1.99	2.76	
Inter-group comparison	Z[ϭ]=-0.764 p-value=0.45 Cohen D=0.008	Z[ϭ]=-0.762 p-value=0.77 Cohen D=0.005	t[α] =-0.51 p-value=0.61 Cohen D=0.18	t[α] =-0.39 p-value= 0.69 Cohen D=0.14	

α Independent T test ϭ Mann-Whitney Test

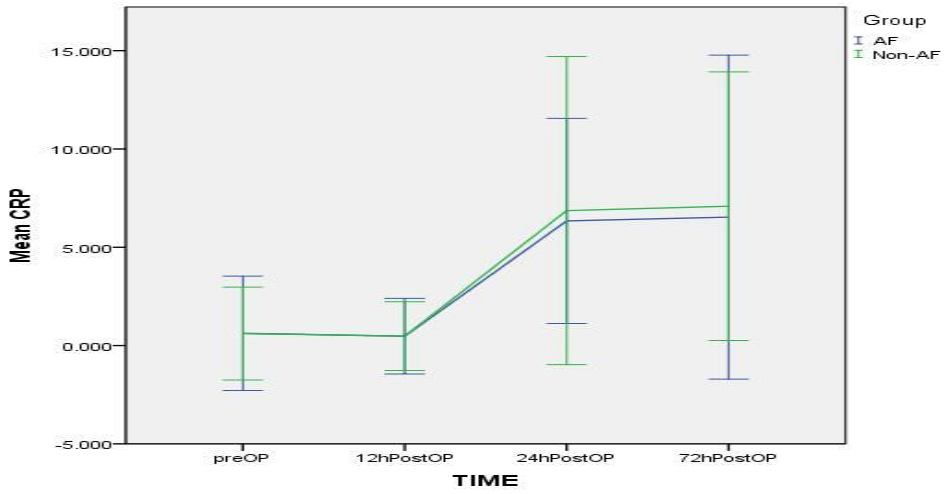


Figure 1: CRP levels before and after operation in AF and non-AF groups

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Discussion

Predicting patients' risk of developing POAF stands as an important issue because it can help identify a group of cardiac surgery patients for whom prophylaxis would prove more beneficial than the risks. Several methods have been proposed for stratification of patient's risk of POAF, which do not have enough efficacies to predict major postoperative morbidity. The aim of our study was to investigate possible correlations of P-wave characteristics and CRP levels to postoperatively developed AF in patients undergoing CABG.

The post-CABG AF incidence of 20% in our study concurs with that reported by numerous groups (3, 13, 14, 19). The main finding of our study was that elevated preoperative P-wave height and duration in patients undergoing CABG are strongly associated with postoperative AF development. This is similar to the report by Hagjoo et al. about higher risk of postoperative AF in patients with abnormal P-wave morphology (20). It is also consistent with the report by Rader et al. where the authors found a significant association between P-wave amplitude and AF (21). Interestingly, Solak et al. recently showed that the P-wave index was significantly higher in a cohort of dialysis patients—a population with a high incidence of AF (22). Chandy et al. showed that increased P-wave duration is believed to be able to identify patients at risk of postoperative AF, but it is not powerful enough to predict POAF (23). Furthermore, P-wave duration > 25 ms in patients with anterior myocardial infarction has been found to be independently associated with AF (24). In contrast to our results, some studies have shown that P-wave duration was significantly shorter in patients with POAF. It is justifiable due to the fact that they evaluated postoperative ECGs which are affected by postoperative increased B-adrenergic tone (25, 26).

It seems that a group of cellular and electro-physical changes such as fibrosis, conduction disturbance, partly depolarized myocardial cells, etc. predispose patients to POAF and these abnormalities are best presented in electrocardiogram P-wave.

A notable finding in our study was the trend of CRP levels after CABG, which interestingly showed a decrease a few hours after operation before the expected rise which was observed 24h postoperatively. At any rate, there was no relationship between CRP levels and post-CABG AF, a finding widely documented in the literature (27, 28). For example, Gasparovic et al. in their study including 215 only "on-pump" cases, clearly reported that the magnitude of the inflammatory response does not influence the incidence of postoperative AF (13). Thus, the inflammation marker CRP cannot be used as a predicting factor for POAF.

One of the limitations of our study was that its data was derived from a single tertiary referral center; thus, the findings may not be easily generalizable. Furthermore, because patients were monitored for POAF only when they were in the hospital, patients who developed AF after discharge were not included in this study. A multicenter study with a longer follow-up period and assessment of long-term outcomes is suggested.

Conclusions

Patients prone to AF arrhythmia can be identified by measuring P-wave duration and height in preoperative ECG. Afterwards, anti-arrhythmic prophylaxis drugs such as Amiodarone can be administered to prevent POAF, hence reduce morbidity and mortality rates as well as treatment costs. HsCRP levels before and after CABG surgery may not contribute to AF prediction, although more comprehensive studies are required to answer this question.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by Deputy of Research & Technology of Birjand University of Medical Sciences. We wish to sincerely thank the officials for their financial support of this study.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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