Dual chamber pacing: how many patients remain in DDD mode over the long term?

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Abstract

Objective—DDD pacing is better than VVI pacing in complete heart block and sick sinus syndrome but is more expensive and demanding. In addition, some patients have to be programmed out of DDD mode and this may have an important impact on the cost-effectiveness of DDD pacing. The purpose of this study was to determine how many patients remain in DDD mode over the long term (up to 10 years).

Design—A retrospective analysis of the outcome over 10 years of consecutive patients who had their pacemakers programmed initially in DDD mode.

Setting—A district general hospital.

Patients—249 patients with DDD pacemakers. Sixty two patients (24.9%) had predominantly sick sinus syndrome and 180 (72.3%) had predominantly atrioventricular conduction disease. Mean (range) complete follow up for this group of patients was 32 months (1–10 years).

Results—Cumulative survival of DDD mode was 83.5% at 60 months. Atrial fibrillation was the commonest reason for abandonment of DDD pacing. Atrial fibrillation developed in 30 patients (12%), with atrial flutter in three (1.2%). Loss of atrial sensing or pacing, pacemaker mediated tachycardia, and various other reasons accounted for reprogramming out of DDD mode in eight patients (3.2%). Overall, an atrial pacing mode was maintained in 91% and VVI pacing was needed in only 9%.

Conclusions—With careful use of programming facilities and appropriate secondary intervention, most patients with dual chamber pacemakers can be maintained successfully in DDD or an alternative atrial pacing mode until elective replacement, although atrial arrhythmia remains a significant problem. There are no good reasons, other than cost, for not using dual chamber pacing routinely as suggested by recent guidelines and this policy can be achieved successfully in a district general hospital pacing centre.

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Figure 1 Cumulative survival of the DDD pacing mode by the Kaplan-Meier method. The number of patients at each interval is shown.

Figure 2 Causes of DDD mode abandonment and their relative incidence. AF, atrial fibrillation; PMT, pacemaker mediated tachycardia.

documented atrial fibrillation before implantation. The mean (range) follow up was about 32 months (1–10 years).

SECONDARY INTERVENTION
Twenty four patients (9.6%) needed reoperation during the follow up period. In total 12 atrial and two ventricular electrodes were repositioned to restore adequate sensing or pacing, or both, even in the absence of gross dislodgment. Eight atrial electrodes needed replacement; three because of failure of pacing because of high threshold, three as a result of fractures, and one each for an insulation break and loss of atrial sensing secondary to random component failure. One ventricular electrode was replaced because of insulation break and one for failure of pacing because of exit block. Two patients (0.8%) were reoperated on because of pacemaker infection. Pulse generator replacement for normal battery depletion was not considered a reparative intervention.

PACEMAKER SURVIVAL IN DDD MODE
In total 37 patients (14.9%) required permanent programming out of DDD mode during the whole of the follow up period. At first follow-up visit, 1 month after implantation, 242 (97.2%) of 249 patients were still in DDD mode. After 6 months of follow up 94% of pacemakers remained in DDD, at 12 months 92.1%, at 24 months 91.9%, at 36 months 88%, at 48 months 85-8%, and at 60 months 83-5% of pacemakers were still functioning in the DDD mode (fig 1).

REASONS FOR REPROGRAMMING
The development of atrial fibrillation was the most common indication for abandonment of DDD mode (fig 2). It was noted in 30 (12.0%) of the 249 study patients. Atrial fibrillation developed in 10 (16%) of 62 patients with sick sinus syndrome and 18 (10%) of 180 with atioventricular block (not significant; P = 0.2). Four patients had a single episode of atrial fibrillation, returned to sinus rhythm after treatment with amiodarone and were reprogrammed back to DDD mode (cardioversion was not used in any patient). Thirteen patients developed chronic atrial fibrillation and were programmed to VVI. In the remaining 13 patients, their atrial fibrillation was paroxysmal; nine were changed to DVI and four to DDI mode (fig 3). Atrial flutter developed in another three patients (programmed to VVI).

Pacemaker mediated tachycardia was the reason for abandonment of DDD in two patients. Two patients had their device programmed out of the DDD mode because of failure of atrial pacing. Pacemaker reprogramming was performed because of failure of atrial sensing in only one patient; one patient programmed into AAI because of high ventricular threshold and in another two patients for miscellaneous reasons. Thus, an atrial pacing mode (DDD, DVI, DDI, or AAI) was maintained in 91% and VVI pacing was required in only 9% (23 patients).
Discussion

Several studies have documented the advantages of DDD over VVI pacing in both atrioventricular block and sick sinus syndrome.\(^1\) - 4 VVI pacing is associated with an increase in cardiothoracic ratio,\(^5\) frequency of atrial fibrillation,\(^6\) higher incidence of thromboembolism,\(^7\) increase in plasma atrial natriuretic peptide,\(^8\) poorer exercise capacity,\(^9\) reduced quality of life,\(^9\)\(^10\) and possibly higher mortality.\(^9\)\(^13\)

In patients with chronic symptomatic sinus node dysfunction and congestive heart failure survival is negatively affected by VVI pacing, while atrial synchronous pacing improves survival rate in this subset of patients.\(^14\)

DDDR pacing may have additional advantages for patients with atrioventricular block and atrial chronotropic incompetence\(^15\) - 16 but this mode is still rarely used in the United Kingdom. Despite the considerable evidence that DDD (or DDDR) pacing is superior to ventricular pacing in atrioventricular block and sick sinus syndrome VVI units are still the most popular units implanted in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the use of VVI pacing has been defended.\(^9\)\(^17\) The arguments against using DDDR pacing routinely for atrioventricular block include the expense, shorter life span, and more complicated follow up and programming. Furthermore if atrioventricular synchrony is lost because circumstances force a change to VVI mode then the patient will be left with a more costly unit from which he will derive little benefit. The question therefore is how often this occurs and what are the main causes. This is an important aspect of this cost-benefit equation. Published data are sparse. Earlier reports using older generators are no longer applicable to current pacemakers. Gross et al\(^8\) in the United States of America found that 78% of their patients were still in DDD mode at 5 years and our results are similar with 83-5% in DDD mode at 60 months. In addition, of the 37 patients in whom DDD mode was permanently abandoned, eight (22%) were converted to other atrial sensing modes; one to AAI and seven to DDI. In comparison with the study by Gross et al,\(^8\) however, we had a higher incidence of secondary surgical intervention—that is, 9-6% in the present study versus 4%. Half of our reoperations were to reposition atrial electrod. These were carried out despite the absence of radiological evidence of gross dislodgment in most cases. When faced with inadequate functioning of the atrial lead—non-sensing or non-pacing, or both—the choice was between reprogramming to VVI with loss of all the advantages of the DDD system and exploratory intervention. We usually opted for the latter to correct “microdislodgement” of the atrial electrode—that is, not seen in x ray film, and in occasional cases to replace a faulty electrode due to fracture or insulation break. In the majority this policy led to the restoration of adequate sensing and pacing. This may account for the fact that loss of atrial sensing accounted for only 2-7% of permanent failures of DDD mode, as compared with 26-2% in the study of Gross et al\(^6\) and perhaps contributes to the higher percentage of patients who remained in DDD mode (83-5% v 78%).

Atrial fibrillation, which developed in 12% of our patients, was the most common reason for abandonment of DDD mode. This observation is in concordance with other studies. Gross et al\(^8\) found that atrial fibrillation, whether chronic or paroxysmal, developed in 37% of the patients for 48% of reprogramming out of DDD mode. Similarly, chronic atrial fibrillation was responsible for 73% of loss of atrioventricular synchronous pacing in the study of Byrd et al.\(^8\) In a recently published study from a United Kingdom centre, however, Chamberlain-Webber et al\(^18\) reported a low incidence of atrial fibrillation (3-3%) in a group of 771 patients followed up over a mean (SD) of 40 (31) months. Detolenaere et al\(^17\) found a high frequency of atrial flutter in their group, nearly half of the patients who developed atrial arrhythmia. In our study atrial flutter occurred in only three patients (1-2%), a rate similar to that found by Gross et al.\(^8\) Patients with sick sinus syndrome, however, had a 1-5 times greater risk of developing atrial fibrillation than patients with atrioventricular conduction defect (16-1% v 10%; although this was not statistically significant), and this is consistent with other studies.\(^6\)\(^9\) In addition, the mode of pacing seems to be an independent risk factor for the development of atrial fibrillation, especially in patients with sinus node dysfunction. Langenfeld et al\(^19\) showed that atrial fibrillation was significantly more common in patients with sick sinus syndrome who had VVI pacing compared with those who had DDD (37% v 19% respectively, P < 0-01).

Similarly, Hesselson et al\(^20\) found in a group of 950 patients that 14% developed atrial fibrillation and that this was over four times more common in those with a VVI pacemaker, especially in those with sick sinus syndrome. In many patients, DDD modes can be maintained by cardioversion to sinus rhythm, either electrically or by drugs, followed by suppressive treatment with amiodarone or sotalol and this was our policy. The DDD mode is useful for paroxysmal atrial fibrillation.\(^20\) DDI mode provides atrial ventricular sequential pacing with atrial sensing, but no tracking during sinus rhythm. Atrial sensing
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Prevents competitive pacing in the atrium and during an atrial tachyarrhythmia there is no possibility of inappropriate tracking. DDDR pacing may help to reduce the incidence of atrial fibrillation especially in those with atrioventricular block and chronotropic incompetence who in effect have sick sinus syndrome and who are more prone to develop atrial fibrillation. However, this is unproved. It is known that DDDR is preferable to VVIR for patients with chronotropic incompetence but not if DDDR is better than DDD alone with respect to the development of atrial fibrillation over the long term. Some DDDR pacemakers contain algorithms that limit inappropriate ventricular pacing rate during tracking of pathological supraventricular tachyarrhythmia and atrial flutter by Wenckebach-like prolongation of the atrioventricular interval. This may occasionally cause an unexpected extension of the atrioventricular interval in patients with high atrial rate and intact atrioventricular nodal conduction which may appear as failure of ventricular pacing on the electrocardiogram. Another possibility in the future for the management of atrial fibrillation is the incorporation of a mechanism for atrial debilitation into a DDDR pacemaker.

Another aspect of this study group which may be different is that we have used almost exclusively passive fixation atrial leads. P wave amplitudes are initially better with passive fixation electrodes but chronically there is little difference, and atrial threshold stimulation energies do not differ between the two lead groups. There is no good evidence at the moment to support the notion that passive fixation atrial leads are associated with lower rates of atrial fibrillation but it is a possibility.

Pacemaker mediated tachycardia was a problem with the first generation DDD pacing systems but this is not so with the recent models. In our study, pacemaker mediated tachycardia accounted for only 5-4% of the reasons for reprogramming out of DDD mode, and this was with the earlier models which had limited programmability and fixed post ventricular atrial refractory period.

The study is limited by its retrospective nature. There was no control group in whom results of VVI pacing were compared with those of DDD. Not all risk factors for the development of atrial fibrillation were routinely recorded. The number of patients included and the long duration of follow up, however, all support the validity of our data and their applicability to the general pacemaker population. Another aspect of this study relevant to practice in the United Kingdom is that it confirms the feasibility of a policy to insert DDD pacemakers where indicated in a district general hospital with good results. There is no reason for the newer pacing centres in these hospitals merely to implant VVI pacemakers.

**Conclusion**

In this study 83.5% of patients with dual chamber pacing systems were maintained in DDD pacing mode for at least 5 years, and 91% maintained some form of atrial pacing. The major reason (in 78%) for abandoning DDD mode was the development of atrial fibrillation or atrial flutter. This continues to be a significant drawback and further research is required to identify those at greater risk of developing atrial tachyarrhythmia.
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