Florid psychopathology in patients receiving shocks from implanted cardioverter-defibrillators

John P Bourke, Douglas Turkington, Gareth Thomas, Janet M McComb, Margaret Tynan

Abstract

Objectives—To increase awareness of the potential for disabling anxiety and depression in patients receiving shocks from implanted cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs).

Patients and methods—ICDs are implanted in patients at this hospital for control of serious ventricular tachyarrhythmias inadequately controlled by drug treatment, who are unsuitable for map guided antiarrhythmic surgery. All are reviewed regularly at a dedicated ICD clinic and are advised to make contact between visits if they experience shocks. Symptoms of anxiety or depression were not actively sought, nor was a patient support group operating at the time of this data collection. When overt psychopathology was identified, patients were referred to a designated psychiatrist for management.

Results—Over a six year period, six (17%) of 35 patients with ICDs developed florid psychiatric problems after experiencing shocks. None had premorbid psychiatric predisposition. Of the six patients suffering severe psychiatric problems, four were men, their age range was 30–63 years, and left ventricular ejection fraction was 18–40%. All shocks were appropriate for clinical arrhythmias and ranged in frequency from two in six months to 111 in 24 hours. All six patients manifested severe anxiety, focused on fear of future shocks. Depression was also evident in three patients and two had become housebound. All responded within weeks to anxiolytic or antidepressant drugs, combined with relaxation and cognitive therapies. Ongoing psychiatric therapy was refused by one patient, and was required for between three and 18 months in the remainder. One patient died and one received a cardiac transplant during the follow up period (median 27.5 months, range 8–43).

Conclusions—Because ICD implantation occurs against a complex medical background with inevitable psychological stress, all such patients should be considered at high risk for developing psychopathology.

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Keywords: implantable cardioverter-defibrillators; psychopathology; complications

Implantable cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs) are established therapy for patients with recurring, life threatening ventricular tachyarrhythmias. They do not prevent arrhythmic episodes but terminate them by automatically delivering either antitachycardia pacing or direct current shocks. Their antiarrhythmic efficacy is not in doubt. The nature of the therapy delivered is determined by the device capability and the way it has been programmed.

By comparison with implant rates in other countries, such as the USA and Germany, ICDs have not been widely used in the UK National Health Service to date; however, implant rates are rising sharply. With the advent of transvenous, rather than epicardial, lead systems and with the progressive reductions in device size, implantation no longer requires a thoracotomy and devices can be implanted prepectoral, as opposed to abdominally. Furthermore, with increased generator life span, incorporating antitachycardia pacing options, and high quality stored electrogram recordings, ICDs have become ever more attractive to physicians as ICD efficacy does not depend on the cause of the patients’ arrhythmia or even its precise type.

All patients who receive ICDs have experienced a complex and life threatening illness with inevitable psychological effects. Most patients have ischaemic heart disease or cardiomyopathy, have survived life threatening episodes of arrhythmia, and realise that they are at risk of future episodes. Their investigations, failed drug trials, and need for device therapy may contribute to their psychological vulnerability. However, the independent psychological effect of ICD implantation, and shock therapy in particular, on patients in this country has not been studied. Psychopathology may easily be overlooked in defibrillator review clinics, where anxiety or depression may be deemed “appropriate” to the patient’s experiences and not therefore in need of specific management.

This report aims to highlight the adverse psychological sequelae observed in six patients after receiving shock therapy from their ICDs, and to report their management and outcome.

Materials and methods

At the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne, ICD treatment is only recommended to patients with ventricular arrhythmias after comprehensive assessment and detailed discussion of their risk of recurrent episodes, the range of alternative therapies available, and the
nature of device therapy. Patients receiving ICDs are those with either very poor left ventricular function or major non-cardiac co-morbidity making surgery inappropriate, or those with idiopathic ventricular fibrillation. Based in these criteria, ICDs have been implanted in 35 patients from 1989–95. All patients are followed up at regular intervals at a dedicated defibrillator clinic staffed by an electrophysiologist and a cardiology technician. Psychological status was not systematically assessed at these review appointments. Patients are also encouraged to make contact with the hospital between scheduled visits if they experience shocks. They are reviewed routinely within 24 hours of shock therapy for reassurance and device interrogation.

Results

Of the 35 patients who received ICD therapy at this hospital in the period studied, six (17%) developed psychological problems that were sufficiently florid to prompt urgent referral for formal psychiatric evaluation. The cardiology background of each of the patients and the events precipitating the subsequent psychopathology are summarised in table 1. The most frequent manifestations of psychopathology were profound anxiety and panic reactions centred on fear of future shock therapy. Two patients also showed depressive reactions. Table 2 summarises the nature and severity of the psychopathology identified and the management and outcome in each patient.

Discussion

The typical symptoms reported by this patient group were of generalised anxiety, manifest as palpitations, sweating, tremor, abdominal churning, and restlessness. There were also phobic anxiety symptoms, including complete agoraphobia in two. This was a panic reaction to leaving the safety of home; however, the agoraphobia was unusual in that it was linked entirely to thoughts about further shocks from the implanted defibrillator and imminent death, and not to fears of being unable to escape from crowds or crowded places. Panic symptoms with hyperventilation, paraesthesia, palpitation, difficulty in breathing, and chest pain were often present when these thought sequences occurred.

Two patients were also depressed after experiencing multiple shocks from their ICD and their symptoms included sadness, insomnia, loss of energy, loss of interest, poor appetite, and suicidal thoughts. There were prominent thoughts of hopelessness about the future. The two patients with depression also suffered from prominent anxiety symptoms.

Multiple shocks were a clear precipitant for the psychiatric disorders. The thought processes resulting from this particular event were central to the subsequent psychopathology as described in table 2 according to the International Classification of Mental and Behavioural disorders. Indeed, all six patients reported profoundly anxiety provoking thoughts in relation to the defibrillator, often linked to withdrawal from social interaction.

One dominant thought pattern was identified in all six patients in this group: “If the device fires I’m going to die”. This catastrophic thought about the purpose of the device fed straight into the panic cycle. In the panic cycle, normal stressful reactions leading to palpitation and tension headache are misinterpreted as being about to lead to catastrophic events, such as sudden death from myocardial infarction or stroke. The cycle escalates because of these thought sequences, leading to more anxiety, which in turn generates more

### Table 1  Patient profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Age/sex</th>
<th>VTA aetiology</th>
<th>Clinical VTA</th>
<th>EPS result</th>
<th>LVEF</th>
<th>Shock frequency*</th>
<th>Status (months’ follow up)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>54 F</td>
<td>Rheumatic MVR</td>
<td>VF</td>
<td>NAD</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>&gt;100 in 24 hours</td>
<td>A + W (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>54 M</td>
<td>IDC/alcohol</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12 in 1 hour</td>
<td>Died LVF + VF (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>63 M</td>
<td>Post-MI x 2</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4 in 24 hours</td>
<td>A + W (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>44 F</td>
<td>Post-MI/CABG</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5 in 48 hours</td>
<td>A + W (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>45 M</td>
<td>Idiopathic</td>
<td>VF</td>
<td>VF only</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>7 in 2 hours</td>
<td>A + W (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30 M</td>
<td>Post-MI</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>SMVMT</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2 in 6 months</td>
<td>Heart transplant (40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of shocks from the ICD in specified time leading to the psychopathology.

A + W, alive and well; CABG, coronary artery bypass graft; EPS, electrophysiology result; IDC, idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction; LVF, left ventricular failure; MI, myocardial infarction; MVR, mitral valve replacement; VF, ventricular fibrillation; VTA, ventricular tachyarrhythmia; SMMVT, sustained monomorphic ventricular tachycardia.

### Table 2  Psychopathology following ICD shocks: nature, management, and outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Main symptoms</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agoraphobia with panic disorder</td>
<td>Agitation/hyperventilation/palpitations/fear of device firing</td>
<td>CBT/benzodiazepines/relaxation training/psychoeducation</td>
<td>Intensive treatment led to full recovery after 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderate depressive episode</td>
<td>Insomnia/sadness/angora/fear of future shocks</td>
<td>Paroxetine/benzodiazepines/relaxation training</td>
<td>Recovered after one month, but died after 5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Generalised anxiety disorder</td>
<td>Sweating/giddiness/thoughts of the device being about to fire</td>
<td>CBT/relaxation training/benzodiazepines/psychoeducation</td>
<td>Recovered after 3 months but very reluctant to stop diazepam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Generalised anxiety disorder</td>
<td>Anxiety/agitation/anger against the device</td>
<td>CBT/psychoeducation</td>
<td>Recovered after 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Agoraphobia with panic disorder</td>
<td>Fear of device firing/tension/fear of leaving home/panic attacks</td>
<td>CBT/psychoeducation/benzodiazepines</td>
<td>Recovered after 2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Moderate depressive episode</td>
<td>Fear of further ICD discharge/housebound/sadness</td>
<td>Fluoxetine/benzodiazepines/CBT/psychoeducation</td>
<td>Improved after 3 months recovered after cardiac transplantation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*psychopathology code from international classification of mental and behavioural disorders: classification of disease; †progressive muscular relaxation therapy with the aid of an audio tape.

CBT, cognitive therapy.
Psychopathology in patients receiving shocks from ICDs

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