Echocardiography of the aortic valve

I: Studies of normal aortic valve, aortic stenosis, aortic regurgitation, and mixed aortic valve disease

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Aortic valve echocardiography was performed in 105 subjects: 30 were healthy persons, 40 were patients with non-valvar heart disease, and 35 patients had isolated aortic valve disease. In the group with diseased aortic valves, the findings were correlated with observations at catheterization and in most cases at operation or necropsy.

The normal aortic valve echocardiogram is described and evidence is given that the anteriorly visualized cusp echoes are from the right coronary but those which are posteriorly visualized may be from the non-coronary or the left coronary cusp. The ultrasound patterns in aortic stenosis, aortic regurgitation, and mixed aortic valve disease are described. In each case the aortic root diameter was measured and cusp motion and thickness assessed by echocardiography. The ultrasound measurements of the aortic root correlated well with measurements at operation. Seventeen of the patients with aortic valve disease underwent aortic homograft replacement and were also studied after operation. The aortic homograft echocardiograms showed cusp movements indistinguishable from normal aortic valves.

It is concluded that echocardiography of the aortic valve is simple to perform, is of value diagnostically, and can contribute to the pre- and postoperative assessment of patients with aortic valve disease.

The aortic valve echocardiogram was first recorded by Edler et al. (1961), using excised calf heart preparation. Subsequently examples of normal human aortic valve echocardiograms were described (Edler, 1964; Effert et al., 1964; Gramiak and Shah, 1968). Gramiak and Shah (1970) described the echocardiographic appearances of calcific aortic stenosis but found no characteristic pattern in aortic regurgitation. Hernberg, Weiss, and Keegan (1970) performed aortic valve echocardiography on patients with aortic valve disease; they could only infrequently record complete aortic valve echocardiograms and were unable to show any consistent pattern. Thus the value of aortic valve echocardiography has to date not been established. Furthermore, there has been no conclusive evidence for the anatomical identity of the visualized aortic valve cusps, though Edler (1964) postulated that the anteriorly and posteriorly visualized cusp echoes originate from the right coronary and non-coronary cusps, respectively.

In this report the echocardiographic appearances of a large series of normal human aortic valves are described. The identity of the cusps was established by studies of two patients with senile degenerative aortic valve calcification in whom localized calcific deposits were used as markers. Echocardiographic studies of a further 33 patients with isolated aortic valve disease were performed in an attempt to define the patterns in aortic stenosis, aortic regurgitation, and mixed aortic valve disease.

Subjects and methods

Echocardiographic studies of the aortic valve were performed in 30 healthy persons (ages 18 to 35) with no symptoms or signs referable to the cardiovascular system and who were therefore assumed to have normal aortic valves. Forty patients (ages 35 to 56) had non-valvar heart disease (37 with coronary artery disease and 3 with thyroid dysfunction). In the group with non-valvar
heart disease catheter-angiographic data of the aortic valves were available and were normal. Thirty-five other patients (ages 5 to 80) had isolated aortic valve disease. They were selected from a larger series because of the availability of catheter-angiographic data on 32 and postmortem information on 3 cases. Twenty-one of the patients with aortic valve disease subsequently underwent aortic valve replacement, when the extent of the aortic valve disease was assessed and when in 11 cases aortic root diameter was measured.

Echocardiograms were recorded according to the method of Gramiak and Shah (1968). An Ekoline 20 ultrasonicoscope and a focused 2 cm diameter 2-25 mHz transducer with a repetition rate of 1000 impulses per second were used. The patients were examined in the left lateral position, with the transducer applied over the third or fourth left intercostal space approximately 3 cm from the sternal edge. As an initial point of reference the echoes from the anterior mitral leaflet were identified. From this position the aortic valve echocardiogram could be obtained by directing the transducer medially towards the sternum and slightly superiority towards the right shoulder. The ultrasonic patterns were viewed together with simultaneous electrocardiography on an oscilloscope using M mode of display. The echocardiographic aortic root inner diameter was measured at the end of the P wave of the electrocardiogram and the systolic cusp echo separation (distance between the anteriorly and posteriorly visualized cusp echoes) was measured immediately after the QRS complex. Permanent recordings were made with a polaroid camera. A calibration scale on the oscilloscope enables measurements of dimensions of, and the distances between echo signals.

Results

Normal aortic valve echocardiogram

The normal aortic valve echocardiogram was seen within the aortic root as slender cusp echoes producing a box-like configuration during systole and a central line during diastole. Fig 1A shows an echocardiogram from the base of the heart with simultaneous electrocardiogram. Fig. 1B is a diagram of the cross-section through the base of the heart illustrating the presumed path taken by the ultrasound beam. On the echocardiogram, anteriorly there are prominent echo signals from the anterior chest wall and anterior right ventricular wall, posteriorly there are echoes from the posterior wall of the left atrium. The two parallel signals (Aa and Ap) moving synchronously with the cardiac cycle are the echoes from the anterior and posterior walls.
of the aortic root, respectively. The right ventricular
and the left atrial cavities are visualized as relatively
echo-free spaces between the anterior right ventri-
cular wall and Aa, and between Ap and the posterior
wall of the left atrium, respectively. In the area represen-
ting the aortic root (between Aa and Ap) are seen
echoes originating from the aortic valve cusps. In
diastole these are visualized as a single central line
representing the cusps in the closed position. Fre-
quently, when the gain of the instrument is reduced,
the central line is visualized as two or three thin
echo signals with hair line separation (1 mm or less).
At the onset of ventricular systole the central line is
rapidly replaced by two parallel lines Ca and Cp.
These latter echoes which lie in close proximity to
to those from the inner wall of the aortic root represent
the aortic valve cusps in the open position. At the
onset of ventricular diastole the Ca and Cp come
together to fuse and form the central line thus giving
rise to the box-like configuration during systole.

In 22 of the 70 subjects with normal aortic valves,
the typical box-like configuration was visualized
(Fig. 1A). In 36 cases the cusp signals were visualized
only during systole and early diastole (Fig. 2A). In 3
instances only one cusp signal (Ca or Cp) could be
obtained (Fig. 2B and 2C). In 7 subjects, despite
careful searching, incomplete valve echocardiograms
were obtained. Only in 2 subjects was there com-
plete failure to localize the aortic valve. Often very
fine fluttering of the aortic valve echoes was seen
during systole (Fig. 2D). The aortic root diastolic
inner diameter measured in 68 of the subjects
ranged from 19 to 25 mm (mean 23 mm) and the
systolic cusp echo separation ranged from 17 to 23
mm (mean 21 mm).

Identification of aortic valve cusp echoes
using calcified deposits as markers
Clinicopathological studies in 2 patients with
circumnscribed cusp lesions enabled identification of
the echoes from individual aortic valve cusps. The
first was a 69-year-old man with disseminated
bronchogenic carcinoma in whom a soft ejection
systolic murmur was heard over the aortic area. The
aortic valve echocardiogram showed increased echo
intensity and reduced movement of the anteriorly
visualized cusp (Ca) (Fig. 3A). In contrast the
posteriorly visualized cusp echo (Cp) had normal
intensity and movement. At necropsy, gross calcifi-
cation was noted in the right coronary cusp and
moderate calcification in the left coronary cusp. The
non-coronary cusp was completely free of calcium
deposition. No commissural fusion was present
(Fig. 3B). It was concluded that the abnormal echo
Ca was from the right coronary cusp as expected
from its anterior anatomical location (Fig. 1B) and
the normal echo Cp originated from the non-coronary
cusp.

The second patient was an 80-year-old man with
chronic bronchitis and severe bronchopneumonia.
Aortic valve echocardiogram showed increased in-
tensity and reduced mobility of both cusp echoes Ca
and Cp with multiple dense diastolic echoes C (Fig. 4A); in addition, minor echo signals were recorded from within the aortic root (Aa–Ap) area. At necropsy, calcium deposits were again noted only in the right and left coronary cusps as in the first patient. No commissural fusion was present; the inner aortic root wall showed small atheromatous plaques (Fig. 4B). It was concluded that the abnormal Ca echo again represented the right coronary cusp; the Cp echo, which was abnormal in this instance, was presumably not from the unaffected non-coronary cusp but was from the calcified left coronary cusp.

It is, therefore, apparent that Ca represents the right coronary cusp while Cp may represent either the non-coronary or the left coronary cusp.

FIG. 3 (A) Echocardiogram showing increased echo intensity and reduced movement of the anteriorly visualized aortic valve cusp (Ca). The posteriorly visualized cusp (Cp) shows normal intensity and movement. (B) Diagram of the aortic root as seen at necropsy. Arrows indicate calcification of the right and left coronary cusps. Other symbols as in Fig. 1.

FIG. 4 (A) Echocardiogram showing increased intensity and reduced mobility of both aortic cusp echoes, Ca and Cp, and the multiple dense diastolic echoes C. Arrows indicate minor echo signals within the aortic root area. (B) Diagram of the aortic root at necropsy. Arrows indicate calcification of the right and left cusps. Pt, atheromatous plaques in inner aortic root wall. Other symbols as in Fig. 1.
Echocardiography of the aortic valve

TABLE I Clinical, radiological, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and operative findings in 8 patients with isolated aortic stenosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age and sex</th>
<th>Aetiology</th>
<th>Clinical features</th>
<th>Grade of aortic valve calcification†</th>
<th>Echocardiography</th>
<th>Aortic valve § inner diameter gradient (mmHg)</th>
<th>Relevant operative findings</th>
<th>Aortic root inner diameter (mm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11 F</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>Blood pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>No opn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60 M</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>95/70</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 M</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>100/70</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>46 M</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>170/80</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>38 M</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>140/100</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>48 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>120/70</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>41 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>180/90</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>50 F</td>
<td>Bicuspid valve</td>
<td>120/90</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Valve not crossed</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ejection systolic murmur over left sternal edge.
† Grade of aortic valve calcification on screening: — Absent; + mild; ++ moderate; +++ severe.
‡ Density of cusp echoes -- thin cusp echoes; + broad cusp echoes; ++ dense echoes with some visible cusp signals; +++ very dense echoes with complete obliteration of cusp signals.
§ Diastolic aortic root inner diameter measured after the P wave of the electrocardiogram.
¶ Systolic gradient across aortic valve at rest measured at catheter-angiography.

Aortic stenosis

Eight patients with isolated severe aortic stenosis were studied; 6 were male (ages 7 to 60, mean 40) and 2 were female (ages 11 and 50). In 7 of the patients there was extensive cusp calcification; in only one patient (Case 1, Table I) was the valve free of calcification. All but one patient subsequently underwent operation. The clinical, radiological, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and operative data are summarized in Table I.

In the patient who had no valve calcification, the cusp signals were visualized only during systole and appeared wide, suggesting cusp thickening (Fig. 5A). The positions of the cusp echoes Ca and Cp in systole appeared normal, though at angiocardio- graphy and at operation a severely stenosed and

FIG. 5 (A) Echocardiogram of patient with bicuspid aortic stenosis from the base of the heart showing wide cusp signals Ca and Cp during systole. (B) Aortic valve echocardiogram of the same patient after valvotomy.
domed aortic valve was seen. The reduced separation of the cusp echoes in systole described in aortic stenosis by Feigenbaum (1972) was not seen. The apparently normal spacing of the cusp echoes during systole may be explained by the upward displacement of the domed orifice out of the reach of the ultrasound beam, allowing echo signals to be received from the wide base of the dome, below the stenosis. Fig. 5B shows the aortic valve echocardiogram of this patient one week after valvotomy. The Ca and Cp echoes are thicker than normal as noted before operation, but they have assumed the normal box-like configuration during systole. There is diastolic cusp echo separation of 1·5 mm suggesting some degree of aortic regurgitation.

In the remaining 7 patients with valve calcification the aortic valve echocardiographic patterns were similar; a typical example (Case 2, Table 1) is

![Aortic Valve Echocardiogram](image)

**TABLE 2** Clinical, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and operative findings in 15 patients with isolated aortic regurgitation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age and sex</th>
<th>Aetiology</th>
<th>Clinical features</th>
<th>Echocardiography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blood pressure</td>
<td>Grade of murmurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(mmHg)</td>
<td>EDM* ESM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>27 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>130/60</td>
<td>3/4 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>50 M</td>
<td>Bacterial endocarditis</td>
<td>150/70</td>
<td>2/4 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>33 M</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>150/70</td>
<td>4/4 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>22 F</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>130/40</td>
<td>4/4 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>58 M</td>
<td>Cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>170/100</td>
<td>2/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>62 M</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>100/70</td>
<td>Not heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>25 M</td>
<td>Cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>100/80</td>
<td>No murmurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>66 F</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>120/70</td>
<td>2/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>63 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>150/70</td>
<td>3/4 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>39 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>200/75</td>
<td>1/4 1/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>62 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>145/70</td>
<td>2/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>62 M</td>
<td>Cystic medial fibrosis</td>
<td>155/65</td>
<td>4/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>21 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>120/60</td>
<td>2/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>65 M</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>145/70</td>
<td>2/4 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>40 F</td>
<td>Rheumatic</td>
<td>130/80</td>
<td>Not heard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Early diastolic murmur over left sternal edge.
† Measured immediately following the QRS complex of electrocardiogram.
‡ Cusp separation (more than 1 mm was considered abnormal).
Aortic regurgitation

Fifteen patients with isolated aortic regurgitation were studied: 12 were male (ages 21 to 65, mean 47), and 3 were female (ages 22 to 66, mean 43). The clinical, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and, where available, anatomical data are summarized in Table 2.

The most striking echocardiographic features obtained in 10 of the 15 patients were abnormal separation of the two cusp echoes during diastole and increased echo intensity suggesting cusp thickening. A typical example is shown in Fig. 7A. Two of the patients with thickened cusp signals also showed moderate restriction of cusp movement as in Fig. 7B. Catheter-angiography in these 2 patients confirmed restricted cusp movement, and subsequent examination of the aortic valves (Cases 5 and 8, Table 2) revealed thickening of the middle part of each cusp with mild cusp shortening and no fusion of the commissures. The cusps were noted to be mobile but the shortening prevented apposition. Coarse systolic oscillations of the cusp echoes (7 patients) such as those illustrated in Fig. 7C, an increase in the aortic root diameter (12 patients), and increased systolic separation of the cusp echoes (3 patients) were further additional but nonspecific features in patients with aortic regurgitation.

In 5 patients in this group, diastolic cusp separation was not seen. In 2 of these (Cases 4 and 13, Table 2), only the anteriorly positioned cusp echoes could be obtained, showing restricted movement and abnormal anterior position during diastole instead of the usual central position (Fig. 7E). At operation extreme shrinkage of all three cusps was observed with gross aortic regurgitation. It is therefore not surprising that good cusp echoes were unobtainable in these 2 patients because cusp tissue was lacking. In the third of the 5 patients (Case 3, the aortic valves inspected at operation were tricuspid.

| Cuspal aortic separation dictate | Catheter-angiographic grade of regurgitation | Operative findings | Relevant pathology
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aortic root inner diam. (mm)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| sent 4/4                       | Not measured                               | Perforated right and non-coronary cusps
| sent 3/4                       |                                   | Left cusp destroyed by vegetations
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | Large cusps and large central orifice
| ent 4/4 1                   | 41                                  | Extreme shrinkage of cusps
| ent 4/4 2                   | 39                                  | (Necropsy finding: middle part of each cusp thickened and cusps mildly shortened)
| ent 1/4                       | Not measured                               | No opn
| ent 1/4                       |                                   | No opn
| ent 3/4                       |                                   | Middle part of each cusp thickened and cusps mildly shortened
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | No opn
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | No opn
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | No opn
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | Free aortic regurgitation with floppy cusps
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | Much shortened and thickened cusps
| ent 4/4                       |                                   | Mildly shortened cusps with tear of free margin of right coronary cusps
| ent 2/4                       |                                   | No opn

\* The aortic valves inspected at operation were tricuspid.
\* Investigated for ischaemic heart disease.
\* Symbols as in Table 1.
Table 2) an aortic valve echocardiogram was obtained, which was apparently normal apart from some increase in the aortic root diameter (Fig. 7D). At operation free aortic regurgitation was confirmed, the aortic valve was tricuspid and there was some thickening of the leaflets. A large central orifice was present. The aortic valve echocardiogram in the fourth patient (Case 1, Table 2) showed unusual early systolic oscillations affecting mainly the anteriorly positioned cusp echoes. The posteriorly visualized cusp echoes showed an unusual configuration (Fig. 7F). At operation floppy aortic valve leafsets were noted. In the fifth patient (Case 6, Table 2) aortic valve calcification obscured the cusp signals and produced an echocardiographic pattern indistinguishable from that of calcific aortic stenosis.

**Mixed aortic valve disease**

Ten patients with mixed aortic valve disease were studied, 5 were male (ages 11 to 61, mean 35) and 5 were female (ages 5 to 64, mean 26). The clinical, radiological, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and operative data are summarized in Table 3.

In 4 of the 10 patients the aortic valve echocardiogram showed diastolic cusp echo separation. Fig. 8A exemplifies a moderately calcified valve. The additional echoes distorting the cusp signals are presumably from the calcified foci. One of the four patients who showed diastolic cusp echo

**TABLE 3** Clinical, radiological, echocardiographic, catheter-angiographic, and operative findings in 10 patients with mixed aortic valve disease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Clinical features</th>
<th>Grade of valve calcification</th>
<th>Echocardiographic patterns</th>
<th>Catheter-angiography</th>
<th>Operative findings</th>
<th>Relevant pathology</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age and sex</td>
<td>Blood pressure</td>
<td>Aortic root diam (mm)</td>
<td>Aortic cusp separation</td>
<td>Valve gradient (mmHg)</td>
<td>Aortic root diam (mm)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>51 F</td>
<td>140/60</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>+ +</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>51 M</td>
<td>130/80</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>51 M</td>
<td>170/80</td>
<td>5/4</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 F</td>
<td>100/70</td>
<td>n.l.</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11 M</td>
<td>120/70</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>2/4</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>150/70</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>+ +</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>31 M</td>
<td>160/60</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>1/4</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>14 M</td>
<td>110/70</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>64 F</td>
<td>140/60</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D = Dense echoes prevented visualization of cusp separation. n.m. = not measured. Other symbols as in Tables 1 and 2.
Echocardiography of the aortic valve

FIG. 8 Three aortic root echocardiograms from patients with mixed aortic valve disease. (A) Shows abnormal diastolic cusp separation (arrowed). (B) Shows restricted cusp movement and diastolic separation of Ca and Cp echoes (arrowed). (C) Shows dense cusp echoes AO due to severe calcification.

FIG. 9 Shows normal cusp movement from a homograft aortic valve echocardiogram. Other symbols as in Fig. 1.

Echocardiography of the aortic valve

of the 35 patients with isolated aortic valve disease who had fresh unstented aortic homograft replacement. The examination was carried out on a single occasion 1 to 4 weeks (16 cases) and 96 weeks (1 case) after operation. In all instances the homograft valve echocardiogram showed a normal aortic valve pattern (Fig. 9).

The preoperative echocardiographic measurement of the inner aortic root diameter (11 cases) correlated well with the measurements at operation during bypass (Tables 1, 2, and 3).

Discussion

The clinical application of aortic valve echocardiography has not kept pace with that of the mitral valve because of difficulty experienced by several workers in regularly recording meaningful echocardiograms from this valve (Effert et al., 1964; Hernberg et al., 1970; Gramiak and Shah, 1970). The present study has shown that, by using a focused transducer and examining the patients in the left lateral position it is possible to obtain satisfactory aortic valve echocardiograms in over 80 per cent of subjects with normal aortic valves and in the majority of the subjects with diseased aortic valves.

The typical box-like configuration was obtained in 31 per cent of the subjects with normal aortic valves; in 51 per cent, though the cusps were visualized only in systole and early diastole, this was

Homograft valve

Echocardiographic study was also carried out on 17

separation (Case 5, Table 3) had wide cusp signals and restricted movement on the echocardiogram (Fig. 8B). There was no detectable aortic valve calcification on cardiac screening. In one patient (Case 9, Table 3) only one cusp signal was recorded; in the remaining 5 patients in this group with mixed aortic valve disease, aortic valve calcification obscured the cusp echoes. Fig. 8C exemplifies a heavily calcified valve echocardiogram which is indistinguishable from those 9 patients with calcific aortic stenosis.
considered to be adequate to exclude valve calcification, thickening, and restricted cusp movement. The frequently observed systolic cusp oscillations presumably indicate increased blood turbulence and pliable cusps.

Clinicopathological studies on patients with circumscribed aortic cusp calcification have confirmed the suggestion of Edler (1964) that the anteriorly visualized echoes are from the right coronary cusp. However, it was found that the posteriorly visualized cusp echoes may represent either the non-coronary or the left coronary cusp.

Tables 1 and 3 show that aortic valve calcification could be better assessed by echocardiography than by cardiac screening, for the density of cusp echoes correlated better with the assessment of valve calcification at operation. The echocardiographic measurements of the aortic root diameter agreed well with measurements at operation (Tables 1, 2, and 3).

In all the patients with calcific aortic stenosis the striking findings were the dense echoes originating from the calcium deposits. The failure to visualize echoes representing valve opening and closure is presumably caused by the density of the above echoes and by the impaired cusp movement. It was not possible to assess the severity of aortic stenosis by echocardiography in these patients, for there was no correlation between the density of the cusp echoes and the aortic valve gradients observed at cardiac catheterization (Table 1). Furthermore, recent studies (Ö. Feizi, unpublished observations) in several elderly patients with degenerative aortic valve calcification, without clinical evidence of stenosis, have shown echocardiographic patterns indistinguishable from those of the above patients who had pronounced aortic valve gradients. These observations are not in agreement with those of Gramiak and Shah (1970) who implied that the density of the aortic cusp echoes was an indication of the degree of aortic stenosis.

So far we have had the opportunity of carrying out echocardiography in only one case of aortic stenosis in the absence of cusp calcification (Fig. 5A). This showed a normal systolic position of the cusp signals. The expected reduced separation of the cusp echoes in aortic stenosis was not observed. In this patient the aortic valve was domed. It is presumed that the echoes visualized during systole were from the base of the dome and that the stenosed orifice was displaced upwards out of the reach of the ultrasound beam.

Previous reports of echocardiographic patterns in aortic regurgitation have drawn attention to the secondary effects on the mitral valve echoes, namely fine oscillations of the anterior mitral valve leaflet echoes during diastole (Joyner, Dyrdal, and Reid, 1966; Pridie, Benham, and Oakley, 1971). Little information has so far been available on echocardiography of the aortic valve itself in the presence of aortic regurgitation. In the patients studied by Gramiak and Shah (1970) the movement of the aortic cusp echoes was reported to be normal. The only abnormalities recorded were an increase in the aortic root diameter in some of the cases with an important lesion, and increased systolic cusp movement. In the present series, abnormal diastolic separation of aortic cusp echoes was noted in 10 out of 15 patients with isolated aortic regurgitation (Table 2). Though diastolic cusp separation was recorded from some normal aortic valves, the degree of separation noted in patients with documented aortic regurgitation was invariably greater than 1 mm and often very much more. The presence of significant diastolic cusp separation can be considered pathognomonic of aortic regurgitation and it has enabled the detection of three silent cases (Table 3).

In Fig. 4A and 5B, diastolic cusp separation which was minimally greater than normal was observed; it is conceivable that these are examples of silent aortic regurgitation. However, angiocardiographic data are not available in these 2 patients. It must be noted that echocardiography does not invariably show diastolic cusp separation in aortic regurgitation, as we noted in one patient (Case 3, Table 2).

In conclusion, echocardiography has proved to be of undoubted value in the detection of aortic valve calcification and thickening, silent aortic regurgitation, and the assessment of cusp mobility. The accurate measurement of the aortic root diameter is also of value. However, contrary to the views of other workers this study has shown that it is not possible to grade the severity of aortic stenosis solely on the echocardiographic appearance of the valve; furthermore it was found to be of limited use in the assessment of some cases of severe aortic regurgitation.

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References

Echocardiography of the aortic valve


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