Effects of external counterpulsation on enzymatically estimated infarct size and ventricular arrhythmia

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SUMMARY To determine whether external counterpulsation influences the evolution of injury in ischaemic myocardium, we analysed 20-hour continuous electrocardiographic recordings and plasma creatine kinase (CK) time-activity curves in 39 patients with acute myocardial infarction and 10 normal subjects. CK values projected from observed changes during the first 7 hours after admission in patients with infarction were used to predict infarct size before implementation of counterpulsation for 30-minute intervals separated by 10-minute rest periods for 12 to 18 hours. CK values during the 72-hour interval after admission were compared with values projected before counterpulsation to determine whether the intervention changed the ratio of enzymatically estimated observed to predicted infarct size. Counterpulsation augmented systemic arterial diastolic pressure and decreased pulmonary arterial occlusive pressure consistently but affected CK activity in normal subjects only minimally (mean peak 0.06 IU/ml). Among patients with infarction treated with counterpulsation, the incidence and rate of premature ventricular complexes, couplets, and runs did not differ significantly from values in control patients matched for early ventricular arrhythmia despite a slight transitory decrease of ventricular arrhythmia within the first hour of counterpulsation (P < 0.01). The ratio of observed to predicted infarct size was virtually identical in treated compared with control patients matched for predicted infarct size. Thus, external counterpulsation initiated 7 hours after an increase in plasma CK activity did not lead to apparent salvage of ischaemic myocardium despite a transitory improvement in ventricular rhythm.

Most deaths occurring in patients admitted to hospital for acute myocardial infarction result from pump failure associated with extensive myocardial necrosis (Harnarayan et al., 1970; Page et al., 1971; Sobel et al., 1972; Shell and Sobel, 1973a, 1974); increasing cardiac output, coronary perfusion, and myocardial oxygen supply with agents with positive inotropic effects (Gillespie et al., 1975); augmenting myocardial perfusion by emergency coronary bypass grafting (Keon et al., 1973), mechanical circulatory assist (DeLaria et al., 1974); or augmenting substrate supply to enhance anaerobic glycolysis (Maroko et al., 1972b). Early reperfusion of ischaemic myocardium produces favourable results in experimental animals (Maroko et al., 1972a) and circulatory assist with intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation is associated with reduction of left ventricular systolic pressure, increased systemic arterial diastolic pressure, increased coronary flow (Brown et al., 1967; Mueller et al., 1971; Shaw et al., 1974), decreased myocardial ischaemic injury (Gill et al., 1973), and delayed evolution of myocardial necrosis (DeLaria et al., 1974). Circulatory assist with this technique requires

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surgical insertion of a balloon into the aorta entailing potential hazards in acutely ill patients. Attempts have been made to avoid such risks by augmenting diastolic arterial pressure with external counterpulsation (performed with a Cardioassist® device) (Soroff et al., 1964). Augmentation of diastolic blood pressure and coronary flow similar to that seen with intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation has been achieved with this technique.

The present study was undertaken to evaluate effects of external counterpulsation (Cardioassist®) on enzymatically estimated infarct size and ventricular arrhythmia during the acute phase of myocardial infarction. Diastolic pressure was augmented noninvasively in 13 patients with acute myocardial infarction, and infarct size was estimated enzymatically based on serial changes in plasma creatine kinase activity as previously described (Sobel et al., 1972). The difference between infarct size predicted before external counterpulsation and infarct size estimated from all plasma CK values (before and after external counterpulsation) was compared with the corresponding difference between predicted and observed infarct size in 13 control patients (not treated with counterpulsation), matched for predicted infarct size.

The effect of external counterpulsation on ventricular arrhythmia was assessed by comparing the frequency of premature ventricular complexes before external counterpulsation with their frequency during treatment to analogous results in corresponding intervals in a second group of 13 other control patients with acute myocardial infarction matched for ventricular arrhythmia during the first 7 hours after admission.

Methods

PATIENT SELECTION

Thirty-nine patients with documented acute myocardial infarction admitted to the Barnes Hospital Cardiac Care Unit and 10 normal volunteers without cardiac disease were studied, including 28 men and 11 women with a mean age of 57 years (42 to 65, range). All patients were admitted within 6 hours of the onset of symptoms with initial plasma total creatine kinase values <0.075 IU/ml. None had been treated with digitalis or antiarrhythmic agents before admission. Thirteen patients were treated with external counterpulsation. Patients were excluded if age exceeded 65 years, systolic hypertension was more than 160 mmHg; or if there was peripheral vascular disease, obesity, previous skeletal injury, severe arrhythmia, or heart block. Thirteen control patients with infarction were selected on the basis of comparable predicted infarct size and treated conventionally. A second control group of 13 patients with infarction was selected retrospectively on the basis of comparable frequency and incidence of premature ventricular complexes compared with treated patients during the first 7 hours (the interval before counterpulsation in treated patients).

Effects of external counterpulsation on the lower extremities may have caused release of creatine kinase from skeletal muscle that might affect estimation of observed infarct size. For this reason, 10 normal volunteers with no history of cardiac disease were studied to determine whether external counterpulsation altered plasma creatine kinase levels, white blood cell count, haemoglobin, haematocrit, or vital signs.

EXTERNAL COUNTERPULSATION

The device used in this study was a Cardioassist® external pressure circulatory assist system (Soroff et al., 1964), which applies circumferential compression to the thighs during diastole, with compression relieved during systole. Electrocardiographic triggering of compression provides synchronisation to the diastolic phase of the cardiac cycle. Compression of the arterial bed in the legs increases diastolic arterial pressure (Fig. 1) and may increase coronary perfusion during diastole. Arterial runoff is enhanced after the compression phase, during systole. Afterload and diastolic pressure are, therefore, reduced after compression ceases at the onset of systole.

Thirteen patients were treated with external counterpulsation for 30-minute intervals alternating with 10 minutes of rest for 12 to 18 hours. External counterpulsation was initiated immediately after data were obtained sufficient for prediction of infarct size from serial changes in plasma creatine kinase activity during the first 7 hours. Treatment was tolerated by 9 patients for the entire 18 hours and by 4 for only 12 hours. Eight normal volunteers underwent external counterpulsation for 8 hours and 2 for 18 hours.

ENZYMATIC ESTIMATION OF INFARCT SIZE

Blood samples for determination of creatine kinase activity were obtained via an indwelling Heparin lock to avoid repetitive venepuncture. Samples were collected hourly for the first 10 hours, every 2 hours thereafter until creatine kinase activity had returned to baseline (< 100 mU/ml). Blood samples were collected and neutralised with EGTA (0.005 M, pH 7.4) and centrifuged at 2000 g for 10 minutes after which mercaptoethanol (0.005 M) was added to protect enzyme activity during storage. Samples were analysed for creatine kinase activity spectro-
Quantification of Ventricular Arrhythmia

Continuous recordings of the electrocardiogram during the first 20 hours were obtained on magnetic tapes, with recordings initiated in all cases within one hour after hospital admission. All tapes were digitised and processed by the Argus/H computer system designed for automated high speed analysis of ventricular arrhythmia with human editor verification (Nolle et al., 1974). This system shows 1 per cent reproducibility after digitisation, true positive sensitivity of approximately 90 per cent and essentially no false positives. Tapes were analysed for the total number of premature ventricular complexes, and the number of couplets and runs of ventricular tachycardia. The effects of counterpulsation on ventricular arrhythmia were assessed by determining the rate per hour of premature ventricular complexes (including couplets and runs of ventricular tachycardia) in the first 7 hours to the rate observed in the subsequent 13 hours and comparing results with corresponding results in control patients matched for ventricular arrhythmia during the initial 7 hours. In addition, the number of premature ventricular complexes (PVCs) occurring during the hour before counterpulsation (seventh hour) was compared with the number occurring during the first hour of counterpulsation (eighth hour) in treated patients. Data were compared also with the corresponding premature ventricular contraction rates during the seventh and eighth hours in control patients. Treatment with bolus injections of lignocaine (1 mg/kg i.v.) was given to all patients when the rate of ventricular premature complexes exceeded 10 per minute for 3 consecutive minutes or when runs of ventricular tachycardia occurred (more than 3 ventricular premature complexes in a row). Lignocaine requirements were similar for treated and control patients. No other anti-arrhythmic agents were used.

Evaluation of Haemodynamics

Systemic arterial pressure was monitored continuously in all patients treated with external counterpulsation with the use of finger plethysmography calibrated by direct intra-arterial pressure and cuff pressure and validated by comparison of serial changes with results of percutaneous catheterisation of the radial artery in 6 patients. Swan-Ganz thermodilution catheters were used in 9 treated patients to evaluate changes in cardiac output, and
right atrial pulmonary artery occlusive pressure for
at least 3 hours before counterpulsation and at
2-hour intervals during counterpulsation. Plasma
electrolytes and arterial blood gases were monitored
every 6 hours.

Results

EFFECTS OF EXTERNAL COUNTERPULSATION ON
NORMAL VOLUNTEERS
Counterpulsation of normal volunteers resulted in a
mean increase of 60 mIU/ml in plasma creatine
kinase among the 8 volunteers treated for 12 hours.
No additional increase occurred in the other 2
patients who were treated for 18 hours. Mean white
blood cell count increased from 5960 cells per mm²
to 9530 cells per mm² following counterpulsation
for 12 hours. WBC count returned to normal within
16 hours after cessation of external counterpulsation.
Modest haemoconcentration occurred (mean haemo-
globin increased from 15-4 g of haemoglobin to
16-0). No significant change in plasma LDH levels,
body temperature, heart rate, or systolic blood
pressure occurred in 10 volunteers treated with
counterpulsation.

EFFECTS OF EXTERNAL COUNTERPULSATION ON
HAEMODYNAMICS
The mean increase in diastolic pressure was
30 mmHg. Additional haemodynamic effects in-
cluded an average decrease of mean pulmonary
arterial occlusive pressure of 7 mmHg, an average
decrease in systemic arterial systolic pressure of
18 mmHg, and an increase in the mean cardiac index
from 2·3 to 3·1 l/min per m² during counter-
pulsation.

EFFECTS OF EXTERNAL COUNTERPULSATION ON
ENZYMATICALLY ESTIMATED INFARCT SIZE
In the control patients matched for predicted infarct
size, infarct size predicted was 36 ± 9·1 CK-gram-
equivalents, similar to estimates of infarct size
observed, 33 ± 6·7 CK-gram-equivalents (Table).
This correspondence is typical of that seen in
patients with infarction uncomplicated by shock or
intramuscular injection. Similar values of predicted
and observed infarct size (38 vs 36 CK-gram-
equivalents) (Table) were observed in patients
matched with external counterpulsation, indicating
that no consistent reduction in enzyme release from
the heart, indicative of salvage of myocardium,
resulted from this intervention. In view of the results
in volunteers, 60 mIU were subtracted from the
creatine kinase values obtained in treated patients
during counterpulsation, and infarct size was
calculated using the corrected creatine kinase values.
Since plasma MB creatine kinase comprised 12 to
15 per cent (Roberts et al., 1975a) of total activity
in samples with peak total creatine kinase in each
treated patient in keeping with the ratio of MB to
total creatine kinase in myocardium, substantial
release of MM creatine kinase into blood from
skeletal muscle could be excluded.

EFFECTS OF COUNTERPULSATION ON
VENTRICULAR ARRYTHMIA
Analysis of the continuous electrocardiograms
showed a distinct decline in the incidence of premu-
ture ventricular complexes in the 13 hours after the
initial 7-hour interval in both treated (n = 13) and
control patients (n = 13), in keeping with the natural
history of ventricular arrhythmias associated with
uncomplicated infarction (Roberts et al., 1975c). In
the treated patients, an average of 190 premature
ventricular complexes occurred in the 7-hour
interval before counterpulsation compared with 70
in the subsequent 13 hours during counterpulsation.
In control patients matched for frequency of
premature ventricular contractions, the ventricular
contractions during the first 7 hours averaged 195
compared with 110 in the subsequent 13 hours.
These data suggest a possible benefit from external
counterpulsation. However, the difference is not
statistically significant (Fig. 2).

Comparison of the frequency of premature
ventricular complexes in the hour immediately before
counterpulsation (seventh hour) with that seen
during the first hour of counterpulsation (eighth hour)
showed a decrease of 45 per cent, compared with
a 10 per cent increase in the control group
comparing time periods (Fig. 3, P < 0·05).
However, no significant difference was noted
between the frequency of couplets before and after
the onset of counterpulsation and during the
equivalent intervals in controls.

Discussion

Intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation has been
shown to modify the haemodynamics favourably
during acute myocardial infarction in experimental
Premature ventricular contractions (PVCs) present in controls matched for arrhythmia (left panel) compared with PVCs in the treated group (right panel). The slashed bars represent the standard error of the mean. Premature ventricular contractions before counterpulsation during the corresponding interval in the control group are depicted with the open bar, and those during counterpulsation with the shaded bar.

and clinical studies (Goldfarb et al., 1968; Kantrowitz et al., 1968). Nevertheless, despite haemodynamic improvement in patients with severe failure and cardiogenic shock, improvement in survival has not been striking (Scheidt et al., 1973). Because intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation is an invasive procedure, its use has been limited primarily to patients with severe failure or cardiogenic shock (Kantrowitz et al., 1968; Mueller et al., 1971), in whom it is likely that a large portion of myocardium has already been destroyed (Page et al., 1971). External counterpulsation, which can be performed noninvasively, may be more applicable to acutely ill patients because it entails less risk and because haemodynamic effects similar to those seen with intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation can be obtained (Soroff et al., 1971).

The present study was performed with external counterpulsation in patients with uncomplicated acute myocardial infarction to determine its effect on enzymatically estimated infarct size, based on the current concept that augmentation of diastolic blood pressure might increase coronary flow and protect jeopardised ischaemic myocardium. Patients with cardiogenic shock were excluded since death in this situation appears to be virtually inevitable. Treated patients underwent counterpulsation for 12 to 18 hours, with frequent brief rest periods. Most patients tolerated the procedure well. Anxiety was minimised by thorough explanations of the procedure to each patient and the presence at all times of a nurse or doctor at the bedside to provide reassurance and answer questions. With treatment, diastolic arterial pressure increased by an average of 30 per cent, cardiac output increased slightly, and pulmonary arterial occlusive pressure decreased significantly by 7 mmHg. Heart rate did not increase significantly. In spite of these favourable haemodynamic effects, no salvage of myocardium was observed.

Experimental studies with both intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation and external counterpulsation have been shown to increase coronary flow (Shaw et al., 1974). However, in dogs, regional flow to the ischaemic area measured with microspheres is not significantly increased by intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation despite a slight but significant increase in coronary flow in normal zones (Shaw et al., 1974).
Protection of ischaemic myocardium

It is possible that the lack of an observed effect on infarct size of counterpulsation in the present study was related to failure of the intervention to increase coronary flow in ischaemic regions. This failure may in turn be related to the time elapsing before the initiation of external counterpulsation after the onset of ischaemia. It is possible that maximum vasodilatation had already occurred and that further increase in flow to the ischaemic area was not possible. In experimental animals, integrity of vessels in the ischaemic area becomes much impaired 2 to 4 hours after coronary occlusion (Connors et al., 1976) and increases in coronary flow after this interval may be associated with extravasation of blood into the tissues and deleterious rather than beneficial effects on infarct size (Bresnahan et al., 1974).

In the present study, lack of apparent salvage of myocardium may be the result of the occurrence of most of the myocardial damage induced by ischaemia before the onset of counterpulsation. The potential for any intervention to salvage myocardium might, therefore, be minimal when the onset is delayed. In animals with infarction evaluated electrocardiographically and enzymatically, the evolution of myocardial necrosis was delayed by counterpulsation but the ultimate extent of infarction was similar to that in controls (DeLaria et al., 1974). This suggests that the effect of counterpulsation on ischaemic myocardium retards but does not preclude evolution of infarction. Interventions implemented early in canine and rat preparations modify infarct size favourably but are without effect when implemented more than 5 to 6 hours after coronary occlusion (Hillis et al., 1976; Karlsberg et al., 1976). Since counterpulsation in the present study was not initiated until many hours after the onset of chest pain, substantial salvage of myocardium may no longer have been possible. Unfortunately, however, the frequent late arrival of patients to the coronary care unit may delay implementation of any intervention for comparable intervals.

External counterpulsation significantly decreased ventricular arrhythmia early after its implementation. This effect was seen from the 7th to 8th hours in which the patient served as his own control. However, the benefit was transitory. The decline in the rate of premature ventricular contractions with time in patients with myocardial infarction is well recognised (Roberts et al., 1975c) and may have masked relatively late beneficial effects on ventricular rhythm resulting from external counterpulsation. The significant decrease in premature ventricular contractions in the first hour of counterpulsation may be related to improved flow to ischaemic areas which may not have been adequate to prevent cell death but may have improved the wash-out of metabolites contributing to ventricular arrhythmia. Though some have argued that external circulatory assist causes increased circulating catecholamines in turn decreasing arrhythmia, no significant increase in heart rate occurred in the present study, and thus increased release of circulating catecholamines appears unlikely. Comparison of the incidence of premature ventricular contractions in control patients versus those treated with counterpulsation showed no significant difference. However, since the number of patients enrolled in each group was small, minor beneficial or deleterious effects may have been masked particularly since the control patients were matched only for ventricular arrhythmias.

In summary, infarct size estimated from the serial plasma CK values was unaltered by external counterpulsation initiated 7 hours after the initial CK elevation. A decrease in ventricular arrhythmia was observed suggesting that external circulatory assist may be of some benefit in patients with refractory arrhythmias, though the effect observed was transitory.

References


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