Survival after cardiac arrest outside hospital

EDITOR,—Most fatal events in patients with ischaemic heart disease occur outside hospital and therefore the greatest opportunities for reducing mortality from acute coronary events lie in the prehospital setting.1 In their recent paper Soo and colleagues2 published the results of a study to determine whether survival after cardiac arrest outside hospital was influenced by the availability of different grades of ambulance personnel and other health professionals. We are concerned with their conclusions about technician-only crews, and we wish to make some more general comments about their paper.

We feel that the data presented by Soo et al did not support their statement that “provision of defibrillation plus basic life support by technicians appears to be inadequate compared with the complementary early provision of advanced cardiac life support by paramedics”. Clearly, in the population studied, overall survival was worse with technician-only crews than with paramedic crews. However, as mentioned by Soo et al, technician-only crews dealt with patients whose chances of survival were already prejudiced by several adverse factors—they were less likely to have had a witnessed arrest, bystander cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and an initial rhythm of ventricular fibrillation. It is interesting that among patients with ventricular fibrillation the proportion discharged home alive was higher for technician-only crews than for paramedic crews (10.9% v 10.5%). Viewed from the perspective of survival from ventricular fibrillation (the presenting rhythm most likely to be associated with survival) it is thus difficult to conclude that the service provided by technician-only crews was “inadequate” compared with paramedic crews.

The interventions that offer the greatest benefit in survival of cardiac arrest are immediate basic life support and early defibrillation.2 Soo et al briefly mentioned possible strategies aimed at improving the chances of survival, including increasing the number of other resuscitation trained professionals able to provide defibrillation. To optimise access to early defibrillation we believe that the issue of alternative first responders deserves serious consideration. Restoration of circulation and survival depends on the rapidity of defibrillation, regardless of who delivers the shocks, and even small differences in the call to shock time may have an influence on survival.2

The fire and police service have already taken this role in some parts of the UK and other countries. Restoration of circulation outside hospital has survival, including increasing the number of technicians and paramedics. The fire and police service have already taken this role in some parts of the UK and other countries.

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1 Norris RM, on behalf of the United Kingdom Heart Attack Study Collaborative Group. Fatality outside hospital from acute coronary events in British health districts. BMJ 1998;316:1065–70.
5 Porter KM, Allison KP. An integrated 999 response—a questionnaire study of fire and police service opinion in the UK. Pre-hospital Immediate Care 1998;2:130–1.

This letter was shown to the authors, who reply as follows:

Dr Soar and Absalom have highlighted the dangers of interpreting results by just examining factors in isolation. We used multivariate analysis by logistic regression method to take into consideration all factors (including those mentioned by Soo and Absalom) identified in our study that might have contributed to survival chances. This technique is particularly useful when dealing with potential confounders or when assessing interactions between variables. As a result of adjusting for confounders and interactions, the odds ratios we reported do support our conclusions.

We were indeed aware of another paper from our institution2 but we considered citation of the latter inappropriate. Sound observational studies require a defined population; this may be the entire population with a specific characteristic (in this case, resuscitation from out-of-hospital cardiac arrest) or a sample taken in some systematic but random fashion from this. The conclusions drawn by Nguyen-Van-Tam et al may well be compatible with the data they reported but their population was neither entire nor a random sample—such selective populations are a potential source of bias.3 We are confident that we identified all resuscitation events in Nottinghamshire over a four year period. We chose to analyse and present the complete population, failing to account for just 3% of all patients (as our Utstein style template shows). The claim that the two papers have used “a common set of patients” is clearly wrong. We do not believe that it is possible to make comparisons between our study and that of Nguyen-Van-Tam et al.

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—J SOAR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Exercise four hour redistribution threshold for 201Tl SPECT and exercise induced ST segment elevation in detecting viable myocardium in patients with acute MI

EDITOR,—Yamagishi et al, studying 37 patients within seven weeks of Q wave myocardial infarction (MI), found that exercise induced ST segment elevation was closely associated with the presence of viable myocardium in the infarct territory.1 We also studied this in patients with previous MI and agree with the results1; however, viable myocardium may persist for a long time after an MI2 and in these cases ST segment shift is not considered a specific indicator of transmural ischaemia and viability. To increase the specificity of this sign in patients with an old (>6 months) MI, we introduced an unconventional, but experimentally validated,3 ECG marker of transmural ischaemia—the stress induced shortening of QTc interval (QTc interval corrected for heart rate using Bazett’s formula) in Q wave leads—to identify hibernating myocardium in the infarct zone. Experimental studies demonstrated an increase in cellular K+ efflux at the onset of myocardial ischaemia accompanied by a progressive shortening of the action potential duration.4

We evaluated 15 consecutive patients (group A) with previous anterior MI presenting with the following: ST segment elevation over Q waves during exercise testing; critical stenosis (>75%) of the left anterior descending coronary artery (LAD), cross sectional echocardiography and stress redistribution reinjection 201Tl myocardial scintigraphy of viable myocardium in the infarct zone (akinetik segments with normal echorereflectivity plus >7 mm end diastolic wall thickness and significant 201Tl redistribution after reinjection (>50% of the reference myocardium in any scan)).

The control group (group B) comprised 15 patients with previous anterior MI, critical stenosis of the LAD, and evidence of scar (increased echorereflectivity, associated to <6 mm end diastolic wall thickness, and no 201Tl redistribution) in infarct areas.

Groups A and B were patients selected at random early or late (>6 months) after their first anterior MI.

QTc interval was measured at rest and peak stress in leads showing ST segment shift, and the lead by lead fractional difference between the QTc intervals (AQTC) was calculated. The AQTC was measured again during exercise testing in 11 patients of group A (group A1) who had significant contractility recovery in akinetic areas (83% of akinetic segments) three months after myocardial revascularisation. We considered significant QTc interval shortening as AQTC <−10%.

There was no significant difference between patients in group A, B, and A1 (before and after revascularisation) regarding age, sex, number of pathological Q waves in resting ECG, exercise induced ST segment maximal workload, maximal heart rate, peak blood pressure, or maximal rate-pressure product.

ST segment elevation over Q waves at rest was higher in group B than in group A (1.8 (0.5) v 0.57 (0.4) mm) (p <0.001).

All groups had exercise induced ST segment elevation over Q waves, but maximal elevation was significantly higher in group A than group B (2.5 (1.4) v 1.8 (1.1) mm).

1 Yamagishi et al, studying 37 patients within seven weeks of Q wave myocardial infarction (MI), found that exercise induced ST segment elevation was closely associated with the presence of viable myocardium in the infarct territory.1

2 However, viable myocardium may persist for a long time after an MI and in these cases ST segment shift is not considered a specific indicator of transmural ischaemia and viability.

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This letter was shown to the authors, who reply as follows:

We are pleased that Bertella and colleagues observed results similar to ours regarding the diagnostic significance of exercise induced ST segment elevation in detecting viable myocardium in MI patients. We reported that exercise induced ST segment elevation could detect the viable myocardium in the infarct region with high sensitivity and specificity, especially in patients with acute MI. However, in old MIs and patients with left ventricular function, profound and possibly irreversible ultrastructural changes might occur in areas of hibernation, such as those of contractile protein. Such myocardial damage might impair the diagnostic accuracy of exercise induced ST segment elevation in detecting myocardial viability. Bertella et al introduced a new ECG marker of hibernating myocardium in chronic MI, the exercise induced shortening of QTc interval in Q wave leads—to increase the specificity of exercise induced ST segment elevation. We are interested in this novel marker; however, how many leads with Q wave were analysed? QT dispersion significantly increases during ischaemia in coronary occlusion and during testing. Brief ischaemia does not change maximum QT, but shortens minimum QT. To understand their results we need to know which leads were selected for analysis. It might be the most sensitive way for detecting myocardial ischaemia to select the lead with the greatest decrease in QTc. Moreover, exercise induced increase in QT dispersion could be a more sensitive marker.


initially assembled in 1992 were enormous. The regional differences between younger patients from these cities are small and not of the order of magnitude suggested by the designers of the tool as significant. Mazeika's interpretation of the change in physical function scores between controls compared to patients is feasible, but we believe that four year survivors of myocardial infarction over age 65 have a quality of life similar to their peers. This may be due either to increasing comorbidity with age or to reduced expectancies in the elderly "norms" as we originally discussed.

Patients with atherosclerotic disease may indeed have significant comorbidity and we do not measure this, albeit useful surrogates. Approximately 16% of our cohort described their main physical limitation as non-cardiac. We discussed return to work in the original text and accept that it is influenced by economic, social, and personal factors. However, establishing causality in the relation between quality of life and ability to return to work is contentious.

It is ironic that Mazeika describes principal component analysis as "obscure" while this technique was used to standardise scores into the summary scales of physical and mental components of health which he recommends. The analysis of our data took place before validation of the summary scale scores were published. He cites published work. Because of space constraints, we omitted Cronbach's $\alpha$, a measure of internal consistency, from the final draft of our paper. For items in the same domain, we exceeded the recommended value of 0.8 for patients younger and older than 65 years, with the exception of the domain mental health in patients over 65 years where $\alpha$ was 0.74. All domains were significantly correlated with each other, with Spearman's correlation coefficients exceeding 0.3 for all domains as recommended in the SF-36 manual.

Mazeika expresses surprise that we did not use the improved UK SF-36 version 2. Research projects take time to design, implement, analyse results, and finally undergo peer review and modification before publication. The SF-36 version 2 was released in 1996, before the UK SF-36 version 2 was developed. At that time, the original SF-36 was recommended and considered the most appropriate tool for this type of study.

It is true that "healthy survivor and volunteer effects clearly made the study patients unrepresentative of the initial group". There is no suggestion in our paper that these four year survivors are representative of all patients with myocardial infarction. The purpose of our study was to describe medium to long term survivors, whether healthy or not. Survivorship may form part of the explanation for some of our findings in the elderly, nevertheless younger patients' demonstrably poor quality of life is hardly likely to be described as "healthy survival".

Following our experience with quality of life tools, we believe that the combination of a disease specific tool, such as the quality of life after myocardial infarction instrument, or perhaps the schedule for the evaluation of individual quality of life (a new, patient weighted measure, not without limitation) and a generic tool such as the SF-36 may well offer a more complete assessment of the impact of illness and comorbidity on health related quality of life. Even so, the SF-36 did provide us with evidence that a myocardial infarction makes a young man feel old and an old man feel a bit older. Perhaps most important, Mazeika seems to be missing the essential point of our paper: the quality of life of infarct survivors younger than 65 is significantly impaired four years after their acute illness.

1 Ben-Shlomo Y, Davey Smith G. Socioeconomic position should be measured accurately. BMJ 1999;318:844-5.

Exercise testing, symptoms, and clinical outcome in aortic stenosis

EDITOR,—We read the recent editorials on aortic stenosis with interest.1,2 Otto rightly highlights the importance of classifying patients with aortic stenosis at risk of future clinical events. Earlier studies on the natural history of patients with symptomatic aortic stenosis have shown that they have a very poor prognosis.3 The difficulty arises in classifying patients with asymptomatic aortic stenosis as they are generally considered to be at low risk of future events, even in the presence of severe disease. Otto has suggested defining severe aortic stenosis as a peak jet velocity $\geq 4$ m/s as "about 80% of asymptomatic patients with a jet velocity $>4$ m/s will develop symptoms requiring valve replacement within two years".4 This statement is not supported by our data. Although almost 80% of these patients did indeed have aortic valve replacement carried out within two years, the most common reason for valve replacement was reduced exercise tolerance.5 Having reduced exercise capacity does not mean patients are symptomatic per se and, although it is a fine point, it is of critical importance. We do not know whether reduced exercise capacity in aortic stenosis is an independent risk factor for outcome, and Otto's study did not address this question. In a previous study on asymptomatic aortic stenosis it was deemed unethical to withhold exercise testing in asymptomatic patients.6 Primary care physicians of the patients concerned, despite the fact there is no evidence in adults to support reduced exercise capacity as a predictor of clinical outcome. In Otto et al's study, of 48 patients undergoing aortic valve replacement, 18 had reduced exercise time stated as the primary reason for surgery.7 This proportion is even higher when patients with severe asymptomatic aortic stenosis and those having incidental valve replacement at the time of coronary artery bypass surgery are excluded. These data clearly show that the primary care physicians were influenced by the results of the exercise tolerance testing and may have inadvertently biased the interpretation. The peak jet velocity of $4$ m/s as a predictor of clinical outcome.

Chambers stated that "if chest tightness develops, it is reasonable to prepare for aortic valve replacement".8 We do not agree that angina confers additional prognostic information compared to other symptoms. In Ross and Braunwald's classic study on aortic stenosis, angina was shown to have a relatively good prognosis compared to symptoms of breathlessness, heart failure, and syncope.9 It is also difficult to distinguish whether chest pain is a result of severe aortic stenosis or underlying coronary artery disease, as approximately 50% of aortic stenosis patients requiring valve replacement will have significant obstructive coronary artery disease.10 We do agree that exercise testing in aortic stenosis confers additional valuable information regarding patients' functional status; however, whether it confers additional prognostic significance is not known. Prospective blinded studies are required before exercise is recommended on this basis in addition to currently accepted echocardiographic and symptomatic variables.


Value of echocardiography in predicting long term outcome after heart transplantation

EDITOR,—The recent study by Fraund et al has highlighted the improving survival of cardiac transplant recipients with a 10 year survival rate of approaching 50%.1 Functional status in long term survivors was encouraging with fewer than one in five patients experiencing (New York Heart Association) NYHA class III or IV symptoms. These findings reinforce cardiac transplantation as a valuable treatment option for patients with symptomatic severe left ventricular systolic dysfunction.

Disappointingly, the authors were unable to identify any useful factors that potentially could be used to predict long term outcome. Allograft vasculopathy is now the main factor limiting long term survival, and 39% of all deaths in the study were attributable to this complication. Angiographic screening programmes for the detection of allograft vasculopathy have been instituted but, without the routine use of intravascular ultrasound techniques, coronary angiography has been shown systematically to underestimate this form of coronary disease. Furthermore, as no adequate therapeutic options currently exist, the value of screening that exposes many stable patients to the risk of an expensive invasive procedure has been questioned.2 Clearly, a non-invasive method of identifying high risk patients would be highly desirable.

Echocardiography plays an important role in the follow up of recipients after cardiac transplantation but, other than assessment of left ventricular systolic function by the ejection fraction, it did not feature in Fraund et al's article. In the past efforts have focused specifically on the use of Doppler studies in detecting acute allograft rejection. Its clinical utility is now expanding. Recently, dob-
Good outcomes from cardiac surgery in the over 70s

Eintorn—We read with interest the manuscript by Zaidi and coworkers who reported their experience on 575 patients aged 70 years and older, in whom various cardiac surgical procedures were performed. Their study, along with data already published in the literature in recent years,7 shows that the role of cardiac surgery in the elderly, and particularly coronary artery revascularisation, is still evolving. Despite refinements in the perioperative management of cardiac surgical patients, valve surgery as well as coronary artery revascularisation in the elderly continue to be associated with operative risks considerably greater than those observed in the younger population.5,6 In addition, older patients are at higher risk for developing devastating complications such as stroke, which often lead to long-term disability. In this regard, Hogue et al in a recent review of 2972 patients aged 65 years and older subjected to a variety of cardiac operations, reported that although age was not an independent risk factor for perioperative stroke, other significant independent factors (such as neurological events, coronary artery stenosis, atrial fibrillation, and diabetes) were more frequently encountered in older patients.4 Based on these considerations, arguments have been made as to whether these therapeutic modalities should be offered to elderly high-risk patients who, as a result of their advanced age and comorbid conditions, invariably face reduced life expectancies.

Of the 575 elderly patients included in Zaidi et al's series, 334 underwent isolated coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG). Importantly, the perioperative outcomes noted in these patients compare favourably with, and are actually lower than, those reported in the literature. In fact, they reported a 30-day mortality rate of 3.9% in patients who received isolated CABG. According to these data, the incidence of postoperative neurological events in CABG patients was remarkably low (1.8%), as was the incidence of other complications, such as renal failure, reoperation, myocardial infarction, and low output syndrome requiring an intra-aortic balloon pump. The proportion of redo operations reported was 7.3% in the two groups combined (valve patients and CABG patients).

We have recently reviewed our experience of coronary revascularisation in older patients, and in more than 450 patients aged 70 years and older, in whom the operation was conducted without using cardiopulmonary bypass ("off pump"). In recent years, advances in techniques of "minimal invasion" in combination with adequate exposure of all target vessels and mechanical stabilisation, have made coronary revascularisation on the beating heart safe and effective. Importantly, more than 22% of the patients were octogenarians. Our analysis revealed a 30-day mortality rate of 4.8% (risk reduced 2%), and an overall rate of postoperative complications of 12%, including a stroke rate of 1.2% and a stroke rate of 1.2% of the patients in the octogenarian subgroup suffered postoperative neurological events. In our study, however, these figures were obtained in the face of a substantial proportion of redo operations (28% of cases), in combination with a 47% rate of urgent and emergent procedures, and a 31% incidence of preoperative cerebrovascular disease. Hence, in this series, results, in agreement with Zaidi and colleagues, we believe that elderly patients with surgically correctable, symptomatic coronary occlusive disease should not be denied surgical intervention based solely on their age. Our preliminary data suggest that myocardial revascularisation without using cardiopulmonary bypass may offer these patients an advantage in terms of perioperative outcomes, especially in the presence of meaningful perioperative risk factors, such as those associated with redo operations. Finally, avoiding extracorporeal circulation seems to provide additional benefit in lowering the rate of postoperative stroke, which remains one of the most debilitating sequelae following coronary revascularisation in the elderly.

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NOTICES

Patho2000, the 20th annual San Diego cardiothoracic surgery symposium, will be held on 10 to 15 February 2000 in San Diego, California, USA.

For further details please contact Lil Wagner, Aligned Management Associates Inc, tel: +858 541 1444; fax: +858 541 1447; email: lile213@minespring.com

Third acute medical emergencies conference, will take place on 21 and 22 February 2000 at the Royal College of Physicians in London, UK.

The programme covers initial treatment of acute medical emergencies in cardiology, neurology, gastroenterology, and respiratory medicine.

For more details please contact the Secretariat, CCI Limited, 2 Palmerston Court, Palmerston Way, London SW8 4AJ, UK; tel: +44 (0)20 7720 0600; fax: +44 (0)20 7720 7177; email: AME2000@confcom.co.uk; www.confcom.demon.co.uk/AME2000/AMEHome.html